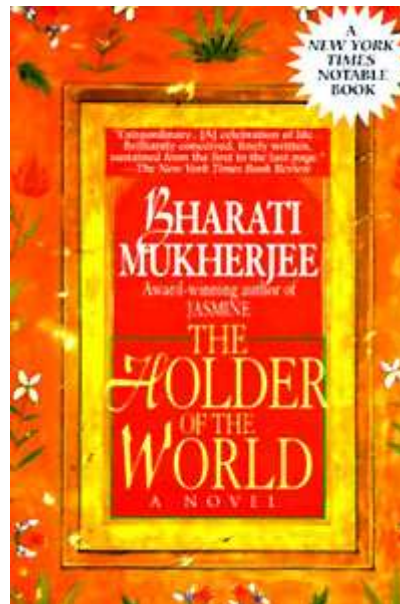


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**Nature as Healer: An Eco-Critical Reading of
Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World***

G. Baskaran, Ph.D. and Mrs. S. Mangaiyarkarasi, M.A., M.Phil.



Abstract

An attempt has been made in this article to interpret Bharati Mukherjee's

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The Holder of the World as a novel dealing with the eco-critical values and the characters representing the society. It also traces the existing relationship between people and nature. As a diasporic novelist, Mukherjee searches the association between women and their contribution to nature.

Bharati Mukherjee's Heroines

The world is a mind and travel is a manifestation of the inner self. The spiritual goal is thus not antithetical to worldly life. Nature plays a vital role in purging of human emotions and granting the spiritual salvation one seeks for. Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are self-creators and women who command large dimensions of their own fate. They move through expansive open landscapes with a vital energy and are able to convert that social world into a landscape adequate to the enquiring spirit. The patriarchal society which pertains woman to nature also exploit woman just as the natural resources that have been exploited. Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* is a novel that juxtaposes the past and the present by exploring the transnational travel through geographical boundary and at the same time covers the period from twentieth to seventeenth century. Mukherjee's heroine Hannah Easton's journey through continents is symbolic in reaching out to nature in moments of crisis and despair. Nature regenerates her yearning soul and transforms her as the promoter of peace towards her final journey.



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Hannah Easton and Beigh Masters

Mukherjee's protagonist Hannah Easton in *The Holder of the World*, is a seventeenth century American woman who sails to India with her husband Gabriel Legge, a British Sailor and finds herself transform into Salem Bibi after landing in Raja Jadav Singh's court. Beigh Masters the narrator of this story finds herself to be a distant relative of Hannah. She is an assets researcher who lives with Venn Iyer an Indian computer scientist. She tries to discover the most perfect diamond known as the "Emperor's Tear" (19), which belongs to the Mughal King Aurangzeb and gets lost in a battle against Raja Jadav Singh. In this search Beigh Masters finds that Hannah Easton, the Puritan woman's Hindu lover is Raja Jadav Singh and the narrator is enthralled to discover the facts about this Puritan woman. The transformation of the Puritan woman to Salem Bibi is extensive and captivating.

Beigh Masters is enamoured by the beauty of the Mughal paintings which depict a pale woman with golden hair against the backdrop of the wild New England of sensuous colour. The paintings also depict the lush greenness of the Monsoon with the radiance of the maples and the oak trees' distinct change of colour. Nature's beauty is painted in such a way that it captures the wonderful scene of Indians roasting fish in the open fire, the howling of wolf-dog, the swirling of the jelly fish and children tossing stones from the beach. The narrator is fascinated by the fabulous Mughal painting which is a revelation of the flow and richness of natural resources during their period. The light of the summer afternoon across the sky is represented by marigold yellow and the crane which is scarlet crested taking its flight and the wooing and screeching sound of the birds captivates the attention of Beigh Masters.

Beigh Masters says that the catalog is named as "*The Apocalypse*" (17) whereas she wants to call it as "*The Unravish'd Bride*" (17). Hannah Easton, who transforms to Salem Bibi and later Precious-as-Pearl, is picturized beautifully as standing on the rampart of a Hindu fort.

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Painting Salem Bibi and the Bloodiness of the Battle

The beauty of the Salem Bibi is painted across the backdrop of “green crescent moons” (17) the sky which is on fire, the grazing of the tethered horses, the prowling of the leopards and tigers and the rich scenery of crow, hyena and jackal chewing the carcass of horses and finally her lover with the poisoned arrow tip protruding from his battle vest. The smoky orange colour of the sky depicts the mood of the battle scene.

The bloodiness of the battle of the battle scene can be visualized through the painting which displays the slain lotus-seated yogi, “blood-splattered shield” (18), the thieves crouching for “necklets of pearls, rubies and diamonds” (18), and the monkeys brooding near the dying and the already dead. The horror of the bloody battle scene is demonstrated further through the painting of the ruined forts as well as through the villages smoking due to fire. On one side the harsh reality of the war is portrayed. Whereas on the other side the Precious-as-Pearl, Salem Bibi, holding the multifaceted diamond her henna-decorated hand and her feet arched high the lamb and the gold grasses all are feast to the eyes with fabulous and extravagant details. The paintings are in fact a manifestation of the wealth, richness and abundance of natural resources in India during the Mughal period.

The Story of Hannah Easton

Beigh Masters narrates the story of Hannah Easton as a consequence of her research. Hannah Easton is born in Brookfield, in the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1670 to Edward and Rebecca Easton. Having lost her father in her childhood, Hannah happens to be the only witness of her mother’s elopement with a Nimpuc lover, four years later. Hannah does not cry of her mother’s infidelity and vows to remain silent and to sustain the others belief that her mother is dead. She is raised by Robert and Susannah Fitch in the strict customs of Puritanism. Hannah’s extreme interest in the needle work is got from her mother’s home making skills and guidance. Her embroidery seems to be a manifestation of her inner conflicts and emotions.

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Beigh Masters observes Hannah's embroidery work to be bountiful and ambivalent. Her skill in embroidery paves way for developing one new skill of sewing and healing of scalped heads. In this context Nalini Iyer in her article "American / Indian: Metaphors of the Self in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*" opines:

These pieces of embroidery (the pun on embroidering as needlework and as embellishment of tales is obvious) create unusual landscapes in which Massachusetts flora and fauna coexist with tropical Indian ones. Hannah's tales told by needlework also achieve a suspension of time in that these panels, like Keats's Grecian urn, are both static and dynamic in their tale telling; Mukherjee quotes Keats's ode in epigraphs to the various sections of the novel. In bringing together two vastly different landscapes in one piece of embroidery, Hannah's work suggests that location is not so much physical space as it is an imagined landscape constructed in art / narrative. (36)

Attracted by the Adventurous Stories of Gabriel Legge

Hannah falls for Gabriel Legge, who claims to be adventurous, and narrates all his experiences and explorations, and courts her and offers a small sachet of gemstones. Hannah is fascinated on hearing the adventurous stories of Gabriel. She is carried away by his seafaring adventures. Gabriel's encounter with the pirate ship, his fond memories of sleeping in the Garden of Eden guarded by angles, the enchanted deadly cobra with a piped melody, his travel on camel-back to Samarkand, and his visit to the court of the Great Mughal where he witnesses the marvelous display of gold and jewels makes Hannah to surrender herself to nature's excellence. Gabriel further reveals about the soil of Hindustan with its richness of sapphire, emerald, ruby and gold, along with spices and finally the soft women in silk dedicating their self to fire on their husband's dead. Hannah wants an escape from the strict Puritanical ideals. Hannah wants a recluse and she surrenders to nature for peace. Though she did not believe Gabriel on whole, the sachet of gemstones and a ruby offered by Gabriel

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enamours Hannah and the exotic tales narrated by him heals her longing soul and makes her to crave for such experience through travel and to lead a life with Gabriel.

A Transition through Travel

Hannah is ready to undergo a transition and this transition is going to be wrought out by the geographical landscapes she travels. He takes Hannah to London and provides her all comforts but he is six months away on ship and few weeks with her. Left alone for most of the time she spends her time observing the outer world and gardening. Her submissiveness and patience transforms her into attaining a new identity as a healer of the suffering people. Hannah gradually transforms into the healer of the world. This comes to actualize when she treats a boy of seven who is hurt and bleeds profusely in an accident due to rain outside her cottage. The boy's parents who have survived in the accident do not allow Hannah to treat him and instead summons on Dr. Aubrey to treat him. On the contrary, Hannah proceeds instantly with her herbs without any hesitation and it did not end there. Having discovered her identity, the Doctor seeks her help on other cases of head injury. She is not just a sailor's widow, she was in some way a woman blessed with healing powers. People began coming to her for poultices, for bone setting, for the laying on of hands. It was true that she could regenerate skin after certain burns and other scarring. She knew woodland secrets. She becomes one with the nature and makes ample use of it in her healing process. She feels satisfied and her soul seems to elevate by giving solace to the suffering.

Arrival in India

Gabriel appears unexpectedly and decides to sell the Stepney cottage and to sail on the *Fortune* for Fort St. Sebastian and land in India where he has joined the East India Company. After travelling for nearly eight months Hannah lands in India. This is the second phase of her transformation in another country. Her journey may be symbolic in the sense that it is an inward journey of herself. Her new self is transformed into the factor's wife. Hannah's embroidery is a metaphor of herself. In

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the absence of Gabriel she spends her time sewing. She even discloses it to Gabriel. She is captured by the sensuous India with all its wealth. She finds oneness with the nature's landscape. The furnishing of the late Factor Henry Hedges house, which is allotted for Hannah's stay enamours her. At the same time when she enjoys the warm breeze she feels elevated and free. When Hannah climbs to the top of the world she enjoys, "The warm breeze sought out the last pockets of chill and damp from Hannah's bones; it was a glorious moment of January sun and offshore breeze, loud jackdaws circling the rooftops. Potted trees even struggled to give off some shade. She closed her eyes, feeling at last that her travels were over" (121).

Finding Solace is in Her Needlework

Hannah does not confide her feelings to the other Factors' wife Martha and Sarah. She remains cool and composed and her only solace is in her needlework. Her embroidery is a metaphor of her thought process. It is a work towards self-realization and self-actualization. Nature plays a vital role in shaping her character and imagination. Even when Gabriel decides to go with Marquis, Hannah does not protest. Hannah kisses Gabriel when they spend their evening on the sea shore on the day of the factor Cephus Prynne's burial. Her soul seems to be emancipated on Prynne's death. For her it symbolizes an end to her sexual tormentor and a feel of freedom. "She was, she is, of course, a goddess-in-the-making" (163).

To Let Gabriel Go

Obviously, Hannah feels independent and "The Coromandel had started something as immense as a cyclone deep inside her body and mind. To let Gabriel go was also to let herself expand" (163). Hannah easily acquaints herself with the Indian culture and the native woman. The plot against Gabriel in which he escapes happens to reveal his affair with Zeb-un-nissa his black Bibi. Hannah weeps and rages over the revelation of Gabriel's affair. This revelation comes as a blow to Hannah and everywhere she witnesses destruction and chaos, though she has heard about such conventions from Sarah and Martha. It seems strange to her and the news of the eight

foot naked firangi (Gabriel) with his black bibi spread all over the village. She is unable to bear the truth about Gabriel.

Another Journey

Hannah's frustration leads to the next level of transition. Hannah prepares herself for another journey and she asks Bhagmati, her servant, to prepare for the voyage, Caught in a cyclone Hannah and Bhagmati try to escape but everything in vain. They scream only to find hauled in a country boat and finally lands in the Panpur Palace. The ruler is Raja Jadav Singh called as the King or Lion of Devgad. Hearing Bhagmati's memories Hannah prepares herself for another transition. Her physical transition is a manifestation of her inner transition. The unforced smile of the Raja, and the music from the inner palace brings about a change in her inner self. The Raja permits them to stay there as long as they wish and even invites her to his musical evening. The shock, depression and frustration that was looming her starts to fade away by the presence of Raja. The psychological transformation of Hannah leads her to seduce the Lion of Devgad. The shallowness and emptiness of her previous life comes as a revelation through Raja. His occasional gifts such as a small songbird in a silver cage, an oval black stone, a copy of Kautilya's treatise in Sanskrit and a basket of custard apples makes her to feel his presence. She feels her gradual transformation just like Bhagmati who was Henry Hedges' bibi.

Wooing Each Other

Hannah is entwined in a world of love for fourteen days and thirteen nights. The lover Raja Jadav Singh and Hannah wooed each other and they give themselves to pleasure thus: "Attendants fed them pomegranates, sprinkled them with attar of roses and lit his *huqqa*. Musicians serenaded them with flutes, drums and stringed unstruments from their courtyard below" (234). Hannah enjoys her newly assumed *bibihood*. Shaken off from their trance she senses the seriousness of the situation and contradictory to the passionate nature-she wants to run to the country and save the dying people. Raja, Hannah and Bhagmati escape from the Panpur palace sending a message of truce. The Nawab's commander, Morad Farah, who comes riding on the

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elephant grinding and mashing the bodies scattered on the battle field, asks the elephant to pick Hannah up. Hannah makes use of this opportunity and stabs him in order to save the wounded Raja. She takes her wounded warrior lover, to Devgad and she removes the clot and blood and sutures the Raja's wounds. Hannah the healer, comforts him and makes him understand the reality of life and how one's duty and fate cannot be altered. She quotes Gita which says that one's duty and fate cannot be altered. The Raja provides her the women's room for she is pregnant and there after she does not see him.

The Final Journey

Hannah speculates for a final journey. She sets both her physical and mental self for the onset of a final journey as a peacemaker. It is her over whelming feeling of love for the Raja Jadav Singh that sets her pace. Both, Bhagmati and Hannah are brought before the Emperor Aurangzeb, who is determined to kill the Raja. The Emperor discloses that night of his knowledge of Hannah's past life. Hannah wants to make use of this opportunity to create peace.

This was the moment, if she was ever to have one, when the gods that controlled the universe had conspired to put her Christian-Hindu-Muslim self, her America-English-Indian self, her orphaned, abandoned, widowed, pregnant self, her *firangi* and *bibi* self, into a single message, delivered to the most powerful man those separate worlds had ever known. She stood. (268)

This is her final transformation. After undergoing physical and spiritual transformation, she gradually sets her mind heart, emotions and the physical body to attain the oneness of supra-mental transformation. This transformation finds fulfilment in her feelings of love.

Precious-as-Pearl

The emperor stands and lifts the diamond high above so the whole world may witness which he calls the "Emperor's Tear" (269) and says that the "all-seeing, all-

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merciful Allah” (269) will give his final judgment on the people and he restores the diamond back to the crown. Later he sends Hannah a gift of chests of jewels stating “ ‘For the Tigress who bested my General’ ” (270) and the pearls “ ‘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’ ” (270-271). The Emperor re-presents the gifts when she sends it back considering it as serious insults. She takes back and she wears it. Hannah’s mission of peace fails and she is asked by the emperor to witness the battle and “*the destruction of the rat-worshipping idolater*” (271) The narrator bought “*The Apocalypse of The Unravish’d Bride*” (277) in an auction which demonstrates Raja Jadav Sing’s suicidal attack on the fort of Aurangzeb and the victory of Aurangzeb.

The transition of Hannah and her travels is represented by Shao-Pin Luo in his article “Rewriting Travel: Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*” where he opines, “It is about re-writing travel, re-reading and re-imagining nations and narrations as forms of translation and transculturation. It is about travelling and transforming, traversing time and space as well as words and ideas: ...” (100).

Protagonist’s Spiritual Search

Hannah’s recourse with nature can be correlated with the observations of Wang Nuo and Zhang Bigui’s article on “Ecoliterature: Its Definition and Features”:

Ecoliterature represents as well as examines the relation between nature and man, particularly nature’s material and spiritual influence on man, man’s place in the natural world, man’s relation with nature as a whole and with everything in nature, man’s conquest, control, reform and plunder of nature and damage to it, protection as well as restoration and reconstruction of ecobalance, man’s eulogy and appreciation of nature, man’s returning to nature and reconstruction. When representing the relation between nature and man, ecoliterature stresses on man’s responsibility and duty to nature: it earnestly calls for protecting the natural world and maintaining the ecological

balance, enthusiastically eulogizing the self sacrifice for the sake of the whole benefit of ecology. (47-48)

Hannah's travel through various continents and her oneness with nature and landscape are indeed symbolic of her inner transition. She seeks solace in nature and in fact nature acts as a healer of her soul. Her final salvation is brought about in Salem where she searches, and finds and lives with her mother and with her daughter Pearl Singh. Thus, the healer of the world transforms to Precious-as-Pearl. Mukherjee's narrative technique in stating John Keats's poetic lines from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as epigraph to the four parts of the novel is a symbolic representation of the protagonist's spiritual search. Mukherjee harmoniously blends Keats's thought process with Hannah's travels. In fact Hannah becomes the silent child crossing the boundaries of time and space nurtured by nature and travel seeking spiritual salvation in serenity.

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