



Cultural Shock and Assimilation in Bharati Mukherjee's 'The Holder of the World'

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The Holder of the World was published in 1993. Once again Mukherjee talks about socio-cultural experiences of characters in India and America. Unlike the other novels, she reverses her plot. Her earlier novels highlight the plight of Asian immigrants, who come to America in the hope of a materially better life and try to adjust and survive in the alien culture. Earlier, it was always the journey from East to West. Here it is the same trip but in the opposite direction. *The Holder of the World* is the story of an immigrant, Hannah Easton, from America who came to India in the 17th century and imbibed the Indian culture. The novel represents the meeting of two worlds, the Puritan American and the Mughal India.

Mukherjee discusses the transformation that results from the meeting of different cultures. Mukherjee chose Hannah as her subject after she came across a seventeenth century Indian miniature painting in a 1989 pre-auction viewing in New York. According to Mukherjee, she identified in the painting, a blonde-Caucasian woman 'in ornate' Mughal court dress holding a lotus bloom. This served as the inspiration for the novel. Mukherjee wrote this novel with a message that there could have been an age-old connection between America and India. Through this novel she tries to reconcile the two cultures. The essence of writing this novel is to display the collision of values that occur when the New World meets the old; 'hurly burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds' (26)²⁷

Appiah maintains that Mukherjee's novel, *The Holder of the World*, 'offers us a model cultural- pollination – a model that is built not on a 'gentle melding' but on a vehement interconnectedness, on a more vigorous, and a more bitter fusion'.²⁸

The Holder of the World consists of two parallel stories about cross-cultural connections woven together across centuries. It has a main plot and a subplot. The main plot of the novel deals with the adventurous life of Hannah Easton. The subplot, however, tells the story of Beigh Masters, the novel's narrator. She is very modern, thirty-two years old, making a living as an 'asset hunter', reads *Auctions and Acquisition* and ferrets around, for antiques and precious stones. Beigh even has a lover, a brilliant South Indian computer scientist named Venn Iyer, whose family came to the United States from South India, and settled in the Boston Area. Venn works in a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) lab for a virtual reality project, which involves feeding data into computers to re-create a segment of time that has passed.

Bharati Mukherjee uses Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as an opening for each of the four parts of the novel. The Ode sums up the enriched perception of reality. Mukherjee is in fact, emphasizing the role the creative imagination plays in creating characters full of life.

When Bharati Mukherjee wrote *The Holder of the World*, the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was very much on her mind because:

Like Keats, I was playing with history and imagination. That's the marvelous thing about the writing process: you don't know when and how a memory, a scrap of conversation overheard, an allusion or image, is suddenly going to surface and work itself into your story. That Ode came to me, I didn't seek it out. That's the way the creative process works for me. I knew right away that I would use the Keats references to control and ironize what my characters had to make authorial meta-statements about writing.²⁹

When John Keats pondered over the inscription on the Grecian Urn, he found that beauty is the truth the Urn would continue to reveal centuries after its creation. All historians however share Keats's yearning. This longing to resurrect the past is shared by two central characters in *The Holder of the World* namely Beigh Masters, a young woman, trained as a historian, who works as an asset researcher, finding antique precious objects for wealthy clients and Venn Iyer 'father of fractals' and designer of inner space, a computer scientist from India working at MIT on an unusual historical project, a programme called X-2989. He animates information. He is working with virtual reality, re-creating the universe.

Bharati Mukherjee has given new meaning to Keats's Ode in the novel, 'no two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality, or even fraction of the available realities. History's a big savings bank, says Venn, we can all make infinite reality withdrawals'. (6)

Hannah's story is told through the eyes of Beigh, the narrator of the novel, who manages to virtually participate in Hannah's life. Venn and his colleagues have decided to research October 29, 1989, in order to restore a single ordinary day to virtual reality through research.

With a thousand possible answers we can each create infinity of possible characters. And so we contain a thousand variables, and history is a billion separate information bytes. Mathematically, the permutations do begin to resemble the randomness of life. (7)

Bharati Mukherjee is a very calculating and scientific realist. She links Keats's philosophy by making a virtual reality and Urn nexus. She makes a contrast between virtual reality and the Urn. The Urn is still and one can only observe it Bharati Mukherjee believes that action stuck in time cannot be redone.

The people are always going to have their hands and fit in one particular posture. Whereas with interactive technology you're changing the narrative by inputting new information according to your new mood. The ways virtual technology will be used for therapy to help autistic children or to enable people to overcome their fears, is very close to what I'm talking about. The individual experiencing the image, not simply the image itself – both are going to be transformed by interaction.³⁰

The theme of the novel is brilliantly linked with the idea of virtual reality. Venn, Beigh's lover, is developing a computer program that would allow an individual to experience few moments in the past, set to specific time, with pertinent information entered into the program. Beigh provides the facts, creating the opportunity to really participate in real time. This is, of course, not real time travel, but virtual participation in real time.

The term 'virtual reality' is based on technological systems such as hardware head mounted goggles, gloves etc. Virtual reality is the output that we perceive from these machines.

Steuer proposed that virtual reality should be defined in terms of presence and telepresence. Presence is the sense of being in an environment. Telepresence is defined as the experience of presence in an environment and by means of a communication medium.

Greenbaum, in 1992, defined virtual reality as 'an alternate world filled with computer-generated images that respond to human movements. These simulated environments are usually visited with the aid of an experience data suit which features stereophonic video goggles and fiber optic data gloves'.

The Holder of the World makes much use of Virtual Reality Mukherjee says that:

[...] the novel was also about 17th century Massachusetts and various trading companies that established themselves in 17th century India, which meant eleven years of uncontrolled and immensely pleasurable research. I love history as stories, and the details of customs. Manners and social structure, the way that people thought and behaved.³¹

and also, 'orality, as they say these days, is a complex narrative tradition' (176) In the novel *The Holder of the World*, Bharati Mukherjee has used all kinds of narration. It can also be read as a quest narrative dealing with themes of hunger for connectedness, and of immigration. Mukherjee does not treat the narrative in the traditional way, as a fictional representation of life; but as a systematic formal construction. Mukherjee is also trying to fit her novel in the tradition of American romance.

Hayden White is a historian, who sets out to demonstrate that the narratives written by historians are not simple representation of facts, nor the revelation of a design inherent in events. Mukherjee has given the novel a historical dimension. As Claire Messud has noted in her shrewd *Times Literary Supplement* review of the novel 'this is an alternative history which could revise forever the imaginative relations between immigrants and "natives" in Mukherjee's America'.³² Mukherjee is developing clues from history and allows events to link America and India over the centuries.

The opening of the novel is set in America. Bharati Mukherjee has used the concept of going back to the future. 'I live in three zones simultaneously, and I do not mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future'. (5)

Venn Iyer, the narrator's lover, is introduced as a computer scientist. 'He animates information. He's out there beyond virtual reality, recreating the universe, one nano second, one minute at a time'. (5) Venn Iyer along with his colleagues works in a MIT lab for a virtual reality project, which involves feeding data into a computer to recreate a segment of time that has passed. Beigh master, the narrator of the novel, travels from Boston to India and back again in pursuit of a client's order, for what she claims is the most perfect diamond in the world – The Emperor's Tear.' She also desires to trace out Salem Bibi – a mysterious white- woman from Salem, 'I know where she came from and where she went. I couldn't care less about the Emperor's Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi'. (19)

Keats's use of the phrase 'The Unravished Bride' in the first couplet of the ode is applied, to Salem Bibi 'The Unravished Bride – beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort' (17). Mukherjee uses the phrase ironically for the Raja's mistress.

In a portrait housed in the Maritime Museum, she is seen posing:

Her hips are thrust forward, muscle readied to wade into deeper, indigo water. But her arms are clasped high above her head, her chest is taut with audacious yearnings. Her neck, sinewy

as a crane's, strains skywards. And across that sky, which is marigold yellow with a summer afternoon's light, her restlessness shapes itself into a rose - legged, scarlet - crested crane and takes flight (16).

Beigh Masters figured out the secret life of a puritan woman, 'whom an Emperor honored as precious as pearl, the Healer of the world.'(20)

The narrator asserts that:

I felt the same psychic bond with Edward Easton that Keats did with the revelers on the Grecian Urn. He became footnote in my thesis, but an assurance to me that my research in that era was somehow blessed. (25)

Hannah Easton is born to the devout Puritans. Edward and Rebecca. Edward Easton died of a bee sting after a year, and her mother Rebecca Easton ran off with a lover from the Nipmuc tribe, when the girl was five years old, and she left Hannah with her neighbors, Robert and Susannah Fitch. The couple brought her up in an orthodox manner. She learnt the art of housekeeping, conventional wisdom and love for embroidery, through which she often depicted her confusion after her mother's disappearance. Hannah discovered in herself, an obsessive love of needle-work, which was, she suspected, an over flow of a nascent fascination with - or failing for - finer things. (41)

Her embroidery gave away the conflict she tried so hard to deny or suppress.

She knew she must deny all she seen the night of her mother's disappearance and all she felt, for she, worthless sinner and daughter of Satan's lover, had been taken, in and raised by decent souls. Instead her needle spoke, it celebrated the trees, flowers, birds, fish of her infant days. (42)

Like her mother Rebecca Easton, Hannah longed to escape and she found Gabriel Legge to help her mainly because he appeared to be the type who would feed her fantasy.

Why would a self possessed, intelligent, desirable woman like Hannah Easton suddenly marry a man she recognized as inappropriate and untrustworthy? Why would she accept Hester Manning's castoff, or betrayer? Guilt, perhaps a need to punish herself for the secret she was forced to carry? Unconscious imitation of her mother, a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien Gabriel Legge with his tales of exotic adventure was as close to the Nipmuc lover as any man in Salem; she sought to neutralize her shame by emulating her mother's behavior. (69)

Gabriel was obviously on a wife-hunting mission, so they got married. Gabriel took her first to England and then to India, where he joined the East India Company. While he pursued his own journeys, as an official, he turned pirate and abandoned Hannah. Gabriel Legge had left her sufficient money to remain independent, for several years. 'She was tired of waiting at home, of not bestirring herself in the rich new world opening out at every hand. Even pouches of diamond did not seem sufficient compensation for idleness'. (86)

Hannah arrives in India in search of a romantic life. She longed to immerse herself in the new culture and keeps looking for opportunities to transform herself. She even has a vision of her mother, transforming herself by mingling with the Indians. 'And she needed time to sort out her errands - oh, so many errands! - in this vast new jungle'. (105)

Hannah takes sheer pleasure in the world's variety.

She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental, interior. Getting there was important, but savoring the comparison with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was the pleasure. She did not hold India up to inspection by the lamp of England, or of Christianity, nor did she aspire to return to England upon the completion of Gabriel's tour. (104)

The two plots are linked through Beigh Masters, who in her quest for the Emperor's Tear has come across a series of Mughal miniature paintings in a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts. Beigh tries to investigate events that transformed Hannah Easton into Salem Bibi.

Mukherjee creates the incredible world of Hannah Easton. She gathers together the mysticism of the East, and practicality of the west. Part two of the novel deals with Hannah's intimacy with her Indian friend Bhagmati - a maidservant in Raja Jadav Singh's Court. Bhagmati was Hannah's only link to the outside world. She brings to light the old Indian civilization. There is a language problem between the two but 'through her eyes, and her body, Bhagmati communicated'. (136)

She recites and narrates fragments from 'the Ramayana'. Hannah is attracted to the events of Sita's life. 'Heard melodies' are Bhagmati's recitation of verses from Ramayana. And the 'unheard melodies' find echoes in Hannah's heart. Mukherjee emphasizes how the ending of Sita's story always changes to match the mood of the times. Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from conservative, shackled relationships to become individuals. Like in her other novels, she has dealt with her favorite theme of seeking fulfillment in a relationship with a man from another race.

Nalini Iyer notes the points of difference both between the two characters, and mythical Sita and also between Hannah and Bhagmati. 'An important distinction between Sita and Hannah and Bhagmati is that neither Hannah nor Bhagmati abstained from forbidden sexual relationship, whereas the mythical Sita's chastity is a dominant cultural trope in the patriarchal Hindu culture'.³³

The story of Sita's ordeal evokes memories of the life of Mary Rowlandsons, as well as that of her mother Rebecca. Hannah tries to locate Sita in her own image. 'a woman impatient to test herself, to explore and survive in an alien world'. (174).

Sita when asked to undergo a second trial by fire by her husband, refused to comply:

This time she stands up to Rama and the unfair institutions of Ayodhya. She flings herself to the ground. And miraculously the Mother earth that had given her birth now swallows her whole, leaving no trace of Sita the mortal. (177)

As the story proceeds, Gabriel joins a gang of pirates and during one of his trips with Haj Pilgrims, he is drowned. In December 1700, Hannah became, to her satisfaction, husbandless. (207) Hannah hesitates to return to Salem, for the fear of becoming a governess as was considered suitable for a widow:

This is no country for Christians! She cried. This was not the place she wished to be entombed. But where could she run to? She saw the folly of a governess's job in Cambridge. There would surely be no welcome there for a pirate's widow, and no place in old Salem for an Indian lover's daughter. (215)

Hannah escapes with Bhagmati to Panpur under the protection of Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad, and becomes the guest of the Raja. She agrees to be the 'Bibi' of Raja Jadav Singh. 'Bibi' in the historical context refers to a mistress. The mistress is rated lower than the wife, and is permitted gifts but not entitled to any inheritance. Hannah develops new roots due to her fine quality of adaptability. Now, she steps into another new world, and also a new religion i.e. Hinduism. 'And now she was in a totally Hindu world. Bhagmati seemed no longer a servant. Perhaps she, Hannah, was about to become one'. (220)

Hannah and Raja Jadav Singh wooed each other, and she converted herself, into Salem Bibi, the Raja's new favorite.

For fourteen days and thirteen nights the lovers abandoned themselves to pleasure. Attendants fed them pomegranates, sprinkled them with attar of roses and lit his *huqqa*. Musicians serenaded them with flutes, drums and stringed instruments from the courtyard below. For fourteen days the king mounted his lady without surcease. (234)

Bharati Mukherjee delineates, through the series of cultural transplants Hannah's discovery of her own feminine identity.

Hannah's whole life is transformed once again, and she experiences the high tide of love, and she discovers, 'her own passionate nature for the first time, the first hint that a world beyond duty and patience and wifely service was possible, then desirable, then irresistible'. (237) Hannah loses herself in the world of high romance and mystique, and experiences total happiness for the first time in her life.

Both Hannah and Raja came out of their dream world when the Nawab Haider Beg, the Governor of Aurangzeb's state sends his commander, Morad Farah to arrest the Raja and Hannah, the Firangi lady, and to usurp the diamond, the Emperor's Tear. Jadav Singh:

Bundled Hannah and Bhagmati into one Planquin, and a servant, disguised in royal jama, turban and jewels as Devgad's Lion King, into another, and set off for distant Devgad at the head of an army of six hundred-foot soldiers and three hundred horsemen. (240)

On their way, the Raja attacks the Mughal army. In the battlefield Hannah displays tremendous courage, and is not even afraid of death. The new experiences add new aspects to her personality.

She would agree to die, but not in the way of some simple ant, some worm on the ground. If I lie here it will crush me. And so she sat up, and then she stood, the only human left standing, the only human with a face not obliterated (246)

Hannah's amazing inner strength propels her to attack and kill Morad Farah.

Hannah thrust the long dagger she'd hidden in the folds of her sari into the exposed flesh under Morad Farah's battle tunic, through the muscle and organs, back across to the spine itself. Even his scream was cut short, barely an in-suck of breath, barely the registering of pain and death from an unexpected sources. (249)

Hannah saves the Raja's life, and brings him back to Panpur. She brings him to Mother Queen's Palace. The Raja's mother screams accusingly; she suggests that, 'Hannah had brought bad luck. The Raja had left the fort healthy and ready for battle, he met the *firangi* and a spear had found his heart'. (251)

And 'the witch has weakened him, this women has taken his manhood'. (251) The juxtapositioning of two women, from two races, presents a quaint picture. The mother refuses to acknowledge the services of Hannah because she was a disturbed 'firangi'. The immigrant was always made to feel alien. Hannah exhibits tenderness

and efficiency as she nurses him, and gives a new lease of life to the fatally wounded Raja. Meanwhile she discloses that, 'I am with child for the usual reasons'. (256)

Usual has the poetic connotations of much more than the usual. This child is representative of a fulfilled union. In contrast to Dimple and Jasmine, Hannah finds complete happiness with her lover. Hannah's decision to negotiate with the Emperor to end the war, brings to notice her extraordinary diplomacy.

She would offer her life, if necessary, to end the war. Only a person outside the pale of the two civilizations could do it. Only a woman, a pregnant woman, a pregnant white woman, had the confidence or audacity to try it. (259)

Hannah argues with the Emperor and asks him why he wants to destroy the Raja. The Emperor replies, 'a skillful ruler trusts no friend, no family member. Trust only the hunting tiger or the vengeful enemy. The survivor is he who distrusts his own shadow. He destroys himself who does not submit'. (265)

The Emperor believes that there is no escaping the judgment of Allah and the duty of the Emperor is to bring the infidel before the throne of judgment. Hannah disdains the Emperor.

Duty! Duty, judgement! I have heard enough of duty. And of judgement. You cloak your lust for vengeance and for gold and diamonds in the noble words of duty and judgment and protection and sacrifice. But it is the weakest and the poorest and the most innocent who suffer, who sacrifice, whose every minute of every day is obedience to duty. (269)

The Emperor lifts the diamond off from his crown and says:

I do no fight for treasure and glory in this life. This diamond is the tear I shed as I discharge my duty. That is why it is called the Emperor's tear. The dutiful and the innocent, if they are pure and if they submit, will be judged by all-seeing, all-merciful Allah. The sum of their lives will be weighed in the scales of judgement. (269)

Hannah fails to bring peace between the Raja and the Emperor. She visualizes Aurangzeb as Ravana, the demon King of Lanka, in a Muslim disguise. Hannah absorbs the mythological environment, and it flows into her thought processes, her conversations and affects her beliefs. In the war, Raja Jadav Singh dies with the promise that 'You and Your child will always have a place. As I promised.' (256)

The Emperor asks Hannah to go back to her native place 'as woman serves man, man serves the will of God. You have placed yourself, where no woman has a right to be. I have decided to be merciful and return you to your people.' (267)

At night Hannah somehow manages to steal the diamond, the Emperor's Tear, from Aurangzeb's war-tent and runs away with Bhagmati. Bhagmati is wounded in the war. Hannah pays her a final tribute by thrusting the world's, most precious diamond into her gaping womb.

Hannah, my pearl, is no longer visible. Light is spreading but it is not the light of dawn, it is the light of extinguishments I plunge the knife deep in my belly, watch with satisfaction, and now with the mastery of my pain, the blood bubble from my beautiful brown flesh. More, I think, and plunge the knife deeper, plunge it as Hannah had into the back of Morad Farah, and make a burrow inside me. I feel the organs, feel the flesh, the bowels of history, and with my dying breath I plunge the diamond into the deepest part of me. (283)

So, the world's most perfect diamond lay in the remains of Bhagmati. After her death, Hannah makes a move towards Salem, giving birth to a black-haired, and black-eyed daughter called 'Pearl Singh', somewhere in the South Atlantic on the long voyage home. The expanses of the Atlantic provide a suitable birthplace for the child of Hannah and Raja Jadav Singh.

In Salem, the town people named the mother and daughter White Pearl and Black Pearl. Finally, Hannah is able to locate her mother Rebecca Easton, and they find a place for themselves in the margins of the puritan community. Not disturbed by the sarcastic comments of the people, of the community, she is happy to keep alive, in her memory, her Indian lover.

Hannah goes back to, the English people. She feels safer in her own community America is the only place where she can get her true identity and also the only place where she can survive by herself. In contrast to this, Jasmine, the heroine of the novel by the same name, chooses not to return to the country of her birth. 'We are Americans to freedom born!' (285) Certain critics like Banerjee make a point here, that Mukherjee considers India as a land without hope or a future.

Beigh Masters enters into Bhagmati's experience for ten seconds through virtual reality. Beigh tries to penetrate the barrier of time, space and personality, by dipping herself into the world of virtual reality recreated in the computer. 'My shoulder still throbbled, and it continues to ache at night; and sometimes I feel in my gut that I really am incubating an enormous diamond'. (283)

The mystery of the missing Emperor's Tear is, fascinatingly enough, solved through virtual reality. Hannah, cleverly, had Bhagmati's body shipped to the west, and given a Christian burial. Bhagmati's tomb entombed the priceless diamond.

In Bhagmati's honey-toned recitation Sita is the self-sacrificing ideal Hindu wife. The stories of Bhagmati ignite the memories, Hannah has tried to suppress namely, a abduction, betrayal, vengeance. Mukherjee digresses from

her narrative to comment on how contemporary Indians will appropriate Indian tradition and refashion it to suit their times.

Mukherjee's ambition as a writer now appears to include rewriting Indian narrative traditions as well as American ones. Fakrul Alam appreciates Mukherjee's work and says that 'the wide variety of Prose style used in *The Holder of the World* also testifies to Mukherjee's ambition to make it the most technically dazzling of her novels'.³⁵

Mukherjee express her purpose in writing the novel:

I did not want *The Holder of the World* to be a traditional historical novel, a period piece. I love history and I am fascinated by the handling of data, what is called information management. As the novel grew, draft by draft, I saw a way to bring these together [...] To me this was an experiment in virtual reality, a way of revising reliving history instead of rewriting it. I wanted to set up for American and Indian audiences how much Asia contributed to the notion of an American or European identity.³⁶

The novel is about Hannah, told by Beigh with an emphasis on certain themes like the merits of attempts to recapture the past, the collision of values that inevitably occurs when New World meets the old. Winston Barclay approaches the novel, as '*The Holder of the World* is a sprawling wide screen historical epic painted in miniature with one-hair brush'.³⁷

Pradeep Trikha comments that 'Mukherjee moves in Yeats- like Gyres of time in order to reconstruct and provide organic unity to the events of Hannah Easton's life'.³⁸ Mukherjee moves, in three time-zones simultaneously- the past, the present and the future. In the novel from America to India, worlds collide with one another 'the tide is reversed, the so- called American dream lies in the Orient and American seeks it'³⁹ says Manju Kak.

Laxmi Parasuram points out that the novel is:

An attempt to turn the tables on the familiar situation of an Indian in America to one of an American in India so that we may discover an approach to cross-cultural consciousness that has a universal relevance. The book releases consciousness from the shackles of Time and space and brings a sense of global connectedness beyond the barriers of time and geography.⁴⁰

Bharati Mukherjee describes *The Holder of the World* as a 'postmodern historical novel'.⁴¹ Laxmi Parasuram says:

Mukherjee seems totally engaged in the book to explore and discover how Hannah could cross the cultural barriers and hold together the colliding words in which she found herself. The world in the Holder is one in which the metaphoric freely merges with the literal and India becomes there a supreme example for such merging of realities to assume the status of a work of art.⁴²

Stephanie Gillian approaches the novel; 'as a rewrite of Nathaniel Hawthorne's, *The Scarlet Letter*. Its simply another version of Hawthorne's work but rather a blending of elements of history, romance, time, travel and adventure'.⁴³

Rubenstein evaluates, *The Holder of the World* as 'a different kind of multicultural story, one that imaginatively links the 17th Century Colonial New World. (Puritan New England) with the old world (England and Mughal India)'.⁴⁴ Rebenstien contends that it brings to like 'A plucky, adventurous woman who challenges the norms of both her era, and her gender to become a full citizen of the world'.⁴⁵

The Holder of the World is a tale about dislocation and transformation arising when two cultures come into contact with each other. Hannah's life succeeds in questioning and discovering new ways of defining identity. Hema Nair is assertive in her comment; 'Hannah is a stunning creation, a bold mind striving for identify in strange surroundings, a timeless creature trying to survive in a rigid, inexorably defined society'.⁴⁶

Bharati Mukherjee creates female characters who break through the boundaries imposed on them by the culture, gender and also by their race. Despite the differences in race, class and culture among Jasmine, Bhagmati and Hannah, they all share the same fluidity of identities, rather than maintaining fixed identity imposed on them by their patriarchy. All of them cross barriers, jump beyond the protective 'white circles' made by their elders. All of them seem to want fulfillment in love, and in order to gratify their physical needs they use both sexuality and violence to get power, and in return gain individual identities. They move beyond restrictions that would stagnate them. Jasmine, Hannah, Bhagmati all, like Sita, cross the border and step outside the white circle, (Sita's circle of protection drawn by Lakshman, her husband's young brother) and become involved with men outside their culture. Bhagmati tells the story of Sita to Hannah. Ravana abducted Sita. Ravana, in Hindu mythology, is the ten-head king of the demons. His abduction of Sita and eventual defeat by Sita's husband Rama is the one of the greatest Hindu myths. Sita was kidnapped by Ravana because she strayed outside the white circle of protection. At this point in the story, Hannah thinks, 'white circle, white town'. (175) Beigh Masters-the narrator- deliberately, chose a man from another race:

My twenties passed in grad school and in travel and in short-term grants and short term affairs that took me wherever I wanted to go. Past success became my credentials, and I picked up

other-men-Other-men-meaning the natives of other countries whose immediate attractiveness I could judge, but nothing else about them; the codes were different. (33)

Bhagmati becomes the mistress of Henry Hedges; Hannah becomes the 'White Bibi' of Jadav Singh. Hannah, like her mother, Rebecca finds a lover from another culture and crosses racial boundaries. For Hannah sexuality becomes a means of identification, and she uses sex as a channel to amuse herself. As mentioned above, Mukherjee respects women's physical needs. In her novels Mukherjee uses sexual relationships with men from other races as a means of erasing boundaries between black and white, self and, other and of course, young and old. Bhagmati, as a child "Bindu Bashini", lived in a large mud hut, crowded with grandparents, parents widowed great aunts, uncles and aunts- in-law. She is renamed after she refuses to die, when she is raped and thrown into the river.

The women robbed, and Bindu Bashini herself violated and thrown into the river. She'd been meant to drown. A dishonored Hindu girl couldn't go back home. To have been abused was to have brought shame to the family for its failure to protect her. (223)

She had swum against the river and survived. On her survival her relatives disowned her.

Individual effort thwarted divine fate. She had neither wanted to, nor known how to, drown. So her relatives- all of them decent, affectionate men and women in untested times-had done the disowning in accordance with neighbourly pressure and Hindu custom. Only cowards chose shameful life over honorable death. (223)

Bindu, a victim twice over, chooses to run away from her family and from all traditions. She now supports herself by taking up menial jobs. 'She'd staved off starvation in a hundred shameful ways' (224)

At the age of twelve, she becomes a kitchen worker for an English man in Hughli. Henry Hedges, her employer, renames her Bhagmati.

He treated her like a slave, and then he treated her like a queen. He'd craved her with the urgency of an addiction. And when he'd been moved from Hughli to Kasimbazar, he'd taken Bhagmati- his name for her for her, reborn self-with him. (224)

Bhagmati cannot choose, as Hannah does, to step beyond the boundaries set by patriarchy. She is more dependent upon the protection of others. She accepts confinement at some stages. For instance, she refuses to leave India with Hannah, because she cannot conceive of life in England without Henry Hedges. He could have kept 'Foreignness at bay'. (224) Similarly, she trusted Raja Singh to keep her safe. Nalini Iyer points out differences between Hannah and Bhagmati's experiences. 'Identity formation for a native woman and an immigrant woman are different because of cultural location and racial identity rather than similar because of their shared identity as women'.⁴⁷

Hannah makes choices throughout the novel. She marries Gabriel so that she may leave Salem. This marriage links her with a man who belongs to another race. Beigh Masters explains this as; 'unconscious imitation of her mother, a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien?' (69) At another point she says 'she had traveled the world, a witness to unimagined vision, merely to repeat her mother's folly and to live her mother's life over.' (238) Hannah proves herself to be 'a product of her time and place, her marriage and her training, exposed to range of experience that would be extreme even in today's world, but none of it, consciously, had sunk in or affected her outer behavior. (220) Hannah chooses to have an affair with Jadav Singh and seems pleased with the change. 'I was once a respectable married English Lady and look at me now- a bibi in a sari. We can all change.' (256) As a Bibi she realizes 'She was no longer the woman she'd been in Salem and London'. (234) Her faith in her white (firangi) identity both limits, and at the same time, empowers her. She challenges the Great Mughal Emperor but she fails to have power over him. She thinks of stopping the war. 'Only a person outside the pale of the two civilizations could do it. Only a woman, a pregnant woman, a pregnant white woman, had the confidence or audacity to try it.' (259)

An analysis of the kind of clothes worn, dealt by Bharati Mukherjee, provides more depth into the shaping of the new identity. There is a description of Rebecca. She 'peels her white, radiant body out of the Puritan widow's somber bodice and skirts as a viper sheds skin before wriggling into the brush' (29) and putting on 'something new and Indian and clean to wear'. (29)

Hannah's adoption of the sari, while she was in the palace of Raja Jadav Singh and her patronage of 'modest clothing' in the court to the Great Mughal Emperor serve as concrete marks of her new identity. Jasmine and Dimple too associate different clothing with different identities. Hannah also takes on different names and identities. Her name changes from Hannah Easton to Salem Bibi. This is suggestive of a quest of a vital life of feeling and emotions. Bharati Mukherjee again is trying to reinforce this idea that like Jasmine, Hannah too is a woman of boundless hope. The novel explores how Hannah could cross the cultural barrier and hold together the world she found herself in. Her own mother, she realized, when she was with Jadav Singh, 'must have taken a Nipmuc name. A new name for a new incarnation. Rebecca Easton was dead. Hannah Easton Fitch Legge was dying'. (222)

While living in the palace of Jadav Singh, both Hannah and Bhagmati give each other new name. Hannah becomes 'Mukta, Bhagmati's word for 'Pearl.'(271)

Mukherjee creates a complex tale about the dislocation and transformation that arises when different cultures collide each other. Mukherjee emphasizes the multiple planes of Hannah's identity who has a Christian Hindu, Muslim, and an American Indian English self.

The novel is a meeting place of three cultures i.e. Christian, Muslim and Hindu. Hannah changed lovers and religions. Her inclination to each religion is different. She practices Hinduism and Islam for a while and gives Bhagmati a Christian name and a Christian burial. Hannah believed at the outset that Hinduism was for her a series of barbaric attitudes like burying young widows, denying humanity to the untouchables and worshipping various images. In the Hindu household she learned to believe in a cosmic energy that governed the Universe. Hannah finds Muslims similar to devout Christians, because, 'they had a heaven, a hell, a book, a leader, a single God; they knew sin and tried to repent. Their dialectic codes were harsh, but logical.' (219)

All along, Hannah maintained the Christian skepticism about the other face of religions. She wanted to embrace this world only to sacrifice herself at the altar of true love. 'She wanted the Raja and nothing else, she would sacrifice anything for his touch and the love they made.' (229)

The Holder of the World, is also the story of Beigh Masters born in England in the mid-twentieth Century. She is a modern twenty-first century woman. She incorporates the attitudes of an educated, empowered, modern woman. Beigh Masters as an asset researcher traces the history of a jewel, 'The Emperor's Tear' that once belonged to an American puritan who became the Salem Bibi in the court of the Indian Emperor. As she digs deeper, she uses historical data to enter the past and find out what happened. She provides a logical corollary to Hannah's life. Hannah's mother was the cousin of Beigh Master's own ancestor. Fascinated by her own familial ties, Beigh traces Hannah's life from New England to the Coramandel Coast. Beigh begins to realize their genetic connection. It was her belief that 'with sufficient passion and intelligence, we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography.' (11) Hannah's genes are similar to Beigh Masters's. Beigh has inherited this trait. She observes Hannah's character and feels that:

Hannah Legge might have lived out her life in India, in the new palace Gabriel was building in New Salem. Her bones might be resting in St. Mary's Cemetery of Fort St. George. Wherever she stayed, I am convinced she would have changed history, for she was one of those extraordinary lives through which history runs a four-lane highway. (189)

Beigh Masters symbolically presents a perspective on history like Keats's Grecian Urn. She is not a 'cold pastoral.' She adds to history. She enlightens and clarifies and informs. In Keats's ode, the Urn has been a preserver of secrets. Beigh Masters ravishes the 'unravished' and exposes the truth. In making sense of Hannah's life, Beigh is striving to make sense of her own life too. Hannah teaches her, to go beyond her 'cynical self, my well trained feminist self'. (60) Beigh learns to value life, which she thinks led Hannah to accompany Gabriel to India. 'Her curiosity, the awakening of her mind and her own sense of self and purpose'. (89) It will help her and her lover Venn to 'predict what will happen to us within our life time'. (91) Beigh finds out, 'I'm part of this story, the Salem Bibi is part of the tissue of my life'. (21)

Ravi Shankar comments, 'the transformation of the Salem Bibi's soul through time and space becomes an allegory of Beigh Masters's personal discovery'.⁴⁸ Beigh Masters unravels the mystery, surrounding the life of the Salem Bibi and the diamond. Mukherjee seems to agree with Elizabeth Long's view that 'people are continually remaking their culture, and in doing so redefining the past, reconstituting the present, and reconceptualizing what they desire from future.'⁴⁹

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