

Multiple Cultures and Genesis of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*

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Abstract:

*Increasing economic globalization in recent times has led to unrestricted and unparalleled movement of people and products from one corner of the globe to another, giving rise to metropolitan culture and troubled identities. However, this phenomenon is ages old. Man has been changing cities, countries and citizenships since ancient times either to satisfy his basic needs of food, clothing and shelter or to satisfy higher order needs of discovery, fame and riches. This commingling of people of varied cultures not only enhanced interaction and mutual co-operation between nations, it also led to people harmonizing between their native culture and that of the new set-up. The people thus caught between push and pull of contrasting cultures, suffering with feelings of alienation, despair and nostalgia in foreign lands came to be known as 'Diaspora'. Bharati Mukherjee is one such well known novelist belonging to Indian diaspora who made her contemporaries envious in a comparatively short creative span. Her literary opus is manifested with her personal experiences and first hand knowledge of continents of birth and stay. This paper scrutinizes one of Mukherjee's protagonists Hannah's endeavors for genesis of identity in a cross-cultural scenario in *The Holder of the World*.*

KEY WORDS: diverse, cultures, diaspora, endeavors, identity

The process of immigrants trying to imbibe foreign culture, in contrast to their native culture, in an alien land is turbulent and it has, more often than not, resulted in some psychological idiosyncrasies alien to both the cultures. The individuals do not feel fully accepted in any culture and are depicted as "on the border". Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian diaspora writer, is the loud and very distinct voice in Indian and American literary canon. Since the publication of her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), she has been keenly engrossed in churning out fiction, analyzing the complexities of her choicest theme of migration experience. Mukherjee has changed citizenships and lived in distinct cultural milieus with disorienting rapidity due to her higher education and marriage with another academician and renowned author of Canadian origin, Clark Blaise. She has most vividly depicted in her novels, the cultural turmoil of South Asian, particularly Indian women upon their arrival in America and their genesis of identity. However, in *The Holder of the World*, the journey of the narrator protagonist of the main plot, Hannah Easton and the journey of the narrator protagonist of sub plot, Beigh Masters, a distant blood relative of Hannah, born centuries later, has been reversed.

The novel illustrates the perturbed psyche of a young woman Hannah, who is a victim of alienation and male dominance. Hannah is able to evolve as a champion in the face of all odds due to sheer strength of her firm will power. The physical, mental and emotional hardships that Hannah undergoes transform her completely into a new and different personality. The plots set in distant time and spaces establish that cross-cultural consciousness has always had a universal relevance. Mukherjee delves deep into the history of the three continents and her protagonists travel from West to East in search of identity which they want to forge, enduring all the cultural shocks in the way. Here we witness a rare and interesting meeting of worlds, the England, America and Mughal India. In a shocking blend of history and imagination, Mukherjee illuminates the making and very nature of the American sensibility in this novel.

Beigh, a 32-year-old very modern and sophisticated woman, born in New England in the mid-twentieth century, an 'asset hunter' by profession who thinks of her job as a means of "uniting people and possessions"⁽⁵⁾ gets set

to track down for a client a diamond called the Emperor's Tear, reputedly the most perfect diamond in the world. Her reading of *Auctions and Acquisitions*, one of the trade magazines in her field, apprises her that though people and their property get separated from one another, "Nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way" (5). Confident to achieve her aim, she travels from Boston to India and back again in search of the priceless object supposed to have been lost while in the possession of Emperor Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors in India. Her frisking of museums, documents, literature, her travels to India and auctions world over, are juxtaposition of Mukherjee's efforts to look at the recorded history and culture of seventeenth-century colonial New England, the East India Company, America and Mughal India in reconstructing a daring woman's odyssey. The seed for this novel germinated in Mukherjee's love for Mughal paintings and her desire to imitate on paper, the accomplishment of Mughal painters on canvas:

Each of the Akbari paintings that I am so mesmerized by is so crowded with narrative, sub-narratives, sometimes meta-narratives, so taut with passion and at the same time so crisp with irony. Every separate 'story' in the miniature matters, every minor character has a dramatic function. But all the strands and details manage to cohere, that's what's amazing! (Chen and Goudie 8).

Mukherjee reveals writing the novel after she came across a seventeenth-century Indian miniature painting in a 1989 pre-auction viewing in New York in which she wondered about a blonde in Mughal court: Who is this very confident-looking woman who sailed in some clumsy wooden boat across dangerous seas and then stayed there? She had transplanted herself in what must have been a traumatically different culture. How did she survive? (Cincotti 7)

Mukherjee evidently enough then crafted her surrogate Beigh, to lookout for answers and placed Hannah Easton in an appropriate historical context that suggests that there were connections made between America and India in earlier centuries - connections that can inspire connections between cultures in our time.

In her hunt for the diamond, Beigh in a Maritime Trade Museum in Massachusetts runs into a set of Mughal miniature paintings. In the largest painting "beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort" (17) who has become legendary as "Salem Bibi" or the mistress from Salem. Beigh, quite obviously, is fascinated by the appearance of a blonde woman in Mughal India, more so, since in one of the paintings she seems to be holding the Emperor's Tear while sharing the frame with a vanquished raja and a gloomy emperor. Relying on her intuition, that Salem Bibi was Hannah Easton, Beigh sets out on two quests: she will not only find out where the Emperor's Tear could have vanished but will also reorganize the sequence of events that transformed Hannah Easton into Salem Bibi and led to her come back to New England.

Beigh's visit to the Museum of Maritime Trade makes her wonder over the gulf between the Old and the New Worlds, represented by America and India, "it's a fly's eye view of Puritan history" (12) whereas the Mughal opulence is "flashy with decoration" (12), a clash of value systems, a confrontation between an austere, stark society and a culture in which nothing is more important than the celebration of beauty.

She thinks that Hannah must have confronted these colliding cultures and learnt to live with them as she travelled to those utmost shores from Salem to the Coromondal Coast of India. During her exploration, Beigh gets more interested, however, in Hannah Easton, the woman who appeared to have led such a fabulous life, than in locating the diamond. Further, Beigh's discovery of the kinship with Hannah makes her realize that they not only shared long lost familial relations but also the thirst for a passion that could transform their lives; both have a "hunger for connectedness" (11).

Beigh has an Indian lover for nearly three years, a brilliant computer scientist named Venn Iyer, from South India settled in the Boston area. He is engaged in "a virtual-reality project" at the MIT lab. Beigh believes that

re-structuring the events of Hannah's life with Venn's aid will, eventually lead them to "predict what will happen to us within our lifetime" (91).

In unearthing the layers of mystery, Beigh stumbles upon strange and surprising adventures of Hannah Easton, a New Englander who was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, to Edward and Rebecca Easton in 1670. Just after a year of her birth, Hannah's father succumbed to insect bite, and Hannah's memory of her mother Rebecca Easton is largely distressing one which always haunts her everywhere. Her mother had deserted her in a Brookfield forest to elope with her American-Indian lover when she was only four. Consequently, she grows up as the adopted child of a devout Puritan couple, Robert and Susannah Fitch, stifled by the strict parameters imposed by Puritan society. Here, she gains all the conventional wisdom and housekeeping, develops an obsessive love of needle work, which often depicted her internal conflict after her mother's disappearance. Through her embroidery perhaps she expressed her hidden, subdued and suppressed emotions. Besides needle work, she is also adept at nursing the sick and the wounded. At a young age of 22, she readily agrees to marry the Irish adventurer and sea farer Gabriel Legge, of not so good repute and with an eye patch, mainly because he appears to be the type who could take her into the unknown. Hers is not only an impulsive decision taken purely on material considerations but a first step on far-reaching odyssey of an individual in quest of a meaning, a purpose and an identity in life. "She did not believe him, but she too longed for escape". (67) Her husband Gabriel Legge is a colorful anecdotist, the pompous seafarer who never had time or sensibility to listen to Hannah. Hannah's married life in London thus turns into a testament of total absence of passion, personal involvement and love. Hannah seems to spend most of her time gardening in her little cottage and writing letters to her friends. She becomes alienated and suffers a vexing surrounding of captivity. And so, after a couple of years in England, where she has to stay while Gabriel goes out on his adventures, she agrees to sail to Coromandel Coast of southeastern India with Gabriel, now a factor in East India Company. Hannah Easton's voyage to the orient effectively voices and manifests the latent tensions, aspirations and ambitions of the protagonist. Hannah becomes an expatriate as a result of a quest for a vital life of feelings and emotions. Parallel to other heroines of Mukherjee's fiction, Hannah is a repository of vigor and countless desires. 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. Hannah's arrival in India in 1695 is set against a period of tumultuous political and economic activity which is a metaphor for the turmoil within Hannah. But Hannah's primary concern in this new world is to peel the layers of superficiality and social grace and dwell beneath it in a quest for a meaningful life. In fact, immediately on docking on the Indian shores she feels an impulsive sense of affinity and resolves that she did not "aspire to return to England upon the completion of Gabriel's tour." (104) Just when Hannah is thinking to frame a new identity for herself in this alien land of promise, her encounter with the English women exposes her to the fakeness of the world she has entered. She is startled to see 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 in all its vulgarity. Their English husbands lead a life of promiscuity having 'bibis', the mistresses, and illegitimate children. She finds a good friend in Bhagmati, her Indian maid, also a 'bibi' by forced circumstances, who brings to her the glimmerings of understanding of an aged civilization. Bhagmati narrates fragments from the holy scripture of the Hindus, The Ramayana. Hannah is attracted to the events of Sita's life because she proves her purity to her husband and to her society in a trial by fire. She figures a striking similarity with Sita as her own life was also a trial by fire but unlike Sita she never undertakes 'Agnipariksha' for the sake of her husband. Both were the victims of patriarchal oppression.

Eventually, Gabriel, always vivacious and undomesticated, turns pirate and leaves Hannah to fend for herself in India. Hannah also leaves Gabriel without any remorse on knowing about his adultery. All this was unthinkable for Hannah grown up in conventional culture. However, Hannah is quick to assimilate in the surroundings and within a few months, ends up with an Indian lover, a Hindu Raja named Jadav Singh. In an irony, she willingly becomes his 'bibi', suspending all morality, all expectations of conventional relationships.

Hannah's early life, surrounded as she is by the harsh world of Puritan simplicity, echoes of Christian service, charity and hard work. However, her affair with Raja, most certainly reflects a life of ecstasy, a life typically declined to her in Puritan New England. Jadav Singh, for a while, offers Hannah a life of limitless possibilities, 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. Hannah is content to be only a mistress, for she has finally "felt her own passionate nature for the first time" and has discovered "that a world beyond duty and patience and wifely service was possible, then desirable, then irresistible" (237). Hema Nair makes a revealing comment: "Hannah is a stunning creation, a bold mind striving for identity in strange surroundings, a timeless creature trying to survive in a rigid, inexorably defined society" (The Toronto Review 106). Ultimately Hannah discovers that "the survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules" (234). This stresses author's message now and again in almost all her fictional writings that only those people can survive in an alien world who are elastic and can mould themselves according to the availability of space by improving upon their native rules.

Hannah's disturbing memory of her mother's elopement with her lover now evokes Hannah's sympathy for her mother's way of life and for the choice that she made. The profound memory, in fact, is re-enforced time and again, draped in sparkling colors indicating a world beyond that of the Puritan outpost. Hannah throws light on superstitions, widow marriage, sati, 'bibi' practice and the attempts on the part of the rulers to thwart any attempt to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. She looks at the idolatry of Hindus as a form of primitivism. Praying to an elephant-headed fat baby God Ganesha and hundreds of such images creates a sort of confusion and contempt in her mind. She also questions the very stand of Aurangzeb in spilling innocent blood in the shadow of Islam.

Soon, Raja severs his ties with Hannah finding she is a distraction in the affairs of the kingdom. Still when the Raja is engaged in a war with Aurangzeb to avert annexation of his kingdom, Hannah encounters the emperor to reason with him for pardoning Raja's life. She buries her puritan past and emerges as a real fighter of life. Raja's love makes her audacious and daring. Now she confronts the 'holder of the world', the Alamgir, the great Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, with boldness. She goes to the war tent of Aurangzeb as a peace maker, somehow purloins the most precious diamond the "Emperor's Tear," and slips out of the army camp, as the narrator reports later at the end of the novel in her experience of the virtual reality in the cyberspace. She tries her best to dissuade the Mughal Emperor from the bloody war. Though she fails in her mission for armistice between the Raja and the Emperor, she is able to impress the emperor with her courage and charisma. He endows her with a unique title: "for your white skin, for the luster of your spirit, for the one-in-a-lakh, I give you these pearls. I call you Precious-as-Pearl" (270). Hannah hands over the diamond to Bhagmati.

In the course of her search for the hidden life of Salem Bibi, then, Beigh Masters learns to treasure her relationship with Venn Iyer even more than she had at its beginning. Hannah teaches Beigh to savor her cross-cultural connection even more. Venn guides her into a belief in design and a knowledge of "a cosmic energy that quickens and governs the universe" (219) and affects all lives. It is appropriate, therefore, that it is Venn who is able to take her on his "virtual reality" machine to the climax of her quest. The diamond is eventually discovered by Beigh in a cyberspace event. Bhagmati forcibly presses the diamond into her dying torso to escape a life of servitude. It is in her catacomb that the holder of the world of the seventeenth century rests.

Jadav Singh's death culminates Hannah's experiences, not only as far as India is concerned but in terms of her own internal journey to the mysterious world, as she has now acquired all Indian values and morality in all its entirety. She returns to her home land, as a radical living on the periphery of culture. Hannah finally quenches her thirst of long sought after peace and joy in the embraced land. She succeeds in questioning and discovering new ways of defining reality in a world, which was essentially conventional. In Salem, she locates her mother in

a psychiatric hospital, nurtures her daughter Pearl Singh and fearlessly lives all her life undaunted by the taunts of the people of the colony. Her genesis of identity is evident in the following lines:

In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coast to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja; a murderer (she murders Morad Farah, one of the Great Generals of Aurangzeb), a widow, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India . . . she wasn't Hannah anymore; she was Mukta, Bhagmati's word for "Pearl". (271)

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