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JOURNEY OF THE HUMAN MIND: A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S
THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD

MANMEET KOUR

Research Scholar, Department of English
University of Jammu, Jammu



MANMEET KOUR

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most celebrated writers of the Indian Writing in English. Her fiction examines how postcolonialism affects identity formation in contemporary women's immigrant literature. Her basic concern is to deal with the problems of cross-cultural conflicts faced by Indian women immigrants. Her immigrants since they come from an Asian or non-European background, undergo experiences somewhat dissimilar to those of European immigrants in the past. In the Asian immigrants of America, the colliding worlds of their exile and immigration generate a number of psychological anomalies that merge into one another to form a unique blend of cross-cultural consciousness that can be measured only by its own ability to survive and succeed. The paper scrutinizes the journey of the human mind through the experiences of the protagonist, Hannah Easton, a white Puritan woman from Salem, Massachusetts Bay colony who makes a journey to the exotic shores in the last 17th century.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Contemporary, Cross-cultural, Colliding, Anomalies

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In English prose writing, the fiction of expatriate writers is gaining immense recognition, echoing as it does the diverse but popular trend of emigration. Bharati Mukherjee's novels express this nomadic impulses of Indians, often in deliberate search of a materially better life with the consequent tensions of adaptation and assimilation. Often the Indian, particularly the Indian woman, finds herself unable to confront and live within a world so vastly different from the one left behind. Vinita in the novel *Wife* sets out to kill her husband as her frustration in the new world assume unmanageable proportions while in *The Tiger's Daughter* the protagonist almost associates her old world with familial values of loyalty and trust while the west seems to offer her only dubious physical relationships.

Bharati Mukherjee's succeeding novel *The Holder of The World* re-inforces expatriation as a journey of the human mind. Like Jasmine who travels westward, Hannah Easton's voyage to the orient is a pre-determined truth which effectively voices and manifests the latent tensions, aspirations and ambitions of the protagonist. Hannah, like Jasmine, becomes an expatriate as a result of a quest for a vital life of feeling and emotions. Like the other women in Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine and Hannah are women 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. To a large extent, therefore, Jasmine's journey to the west is emulated by Hannah Easton's voyage to India 300 years ago

Hannah's movement to the physically conscious, self-indulgent and fastidiously passionate world of the east is no accident nor is her role of an expatriate that of chance. Hannah Easton's early life points most emphatically to a life of passion and feeling, a life essentially denied to her in Puritan New England. Hannah as an expatriate can only embrace the new world in its entirety, for it is this world that she has been in quest of ever since the fateful evening of her mother's abduction. Just as Jasmine is destined to reach the shores of America since her childhood, so is Hannah fated to be in the arms of an Indian lover, participating in passions and emotions alien to the world to which she belongs.

Hannah's early life, surrounded as she is by the harsh world of Puritan simplicity, echoes of Christian service, charity and hard work. The image of Hannah being made to sing Psalms along with her mother Rebecca is countered immediately with the more forceful image of her mother being swept off into the arms of her Indian lover and of them galloping into the wilderness, physically breaking the barriers of her Puritan society. Hannah's memory of this event, while being hazy and grey, is at once also sharply outlined. Her sympathy for her mother's way of life, for the choice that she makes, discarding her grey and white robes to reveal a youthful and passionate body is pictured by Hannah in images which are clear in spite of attempts to obliterate them from the mind.

The arrival of Gabriel Legge in Salem, an event which ultimately alters Hannah's destiny, is more of a catalyst than a determining force in her life. Gabriel's courtship of Hester Manning exposes the vast differences between the personality of Hannah and her colonial contemporaries. Hester's flirtatious nature embraces the realm of 'reasonable' society, of a world defined by reason, enlightenment and cultivation: "She would go only halfway round the world with him, the tiresome, well-trod half, to England" (68). Hannah, on the other hand, succumbs to Gabriel's particularly adventurous nature with its suggestions of recklessness, danger and unpredictability. Hannah's attitude to Gabriel, however, is tinged with a certain sense of detachment, curiosity and personal appeal. She knows that Gabriel's stories are more fiction than fact and that his tough, manly exterior only reveals a man with little patience for the domestic, mundane necessities of everyday existence. Yet, Hannah instinctively agrees to marry Gabriel, not as much out 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" (67).

Hannah's married life in London is itself a testament to the total absence of passion, personal involvement and love between her and her husband. Hannah seems to spend most of her time in her little cottage, tending to her garden and writing memoirs and letters to her friends in America. Her encounter with Hubert who offers a life of sophisticated travelling leads to a rejuvenation of her instinct for the outdoors. When Gabriel returns, almost from the dead, Hannah accompanies him to India for she sees in Gabriel the only way out and into a more vital, more active life of feeling and emotion.

Hannah's arrival in India is set against a period of turbulent political and economic activity. The major concern of the novelist is to describe the journey of Hannah, her struggle and the efforts she makes for the sake of personal identity. Here Mukherjee has used her women characters to portray the affinity between the two cultures. In her new world, Hannah's primary concern seems to be to peel the layers of superficiality and social grace and dwell beneath it in a quest for meaningful life. As soon as she steps on the shores of the Coromandel coast she feels an instinctive sense of belonging and decides that she did not "aspire to return to England upon the completion of Gabriel's tour" (104). Her encounter with the English women furthers her impatience with their pretensions to nobility and their self-conscious superiority among the local community. These were women who led ordinary lives, even lives of servitude in England but came to a life of command and respect and were too eager to display it all its vulgarity. Their life of reason and etiquette is sharply opposed by the dubiously adventurous and morally ambivalent lives of their husbands whose *bibis* become the wives' primary topic of conversation.

The first manifestation of a *bibi* that she comes across in the form of Bhagmati pulling herself down from the terrace of Hannah's house, dressed in sheer muslin white mesmerizes Hannah's consciousness. It is an image that persists in her mind as suggestive of the sensuality, magical attraction and passionate representation of this land. In fact, as Gabriel sets out with the Marquis on a mission of piracy, Hannah feels no remorse or longing for her old world, for she has yet to come to terms with this passion, with the sensuality and life of emotion.

Hannah's desire to attain a kind of passionate salvation as a way of recreating her mother's choice in the forest is largely fulfilled in her encounter with Raja Jadav Singh. Her courtship with Jadav indicates a relationship based entirely on Indian values and morality with little reference to the life left behind. In fact as Hannah admits herself, she had left Gabriel for having a *bibi* but within a few months, she willingly becomes one herself, suspending all morality, all expectations of conventional relationships. Jadav Singh offers Hannah a life of limitless possibilities, of passion with abandon and sensuous pleasures undreamt of in the English world. It is this experience of being overwhelmed in love, of being possessed to the point of distraction that Hannah embraces with the totality of her being and little moral speculation.

Jadav Singh's death and Hannah's encounter with Emperor Aurangzeb culminates her experiences, not only as far as India is concerned but in terms of her own journey to the world of the mysterious east, assuming as she has now an entirely Indian physical garb as well as Indian values and morality. Hannah is ready to protect her Indian lover in spite of his dissociation from her, for like a true Machiavellian and believer in Kautilya. Her journey to India is fraught with images of adventure and passion. She returns to her native land not as a reformed American but as a rebel living on the fringes of society. Like Jasmine, Hannah finds final satisfaction and joy in the adopted land and it is the morality of this land that Hannah carries along with her.

To conclude, as Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationship to become individuals, *The Holder of the World* is different from her other works as it has "a wide canvas, that sweeps across continents and centuries, cultures and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign lands have always been the colour of Mukherjee's plate, and with *The Holder of the World*, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility and eternal time" (Ashia Sattar). *The Holder of the World* is a novel of a quest and a journey not only to geographically diverse lands but to culturally variant societies which help to question and abandon conventional social and moral values. Hannah's life succeeds in discovering new ways of defining reality in a world which was essentially orthodox. She was born as Hannah Easton, brought up as Hannah Fitch, re-named as Hannah Legge after her marriage, becomes Salem *bibi* and finally Mukta. She faced all the difficulties but finally struggles through them and came out as a winner. The story unfolds that it is not the culture, but the mind of a woman which is responsible for the type of life she leads.

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