My Lord The Baby

##### **Plot Summary**

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the most celebrated Bengali-language poets of his time, although he has received greater acclaim for his short stories. His stories, including My Lord The Baby are reminiscent of an eastern Anton Chekhov, another master of the form.

Part One of My Lord The Baby begins with a twelve-year-old boy named Raicharan. He leaves his village and enters the home and service of a man who shares the same caste as Raicharan. Raicharan becomes the private servant of the man’s so, Anukul. From birth up until the day that the boy leaves for college, he is Anukul’s personal attendant When the child begins to walk, it is an “epoch in human history.” He plays with the child night and day. When it utters the words “Ba-ba,” “Ma-ma,” and “Chan-na” (this is what the baby calls Raicharan), “Raicharan’s ecstasy knew no bounds.”

Anukul buys a small go-cart for his son, and drapes him in silks and finery, including golden ornaments, bracelets, and more. When the rainy season approaches, the child is dreadfully bored while confined indoors. One day, on which the rain has lifted, Raicharan puts him in the cart and pulls him down to the riverbank.

The boy sees a lovely tree covered in flowers, and Raicharan can tell that he wants one. He tries to distract the boy by showing him birds and various other diversions, but the child is intractable. Finally, Raicharan asks him to stay in the cart, forbids him from going to the water, and wades in to get the flower. When he returns, the child is missing.

When evening comes and Raicharan has not returned with the child, Anukul and the mother go out searching. They find Raicharan running along the banks, calling out “Little Master!” over and over, heartbroken. Under questioning, he says that he knows nothing about what happened. They promise him anything if he will tell them, but he has no answers. He is sent from the house. The mother tells Anukul that she suspects that Raicharan had stolen the child, possibly to sell it to the gypsies, who were also rumored to be in the area at the same time. “The baby had gold ornaments on his body,” she says. It is enough to convince her.

In Part Two, Raicharan returns to his village. His wife bears him a son named Phailna and then dies. Raicharan initially feels an intense resentment of the child, feeling that it someone intends to replace the little master who was so recently lost. He feels extreme guilt at the prospect of being happy about his own child in the aftermath of such tragedy.

Soon he is as affectionate and loving with his own son as he ever was with the little master. However, there is an unsettling development. As the baby develops, begins to walk, and to do all of things that babies do, Raicharan is reminded of the little master. His son’s actions seem uncannily similar, and he manages to convince himself that it is the little master, reincarnated in his own home. He considers the following three facts “beyond dispute:”

The new baby was born soon after his little master’s death. His wife could never have accumulated such merit as to give birth to a son in middle age. The new baby walked with a toddle and called out Ba-ba and Ma-ma. The logic is far from ironclad, but he remembers that the mother accused him of stealing her child. If this is truly the little master reincarnated, he feels that he deserves her accusation.

In the final sequence of the story, Raicharan begins spoiling Phailna just as Anukul did for the little master. He spends money he does not have to clothe him in satin, and send him to fine schools. When he visits Phailna, the other students are amused by his country manners and they wonder how the elegant Phailna could have such a bumpkin for a father.

Soon Phailna is asking for more money and there is nothing Raicharan can give him. He visits the city where Anukul is practicing as a magistrate and tells him that he lied about the little master. He had kept him all along and now wishes to make it right. Anukul is suspicious of the claim, as there is no proof that Phailna is the little master. However, his wife’s reaction makes it irrelevant. She accepts the child whole-heartedly, believing that he is hers, and they send Raicharan away. The story ends with Anukul sending money to Raicharan’s village, but there is no longer anyone there with that name.

My Lord The Baby, and many of Tagore’s other short stories, is a precursor to sprawling stories of Indian families such as Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance and many of the novels of Salman Rushdie. Its central themes are duty—particularly the duty to one’s master and one’s son and father—and sacrifice.

Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. His work has been venerated by countless critics. His stories are sufficiently straightforward, however, and therefore have not been dissected as more thematically complicated, ambivalent tales like those of Kafka and Chekhov.

Rabindranath Tagore left an indelible mark on literature and social thought. In “The Kingdom of Cards,” Tagore introduces us to an intriguing realm where the inhabitants are not humans but cards. Each individual takes the form of a playing card, and their existence revolves around a hierarchical society. The story stands out as a thought-provoking tale that offers a piercing critique of societal values and norms. This blog explores the dehumanising effects of segregation in the island’s society and blind conformism, all leading to the loss of identity.

**Segregation in society**

In a distant island called the “Kingdom of Cards,” a strict social hierarchy governed the life and roles of the inhabitants. The Ace, King, and Knave held the highest positions, while the Twos and Threes were at the bottom. Since the Twos and Threes were “inferior Cards”, they were “never allowed to sit in the same row with the great Court Cards”. This was because they were “not twice-born people, like the famous Court Cards”. Hence, one can see that everybody had a specific rank that had been established from time immemorial. They only worked according to their rank and “never did anything else”.

Subsequently, the Prince, the Son of the Kotwal and the Merchant’s Son had set out to seek their “fortunes in the sea”. These individuals were inhabitants of the “far-off foreign land across the sea”. They were stranded on the island due to the capsizing of their ship. Since they were hungry, they ate “all they could find and” drank “out of every vessel”. They broke all regulations regarding caste-based segregation. This made everyone very angry, and they exclaimed, “These people are openly shameless!”

**Blind conformism and herd mentality in Tagore’s Kingdom of Cards**

“The Kingdom of Cards” also serves as a commentary on the pitfalls of blind conformism and herd mentality. The inhabitants of the Kingdom mindlessly followed the norms set by society, “No one in the Kingdom of Cards had any occasion to think; no one had any need to come to any decision; no one was ever required to debate any new subject”. They never questioned their purpose or talked about any implications. “The citizens all moved along in a listless groove without speech”. Evidently, “There was never any excitement or enthusiasm” in the Kingdom. All of them lived a subdued existence. On the other hand, “the Queens of Spades and Clubs and Diamonds and Hearts had remained behind curtains” and followed the patriarchal norms set by their society. As a result, their authenticity and identity are lost.

This mirrors the tendencies observed in present-day Indian society, where many individuals are forced to unquestioningly accept majoritarian societal norms, even if they go against their values or principles. Tagore’s critique urges readers to break free from this conformist mindset and think critically.

**The loss of authenticity and identity in the Kingdom of Cards**

In this relentless process of societal subjugation, the individuals on the island lost touch with their true selves. The Queen of Spades and other members had lost their individuality. They “gazed vacantly into space, or else remained fixed upon the ground.” They had transformed into mechanised people. Tagore describes the native population as moving in “dismal processions with prim and solemn faces”. This showcases the innominate individuals who were devoid of identity and authenticity.

Their loss of identity is further exacerbated by the “unseen hand” that “appeared to be directing them wherever they went,— according to the Rules”. They were bound by the societal rules governing the island, diluting their sense of freedom.

Hence, Tagore’s narrative highlights the consequences of forsaking one’s genuine self to conform to societal expectations. This loss of identity resonates with the challenges individuals face in modern Indian society, where the pressure to conform to a particular ideological standard often leads to a sense of alienation from one’s true nature.

**Conclusion:**

Thus, “The Kingdom of Cards” remains a timeless and compelling tale that resonates with readers today. Rabindranath Tagore’s poignant critique of societal values and norms encourages us to reflect on the consequences of a segregated and conforming society, which leads to an identity-less existence of individuals. This enduring message is a testament to Tagore’s brilliance as a writer and social critic, leaving us with lessons for generations to come.