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**CULTURAL AND ETHNIC TRANSFORMATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD***

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Abstract

Cultural and Ethnic Transformation is the major theme of Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*. They are presented in totally new and unique garb – for new, there is no longer the usual Indian protagonist a *Jasmine* or a *Middleman* seeking a new identity in a new world. Hannah Easton, a white puritan woman from Salem, Massachusetts Bay colony who makes a journey to the exotic coromandel shores in the late seventeenth century and finally becomes the mistress of an Indian potentate, Raja Jadhav Singh. Bharati Mukherjee attempts to give her novel a greater complexity and depth.

Keywords: *a new identity, exotic, puritan, potentate*

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The ethnic group derived from the same historical founder population often continue to speak related languages and share a similar gene pool. Ethnicity is often used synonymously with terms such as nation on people.

Bharathi Mukherjee an expatriate of the Indian origin in the United States of America, is one of the remarkable women writers to have contributed an explicit fiction to the much-debated rein of post-modernist literature. Bharathi Mukherjee the Indian American immigrant novelist clearly fits into the school of writers earlier called expatriate writers but later they are known as the writers of the Indian Diaspora. It means different things to different people at different points of time, place and circumstance. Cultural differences remain with the host country but grow from the home country. A distinction is made between immigrant culture and ethnic identity. For a diasporic person, identity is neither static nor fixed, it keeps on changing with time. Bharathi Mukherjee like many other postmodern writers has taken up the problems and experiences faced by the Indian immigrant in the US or the western world.

Cultural and Ethnic Transformation have been Mukherjee's two major themes. Her novel, *The Holder of the World* which has been taken up here, has the theme of transformation and, but with a difference. Seeing a miniature painting titled A European Woman in Aurangzeb's Court at an auction of Sotheby in New York, made Mukherjee write this novel.

Unlike the other protagonists of Mukherjee's novels, Hannah Easton, the heroine of *The Holder of the World* travels not from East to West but just the opposite from West to East. The novel is about time traveling. The Opening lines of the novel:

I live in three times zones simultaneously, and I don't mean Eastern, Central, and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future. [5]

It Takes us to the seventeenth century Mughal India full of riches.

Mukherjee has recaptured the past reality. She has described the grandeur and exotica of then India as:

Those Indian guys wore earrings, dresses, and necklaces. When they ran out of space on their bodies they punched holes in their wives noses to hang more gold and pearl chains. Then they bored holes in their wives ears to show off more junk, they crammed gold bracelets all the way to their elbows so their arms were too heavy to lift and thumbs so they could barely walk or make a fist (13).

She has compared 'our' wonder with 'their' dread as :

No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins... women's virtue was guarded by bonnets and capes and full skirts (13).

She beautifully blends Mughal India along with mythological illustration from *Ramayana* with the modern day Computech age. In other words, a novel is a form of 'computerized history.' Man's search of his identity, in a world of rootlessness and uncertainty, takes him back to history or past, which gives him a base to hold on to. This is exactly what Bharati Mukherjee seems to bring out in this novel. Her modern American woman Beigh Masters, who does 'assets research' reads Auction and Acquisitions and ferrets around for antiques and precious stones both as professions and hobby are in search of the precious diamond 'Emperor's Tear.'

Her lover Venn Iyer of MIT, a computer engineer from Madras makes use of Omnipotent technological wonder, the computer and its latest database programme × 2929 and reanimates and recreates history by feeding all the information collected by Beigh Masters after consulting five hundred books, endless number of paintings and engravings , trade records and picture journals and artifacts to get to 'Salem Bibi.'

Like *Jasmine*, the heroine of Bharathi Mukherjee's third novel, a journey of Hannah Easton is not by chance or a forced one. It is more an escape from the rule-bound, claustrophobic influence of the Puritan world. Hannah's early life points most emphatically a fascination for passion and feeling, which she weaves her colorful, bright tapestries: 'The embroidery is the embodiment of desire' a desire to escape from the dull, grey of the Puritan outpost. Her embroidery even shows her hidden and imaginary world, which the narrator describes as :

'On a field of light blue', Hannah created "uttermost Shore."

Again she says that it is unusual for :

"a twelve years old puritan orphan who had never been out of Massachusetts imagined an ocean, palm trees, thatched collages, and black skinned men casting nets and colorfully garbed, bare-breasted women mending them; native barbs and on the horizon, high masted schooners..., through bright-green foliage, a ghostly white building it could even be the Taj Mahal –is rising (44).

Hannan Easton's memories or her mother's abduction by her Indian lover and her disappearance into the wildness, physically breaking the barriers of her Puritan society, remains in her mind forever. This later helps her to embrace the new, exotic world of Mughal India in its

entirety for it is the world that she was in search of. So, when she meets a swash-buckling, adventurer, Gabriel Legge, she agrees to marry him, not because she loves him but just to squeeze out her constrictive society. She did not believe him, but she too longed for escape (64).

At this point or level, the novel is, like Bharathi Mukherjee's other novels, a fiction of expatriation, of a quest and a journey, not only to culturally variant societies, which help to question and abandon conventional moral and social values.

After Gabriel's death, Hannah meets Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad who loves her and there is the transformation of Hannah Easton to Bibi. She enjoys her new identity. Hannah delves for new roots and with her fine quality of adaptability, she steps into the New World of Hinduism. She and Jadav Singh woo each other, ignoring the sword of Damocles, the Nawab Haider Beg Governor of Aurangzeb's State. The Nawab arrest Raja, usurp the Diamond emperor's Tear and bring Hannah, the firangi lady. Raja Jadav Singh puts Hannah and her caretakers and good companion, Bhagmati into a palanquin, but on way to Nawab, the Raja attacks the Mughal army. Hannah kills Morad Farah, saves Jadav Singh's life and brings him back to pamper. She tries to transact with the emperor and end the war but she is taken hostage by him. She disdains the emperor for the bloody war and suffering of numerous innocent lives. Wherever Aurangzeb comes to see her, she is reminded of Ravana, the Demon King, in Muslim disguise. Though she fails to an armistice between the Raja and the Emperor, somehow, she purloins the diamond – the Emperor's Tear from Aurangzeb's war tent and escapes towards the fort of Panpur. There she hands it over to Bhagmati. The diamond is ultimately found by Beigh Masters in Cyberspatial finale. Venn takes Beigh through the miracle. Bhagmati thrusts the world's most famous diamond into her dying womb. It is in her grave that they find the holder of the world of the seventeenth century.

In Hannah's character, one can find the adaptability she proves to be:

a pure product of times and space, 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 in or affected her outer behavior (220).

The Salem Bibi provokes Beigh Masters to unravel the mystery, which surrounded her life and the diamond. Mukherjee devotes her attention to female issues in historical times as well as in contemporary society. She seems to concur with the view:

People are continually remaking their culture, and in so doing, redefining the past, reconstituting the present and reconceptualizing what they derive from the future.

Like any other feminist writer Bharathi Mukherjee's women character offer "a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanism."

In the novel, one can see two advantages of women's liberation, which Bharathi Mukherjee thinks, is not only the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon but was prevalent in the epic period as well as the seventeenth century. First, it allows women to realize their potential as individuals in the wider society. Secondly, it is the only means by which it can attain personal recognition.

The title of the novel *The Holder of the World* is after the name of Aurangzeb, who was also, called Alamgir in Urdu and the World-holder in English. Fictional characters, incidents, and events coalesce with historical personages, places, events and incidents to give it a local color and habitation like the historical plays of Shakespeare.

This makes the novel interesting and exciting. But, at several places in the novel, there is a lack of passion, feeling, and poetry so essential for a work of art to make it simultaneously exciting and readable. Hoping to humor her Indian and American readers, Mukherjee fails to please both.

Bharati Mukherjee, despite everything, does a brilliant work when she interweaves the historical and the imaginative reality through the database, the technology, which will help any one of us "make infinite reality withdrawals" from both time and space. Mukherjee has used two narrators who belong to two diverse time periods separated by a time span of three hundred years. But this distance in time is bridged when Beigh Masters in the process of her research finds her familial link with Hannah Easton at the distant past and all her energies in present are directed to track down the history relating to Hannah Easton. The whole novel acts as a bridge between the past and the present and piles up meticulous details and information as Bharati Mukherjee recaptures history in the most aesthetic sense.

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