

Transformation and Migration in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*

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Abstract:

Transformation and migration which form the two major themes of Bharati Mukherjee's works are shown in a new light in **The Holder of the World**. The theme of migration as depicted in the earlier novels of Bharati Mukherjee is reversed in this novel. Though the protagonist is a woman, she hails from Salem, Massachusetts, Bay Colony and not India. She, unlike the other protagonists in Mukherjee's other novels, travels eastward.

Key Words: Transformation, migration, travel, eastward

Introduction:

In the novel **The Holder of the World** we find that the migration herein occurs from West to East and not from East to West as it was in her previous novels. The protagonist in this novel is a White and not an Indian as it was in her previous novels. The protagonist of this novel Hannah Easton migrates to India wishing heartily to escape from the puritanical surroundings of her home town. She welcomes change with an open mind and adapts herself to the Indian style of life, by even embracing Hinduism. The difference in this story is that the protagonist returns to her native place towards the end of the novel.

The structure of **The Holder of the World** is complex; it spans two historical periods, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. Mukherjee draws the readers with gusto and precise concern to enumerate across time- from the present to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and space - from Salem, Massachusetts, to the coast of Coromandel, in India-into the footsteps of not one but two extraordinary women protagonists and narrators. The primary narrator, a twentieth century American assets hunter, Beigh Masters, from Massachusetts with the aid of her Indo-American lover Venn Iyer of MIT, a computer engineer; is trying to recover the narrative of a seventeenth-century woman, Hannah Easton

Fitch Legge. Beigh's primary incitement for piecing together Hannah's story is to find the Emperor's Tear, a jewel nicked by Hannah from the Mughal Emperor, Aurangazeb. Beigh's narrative traces the story of Hannah from her New England origins, through a brief stay in England as the wife of an English sailor, to her subsequent travels to India with her husband, who becomes an East India Company factor and later a pirate.

The novel reinforces the theme of expatriation as a journey of the human mind. The protagonist Hannah Easton's voyage to the orient is a predetermined truth which effectively proclaims and portrays the underlying tensions, hopes and ambitions of the protagonist. Hannah becomes an expatriate as a result of a quest for a vital life of feeling and emotions. Like the other women in Bharati Mukherjee, Hannah is also a woman of energy and boundless hope. The escape from the old world is largely the result of not necessarily embracing new, positive values but an attempt to escape from the limitations and claustrophobic influence of the native world.

The arrival of Gabriel Legge in Salem, an event which ultimately alters Hannah's destiny, works more as a catalyst than a determining force in her life. Hannah agrees to marry Gabriel, not as much of love for him as a way of squeezing out of her constrictive frontier society: "She did not believe him but she, too, longed for escape" (Mukherjee, Holder 67). The total dearth of fervour, individual entanglement and adulation between Hannah and her husband is a testimony of Hannah's married life in London.

Hannah accompanies Gabriel to India firmly trusting the dawn of a more vital, active and emotion-filled life in her near future to be a possibility only through him. His wanderlust leaves her in India at the mercy of a Hindu King and eventually as the mistress of the Great Mughal; Aurangazeb. The journey of Hannah Easton to the physically conscious, self-indulgent and fastidiously passionate world is not a quirk of chance or a forced one. Having been under very strict, rule bound, claustrophobic influence of the Puritan world, Hannah's early life directs to her fascination for passion and feeling.

Hannah's arrival into a severely tumultuous atmosphere charged with unforeseen political and economic implications in India happens in the year 1695. Hannah meanwhile is mainly concerned only with delving deep into the basics of life, peeling away layer after layer the superficiality that confronts the world and going in quest of a social grace that awards a meaningful life. The minute she touches the soil on the Coromandel coast, she precisely knows she has arrived and instinctively senses that she is not interested in returning to England even after Gabriel completes his tour.

Hannah's fate led her on a totally different route. She was different from the other expatriates that arrived on the shores of India with the basest attitude. It is because Hannah was still connected to the emotional realities of human life at all levels and places. For her an Indian or any other person as such was first a human being and only later came in all the frills and frailties. She was open to forming a link with the human being, whatever the origin or whoever he might be. It is this openness to experience and connectedness to human beings that enables Hannah secure the title 'precious us as pearl'.

The adaptability in Hannah's character is brought to the fore through the repercussions of her first meeting with Bhagmati. Bhagmati's narration of The Ramayana in fragments ignite Hannah's memories because of congruous themes of abduction, betrayal and vengeance. Her hunger for a fierce and fervid redemption with the sole intention of re-creating her mother's adventurous amour is seen to be fulfilled through her encounter with Raja Jadav Singh. She is transformed into Salem Bibi, wherein Hannah willingly embraces the new world of Hinduism. Her courting of Raja Jadav Singh is an indicator of a relationship that is Indian based, of 'eastern' values and morality; a total deviation from the life she has left behind. As Hannah truthfully admits, she had left Gabriel for having a bibi; but the irony is that, within a few months, she willingly turns herself into one; shelving relationships of all ethical expectations of conventionality.

Jadav Singh offers Hannah a life of abandonment, limitless passions and sensuous pleasures hitherto unseen or unknown to the English world. This experience of overwhelming love and the fact of being possessed to the point of distraction drives Hannah into the totality of her relationship with Jadav Singh with little thought for moral or ethical considerations.

Hannah's transformation clearly reflects the changing scenario, wherein people tend to change, refashion or rather transform themselves to what they feel is contemporary and current trend. "People are continually remaking their culture, and in so doing, redefining the past, reconstituting the present and reconceptualising what they derive from the future" (Long 202). Hannah's thriving on the new recognition and identifying herself as Jadav Singh's bibi is clear evidence of Mukherjee's view that survivor is one who improvises, but not one who plays by the rules. Hannah's triumph attains a glory because it is courageous, full of unyielding passion and an obstinate will to survive.

Hannah faces tough times when Nawab Haider Beg, Governor of Aurangzeb's state dispatches his most trusted lieutenant, a ruthless commander, Morad Farah to arrest the Raja and usurp the diamond. He also has instructions to capture the 'firangi' lady, Hannah. Raja

Jadav Singh carefully manipulates the escape of Hannah along with her companion Bhagmati, but as fate would have it there is an attack in which Hannah kills Morad Farah and saves Jadav Singh's life. She returns Jadav Singh to Panpur and embarks upon as an emissary to the court of Aurangzeb; in a bid to end the war. Though she disdains the emperor for the bloody war initiated that unnecessarily claimed the lives of numerous innocent people, she still tries to transact terms and conditions. She, though, is taken hostage by Aurangzeb.

Whenever Aurangzeb approaches her, she eyes in him 'Ravana' the demon king in a muslim disguise. Hannah experiences journey so far into the mysterious east that she now is entirely Indian-not only wearing the physical Indian garb but also developing Indian values and morality. Due to this transformation into Indianness, Hannah is ready to protect her Indian lover inspite of his disassociation from her. Jadav Singh focuses his attention on war and public service, abandoning his lover. He discovers that she was distraction in the running of the affairs of the kingdom. Hannah on her part confronts Aurangzeb and even bows to his gifts of pearls which are given as a symbol of his superiority and might. Having accomplished the duty of purloining the diamond from Aurangzeb himself, she escapes towards Panpur and hands it over to Bhagmati and returns to Salem.

Hannah's journey to India is fraught with images of adventure, action and passion. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society. Like Jasmine, Hannah finds final contentment and joy in the adapted land and it is the morality of this land that Hannah carries along with her. Towards the end of the novel, Hannah spends the rest of her life eking out a living mostly as a nurse. She returns to her mother Rebecca, who has also returned to the white world with her five half-Nipmuc children. Mother and daughter live together in Salem with Hannah's child, the daughter of Jadav Singh, the mark of her Indian love. The daughter of Hannah is called the Black pearl; while Hannah herself is called the white pearl.

The novel **The Holder of the World** appears to be a deviation from the degeneration and rootlessness found in the earlier novels of Bharati Mukherjee. The novel succeeds in introducing a set of new elements in Mukherjee's cross- cultural vision. She communicates through it a new kind of global consciousness that provides a sense of connection beyond the barriers of time and geography. Though Mukherjee describes **The Holder of the World** as a "Post-modern historical novel" (Kumar 6) it is at its most basic level, a novel of expatriation, of a quest and a journey, not only to geographically diverse lands but to culturally variant societies which help to question and abandon conventional moral and social values.

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