

## **Euphoria of Renovation from Cultural Amalgamation in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder Of The World***

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### **Abstract**

Bharati Mukherjee, a trailblazer of diaspora in North America, is an established novelist of the post-modern era. She is one of the prominent diasporic women novelists who mainly focus on female protagonists in their novels. Mukherjee strongly believes that a genuine fiction should epitomize the emotional, intellectual and physical responses of the characters when they are caught in a situation which is strange to them. Her protagonists are projected as individuals who have the potentiality to face the bitter truth of their lives as immigrants, but do not fall prey to the circumstances; rather they are brave enough to accustom themselves in the new environment. They are presented as paragons of vigour and valour to wrestle with the problems of life for the sake of survival. Mukherjee's protagonists leave a long lasting influence on readers' mind as they finally emerge out as successful beings in their adopted land. The fiction, *The Holder of the World*, is an ideal unification of the past and the present where the author traces the story of Hannah Easton, a New Englander, who was ultimately deemed as the mistress to an Indian Emperor. The novel exposes the change in geographical and cultural space - from America to India through England, and as a result of which the young protagonist renovates herself. Thus, this paper analyses the traumas and travails that the protagonist undergoes in a different cultural scenario, her acclimatization to the alien culture, gradual transformations in her personality and her rejoicing at renovation of her self.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, *The Holder Of The World*, Acclimatize, renovation, ecstasy, transformation, Identity, unification

### **Introduction**

Bharati Mukherjee is uniquely placed amongst contemporary Indian women novelists in English. In spite of being a typically diasporic writer, she never loses track of her Indian sensibility utilizing a canvas of wider perspective than others thereby claiming the right to be a novelist of plenum rather than that of disillusionment. She churns out raw materials from her native country not only to satisfy her

creative urge but also to get attention of the Western World. She has found a rich textual resource in her own experiences of immigration. Her novels mainly speak of immigrant woman's venture to define herself and attain her own identity in the cultural mosaic. She pens down the dreadful condition of immigrant women who have been pulling through the divergence of inherent homeland values and their obsession for western mode of living or for their craving for the liberty in liberal and dynamic society of America.

*The Holder of the World* is a significant fiction in Bharati Mukherjee's literary arena. Through this novel "Mukherjee has tried to convince the older Americans that their destinies are not distinct from that of the new immigrants because of their historical connection with South Asia" (qtd.in Stephen 88). Here, Mukherjee constantly mentioned the interconnection between cultures with which the modern world is made of. She "records the brutalities and the squalor of these dealings between peoples, as well as passions that yoke us together. What she offers as a model of cultural cross-pollination-alas, one cannot forever resist the temptations of allegory- is not a gentle melding but a more vigorous and a more bitter fusion." (qtd. in Stephen 88)

This novel marks a momentous shift in Mukherjee's concept of immigrant identity. Unlike the other novels, she reverses her plot in this novel. Up till the publication of this novel Mukherjee's protagonists, have been mostly women of Indian origin who have migrated to North America. In contrast, the protagonist of *The Holder of the World*, Hannah Easton, a puritan American woman, migrates to India along with her husband and discovers her true self in the company of a Hindu Raja-Jadav Singh and returns home as a changed and renovated human being. Here, Hannah's journey is a psychic progression. The psychic journey of Hannah not only leads to the renovation of the self but also makes her recognize the other side of herself. In this process of inward journey she encounters several hurdles and pitfalls. The physical, mental and emotional hardships that Hannah undergoes renovate her completely into a new and different personality. The journey of Hannah is voluntary, which was undertaken to scarp from the rule bound, cramped puritan world.

In Hannah, Mukherjee presents a definitive American character, which is a result of immigration and renovation. In *The Holder of the World*, Hannah forms her most striking relationships with other individuals while in India, and these bonds created with non-Western people transform Hannah in what she retrospectively calls her transformation. Her voyage to and residence in India force encounters with other characters that produce change: "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" (*THOW* 104). Hannah also employs a comparative framework to make sense of the transformations spawned by her global experiences and relationships.

Hannah's early life reverberates harsh world of puritan simplicity, Christian service, charity and hard work. The image of Hannah being made to sing Psalms along with her mother 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 wilderness, physically breaking the barriers of her puritan society. Hannah's 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 wipe out them from the mind: "It is necessary not only to retain the memory of her beloved, absent mother, but to deny its final blinding, lustful image" (30).

The Indian raids make Hannah undertake a journey, along with her foster parents, to Salem which ultimately leads to her next transformation. She very soon discovers in herself "an obsessive love of needlework", which she suspects is an "overflow of a nascent fascination with –or failing for-finer things" (41). Hannah's embroidery becomes an expression of the conflict that she tries to deny or suppress in her heart. The memory, far from being blinded, in fact, is re-in forced in embroideries done in rich vibrant colours indicating a world beyond that of the Puritan outpost. Her needle "celebrated the trees, flowers and birds, fish of her infant days. Nostalgia, all the more forceful because it was acknowledged, was augmented with fancy. Flora and fauna grew wild on fecund and voluptuous terrain" (42).

The arrival of Gabriel Legge in Salem, an event which ultimately alters Hannah's destiny, is more of a catalyst for renovation than a determining force in her life. Hannah succumbs to Gabriel's particularly adventurous nature with its suggestions of recklessness, danger and unpredictability. Her 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" (Mehta 195). "She did not believe him, but she too longed for escape" (*THOW* 67). On marrying Gabriel Legge, Hannah made herself ready for the next transformation in her life.

Hannah decides to leave for another country along with her Husband to invent herself and evolve multiple identities. Gabriel and Hannah leave Salem for England soon after their marriage. It dawns on Hannah that Gabriel has "no land to root him and not a goat's worth of family fortune" (70-71). Gabriel proves to be a "compulsive seafarer" (70) who is away for months. Hannah counts herself "a contented wife" (70). It is surprising that Hannah who repositions the stars later in the narrative submits herself very meekly to a subservient existence. Her married life itself is a testament to the total absence of passion, personal involvement and love between her and her husband. Gabriel is a man of egocentric, self-pushy type. Hannah is a woman of consciousness and wants to discern her vital individuality. She needs a guy who heeds her words when she talks and understands her even when she is silent. She thus gives up her happiness, her individual identity. This in fact makes Hannah feel very restless. In fact the entire nation seems to be in a state of anxiety. 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.

At the age of twenty three Hannah hears of Gabriel's death, becomes a widow, a mere prelude to her real widowhood later. In order to avert aloofness and rejuvenate her instinct for the outdoors, Hannah accepts the job of a governess in Cambridge offered by Hubert, a researcher in the Royal Society.

Hurbert's calm and placid personality appeals to Hannah in spite of suggested ordinariness as she sees in Hubert a man capable of encouraging her hidden impulses and desires. But Hannah's alternative prospects of life are cast off by the sudden appearance of Gabriel. He has joined East India Company and Hannah sails with him to the Coromandel Coast. "If status had mattered to Hannah, she would have stayed in Stepney. Her curiosity was robust. She wanted to earn, not inherit, dignity. She moved on without regrets" (90). She sets herself psychologically towards the next step for renovation of self. On reaching Coromandel coast Hannah feels that she has been "transported to the other side of the world, but the transportation was more than mere 'convincing' as it was for Gabriel and others" (104). Many years later, Hannah calls this her 'transformation'. She is not afraid of the 'exotica' instead she is thrilled.

Mukherjee develops the character of Bhagmati by involving her in the process of Hannah's renovation and this virtuality facilitates her own transformation too. During Gabriel's absence, it is Bhagmati who serves as a link between Hannah and the outside world. She becomes the facilitator in the process of Hannah's transformation into the New World. Hannah and Bhagmati had language problem but "through her eyes, and her body, Bhagmati communicated" (136). Bhagmati recites and narrates fragments from 'the Ramayana'. "In Bhagmati's honey toned recitation Sita is the self-sacrificing ideal Hindu wife" (173). Hannah finds herself attracted to the events in Sita's life. "Like Hannah, Sita was a foundling. The Fitches recovered her from their doorstep; a childless king, Janaka, had unearthed the girl infant with his plow and named her Sita, or "furrow". Sita adjusted to life as a king's adopted daughter and a prince's wife as willingly as Hannah had to her girlhood in Salem" (174). The story of Sita's ordeal evokes memories of the life 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)

Mukherjee uses Sita's story to integrate Hannah into Indian culture. The story of Sita by Bhagmati introduces Hannah to the Indian culture, but Hannah herself is unable to reconcile her experiences regarding sexuality and relocation with that of Sita because in her case, she is rescued not abducted by an alien man, Jadav Singh and unlike Sita she enters into an illegitimate relationship with Jadav Singh, instead of being faithful to her husband. Hannah ignores the racial boundaries like her mother by taking a lover from a different culture. Sita, Bhagmati and Hannah had different approaches towards sexual relationship. Sita maintains her chastity by protecting herself against the lust of Ravana, and becomes an quintessence of wifely virtues. Bhagmati was raped and immediately disowned by the family. She allows herself to be treated according to her culture and society that punishes the victim for

the lost of chastity. Her circumstances forced her to become a Bibi. But, in case of Hannah, she voluntarily breaks her Puritan laws, and enters the forbidden sexual relationship. Nalini Iyer notes the points of difference between the characters, mythical Sita and 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.” (38)

Hannah became, to her satisfaction, “husbandless” (*THOW* 207), in December 1700, when Gabriel is drowned during one of his trips with Haj Pilgrims. 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)

Circumstances of Hannah's life start changing at frantic pace in the year 1700. First she lives with Gabriel on grounds of faithlessness and next sees his ship sinking. She herself should have been drowned when a bridge collapsed but she is saved by Jadav Singh, the Raja of Devgad only to become his bibi afterwards. '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. It is strange to note that the Hannah who left Gabriel for having Bibi, she willingly becomes one herself, suspending all morality, all expectations of conventional relationships. It is love at first sight for her and sex is the first close encounter; explained only by “the brief cryptic reference” (228). 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). To mark their transformation in the palace of Jadav Singh, both Hannah and Bhagmati give each other new name. Hannah becomes “Mukta, Bhagmati's word for Pearl” (271) and Hannah renames Bhagmati as Hester.

Bharati Mukherjee delineates, through the series of physical and psychological transformations, Hannah's discovery of her own feminine identity. Hannah transformed herself into Salem Bibi, the Raja's new favorite and Hannah and Raja Jadav Singh wooed each other. “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)

Hannah's whole life is transformed once again, and she experiences the high tide of love. This alters the sensibility of Hannah. The Eastern love makes her more emotional. While her whole life has been transformed by Jadav Singh, and she can think of nothing else except their love, the raja comes to

her for part of the night and takes her only as his white Bibi. Nevertheless, Hannah is content to be only a mistress. 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). What she had to repress in Puritan Salem, what marriage to Gabriel failed to bring out in her except possibly once, she experiences in the raja’s palace, and in the process, she comes “to understand the aggressive satiety of total fulfillment” (237). She discovers her own self in the palace of Raja Jadav Singh in Devgad, India.

Ultimately Hannah discovers that “the survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules. What she had left Gabriel for just months before; she would accept from Raja Singh. She was no longer a wife. She was a bibi . . .” (234). This comes as an indirect message of the author herself. She stresses now and again in almost all her fictional writings that only those people can survive in an alien world who are elastic and who can shape themselves according to the availability of space by improving upon their native rules.

Hannah displays tremendous courage in the battlefield 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 stand alone in the battle field. Hannah Easton enfolds her past and comes out as a real fighter. It was Raja's love that transforms her into a reckless and daring personality. She can think of even meeting the 'holder of the world', the great Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb.

Hannah's life turns into a true, enthralling journey and she gets a new identity wherever she steps in. The journey that takes her, from, Salem in New England, America to Stepney in England, Stepney to Coromandel in India, Coromandel to Devgad, and from Devgad back to Salem. It is the journey that covers three continents, three oceans, and alien cultures. During the journey, she renovates herself gradually without losing all the associations with the past. “Hannah is a pure product of her time and place, her marriage and her training, exposed to a 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[...] the forces of the universe were working within” (220).

## Conclusion

Thus, Hannah’s is the expedition of self in which she is seen in different roles: Hannah Easton, a self-conscious child full of sense of humiliation, an insecure orphan, Hannah Fitch, an adopted child having secret fears, a sensuous, dreaming young woman brought up in puritan atmosphere, Hannah Legge, a devoted wife, a widow with uncertain future, a willing concubine, a warrior woman, Salem bibi, a passionate beloved who becomes a murderer for the sake of her love, a bold and persuasive orator, a prisoner, and finally Mukta who is no more a puritan woman. Hers is a life of sheer audacity, fervor and determination. At the outset she is just a young girl who is ashamed of her past and heritage.

By the end of her journey she flourished as a woman who accepts life as it is, develops a sense of identity and understands the meaning of existence. She realizes she is neither an American, nor Indian, but a renovated New Englander who has led a unique and extraordinary life. Her journey proves the belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence, one can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. With the strong obsession, Hannah faced all the oddities and difficulties, but finally struggles through them and rejoices the ecstasy of renovation. Hers is a journey from immaturity to maturity, ignorance to knowledge, instability to stability, and agitation to sobriety. Hannah has proven herself to be a great adaptor and a survivor. She is an embodiment of courage, imagination and brazenness which reflects her rebellious spirit. She bears the ability to merge into different cultures as per need. She adapts so successfully and therefore, wherever she lives or whatever role she performs, she has proven herself to be the best.

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