

Disquieting reminiscence of Hannah in the Holder of the World by Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent author of the Indian Writings in English who has evoked the study of feminism in her writings. This paper scrutinizes disquieting reminiscence of Hannah in the Holder of the World. Hannah Easton, in this novel, travels from Puritan Salem to England to colonial India before turning back to settle in America for the remainder of her life. Mukherjee interlaces into the version both high, classical texts like the story of Sita from the Hindu Ramayana. Beigh states that Hannah compared herself to Sita in that they were both waifs and strays and faced the choice between staying in an antagonistic environment and trying out new surroundings. Jadav Singh qualms Hannah's loyalties as his Bibi in ways analogous to Ram after she beseeches him to impede fighting.

Keywords: - scrutinizes, remainder, interlaces, analogous, antagonistic, antagonistic, patriarchal, qualms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mukherjee has wrought authentic female characters. They are flesh and blood characters with recognizable credentials. She is subtle in delineating their trials and tribulations, earnings aspirations, failures and foibles. She does not think of her novels as a man verses women issue at all. In the light of the statements made arbitrary appellations and dragging her work into the crinkle of militant feminism of the western assortment would be unfair. Her novels are concerned with a women's chase for self and elucidation in to the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life. The novel *Holder of the World* is primarily concerned with the plight of the white woman Hannah Easton who endeavors to

make sagacity of her life to find a prototype in the past and a direction for the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

Mukherjee moves from compliance to allegation in order to acquire an identity and to robust into the mainstream of the Indian society. The novel is a manifestation of the anxious psyche of woman who is a victim of estrangement and male dominance. However, Hannah finds a way out by self-discovery and introspection. Owing to her unconquerable spirit and compromising attitude, she emerges as a winner after undergoing considerable hardships. Here Mukherjee's female protagonist passes through tortuous physical, mental and emotional agony which affects her entire personality largely turning her into a whole new being.

A seventeenth century Mughal painting held for mart in New York that attributed a white woman decent in Mughal court garb inspired Mukherjee to write *The Holder of the World*. Mukherjee has enlightened that her novels seek to imitate the Mughal canvas by giving numerous characters equivalent consequence and

putting multiple narratives together in such a way that they are inextricably allied to one another. By focusing on the daunting past of both America and India, Mukherjee straps the ostensibly incongruent literary histories of both countries through the influence of English culture. She restructures the idea of American exceptionalism by first avowing India's edifying assessment afar England's colonial persuade and then demonstrating the equally vital maneuver.

2.1. Disquieting reminiscence

The Holder of the World (1993) a feminist novel, is a story about the sprain of commotion and bliss of renovation arising out of the union of two cultures. It is a story of Hannah Easton a white woman, came to India in the seventeenth century. She is a quintessence of valor, imagination and brazenness which is part and parcel of the American spirit. Hannah the protagonist of the novel becomes orphan after her mother's elopement with her Nipmuc lover. She is adopted by conservative Robert and Susannah Fitch of Salem. There she is brought up in a conventional puritan atmosphere. She discovers in herself a fanatical love of needle work. Even though she lost her mother at her immature age she

has a disquieting reminiscence of her mother all the times. It is the remembrance of one psalm-singing night. Rebecca her mother sings psalm and her voice is moderately burly and syrupy. Another incident she does not want to remember is her mother's elopement with her Nipmuc lover on one fine night leaving her child. She has witnessed her mother's fall.

“The innocent lives in an unfilled world, a green Eden where life is sweet and all one's needs are met in an atmosphere of care and love. Whereas the Orphan is a disappointed idealist ... the greater the ideals about the world the worse reality.” (p27)

Hannah thinks of the gorgeous jiffy with her mother in the woodland but she keeps her reminiscence of her mother a clandestine. The arrival of Gabriel Legge in Salem, an occurrence which eventually alters Hannah's providence is more of a catalyst than a determining force in her life. Deliberately taking one's voyage, setting out to tackle the strange, marks the launch of life lived at a fresh plane for one thing the itinerant makes the drastic allegation that life is not chiefly suffering, it's an exciting

activity. Hannah concurs to marry Gabriel Legge, a buccaneer and sea farer because she envisages emancipation from a constrictive society. But her marriage life in London does not give the comradeship she desires. Gabriel has neither sensuality nor endurance to snoop to Hannah. He is a man of egocentric, self pushy type. Hannah is a woman of consciousness and wants to discern her vital individuality. She wants a chap who can heed her accent when she chats and understands her even when she does not. She thus forfeits her happiness, her individual identity. This intact made Hannah feel very fidgety. In fact the entire nation seemed to be in a state of agitation. Hannah seems to spend most of her instance in her little chalet tending her garden and writing memoirs and letters to her friends in America. Hannah feels forlorn and she ultimately becomes estranged and endures an irksome contiguous of internment.

A woman is a woman whether Indian or American; it is cerebral makeup that counts. Hannah travels to India and gets involved with a few Indian lovers. The novelist concentrates on the immigrant woman and her efforts to gain autonomy as individuals. The novel expands a broader viewpoint as the women characters are

utilized now to review the kinship between diverse cultures. Hannah's journey to the East laden with images of escapade, action and fervor projects a sort of escape from the rigid claustrophobic Puritan world. She agrees to marry Gabriel Legge because she visualizes deliverance from a constrictive society. After the death of Gabriel, she comes across Raja Jadav Singh resulting in a rather ardent association.

2.2. The Patriarchal Hindu culture

The holder of the World makes frequent reference to Indian epics and allusions to archetypal characters like Rama, Sita, and Ravana. Indian literature has been shaped and molded by the influence of Buddhism. The fiction of Bharati Mukherjee has also been influenced by the archetypal presents of Buddhism in India. Sita's story is part of an oral tradition she keeps alive, and this story represents for her an ideal of womanhood and marital relationships. She uses Sita's story to integrate Hannah into Indian culture, but Hannah herself is unable to syncretize her experience of relocation and sexuality with Sita's dislodgment in Lanka and her fear of rape by Ravana, her vanquisher. Hannah is rescued not abducted by an alien man, Jadav Singh, and contrary to Sita who remains

faithful to her husband; Hannah seduces Jadav Singh, thereby gaining sanctuary in an alien land. Unlike Rama, Sita's faithful husband, Hannah's husband, Gabriel, is neither faithful nor concerned about Hannah's welfare. Instead of viewing Sita's decision to be banished with her husband as passive obedience, Hannah instead interprets this decision as

“banish[ing] herself from court life and set up pastoral domesticity free of court customs and taboos” (176).

Hannah's rescue by Jadav Singh is also the point at which she consciously crosses racial boundaries, and like her mother, Rebecca, takes a lover from another culture, thus violating colonial laws that prevent white women from cohabiting with the natives. Bhagmati was raped and immediately disowned by her family, whereas Sita was rejected later for the public's perception of her lack of chastity; and subsequently Bhagmati managed to survive by becoming an English factors mistress. An important distinction between Sita and Hannah and Bhagmati is that neither Hannah nor Bhagmati abstained from forbidden sexual relationships,

whereas the mythical Sita's chastity is a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood in the patriarchal Hindu culture. It stands as a symbol that the true Holders of the World are those who do not vie for supremacy over other groups. Hannah's life serves as an opportunity for self recognition by Beigh and Venn. Beigh explains

“together and separately we remember what happened To Hannah Easton Fitch Legge aka the Bibi from Salem so that we may predict what will happen to us within our lifetime” (p91).

When she comes to know about Gabriel's unfaithfulness she makes up her mind to go from Coromandel for London. During the voyage due to unexpected heavy wind the boat turns and luckily Hannah manages to survive with the help of her friend cum servant maid Bhagmati. Finally they become the guest of Raja Jadav Singh, the king of Devgad. Hannah falls in love with Raja Jadav Singh and willingly becomes his Bibi, suspending all morality, all expectations of conventional relationship. Jadav Singh offers Hannah a life of limitless possibilities, of passion and sensuous pleasures undreamt

of in the English world. The eastern love makes her more emotional and she felt very happy about this new relationship. She is aware of the transformation of her mentality, her whole personality. Ultimately she discovers that

“the survivor is the one who improvises not follows the rules”(p234).

The crucial distinction between Hannah and Bhagmati is that of choice. Bhagmati's rape disempowers her in a culture that values virginity and chastity, whereas Hannah chooses to break social norms concerning interracial relationships and the power of women to choose their sexual partners. Both Hannah and Bhagmati appropriate and adapt Sita's story to reconcile and understand their individual experiences as women. But the difference in their narrativization and appropriation of Sita's story suggests that identity formation for a native woman and an immigrant woman are different because of cultural location and When Bhagmati recounts Sita's story, Hannah wonders about Sita's own version of the events, which she finds intriguing in its absence.

2.3. A New World of Hinduism

Gabriel wanted Hannah to triumph over her Puritan sensibilities and she obliged

him, because she loved things of life. Legge joins a group of pirates and during one of his misadventures with Haj pilgrims he is separated from his wife. Hanna escapes with Bhagmati to Panpur under the protection of Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad. Bhagmati and Hannah become the guests of Raja. She steps into a new world of Hinduism. She and Jadav Singh wooed each other. The Nawab Haider Beg dispatches his most ruthless commander, Morad farah, to cage Raja, Jadav Singh usurp the diamond, Emperor's tear and bring Hannah, the firangi lady. Jadav Singh with no option bundled Hannah and Bhagmati into a palanquin and a disguised Raja into another. On their way to Nawab the Raja attacked the Mughal army.

Jadav Singh bundles Hannah and Bhagmati into one palanquin and servant disguise in royal Jama as Devgad's Lion King and set them off to Devgad. At that time Bhagmati holds out the Raja's dagger and gives it to Hannah. They find Raja Jadav Singh lying beside his dead white horse. Seeing his condition, Hannah becomes ferocious and thrusts the dagger into Morad Farah's exposed flesh. Hannah saves Raja's life but he is left with one arm. The strong Warrior archetype gives her vitality to battle and cross over the obstacles.

At last life inside her compels her to offer her life to end the war. She and Bhagmati enter the secret passage in the child-queen's palace in Devgad, She flounced into the war camp with Bhagmati, demanding and expecting to get an audience with the Emperor at once so that she could free the two warrior-kings from their self-destructive obsession. Pearson observes:

“The Warrior also helps us to speak out and to fight for what nourishes our minds, our hearts, and our souls and to vanquish those things that sap and deplete the human spirit by speaking the truth about them and by refusing to countenance them or to allow them into our lives” (p75).

Hannah Easton buries her puritan past and emerges as a real fighter of life. The love she gets from Raja Jadav Singh makes her reckless and daring. Now she can face the 'holder of the world', the Alamgir the great Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, with courage and confidence. The decision to care, even at the cost of self sacrifice, is a choice here for life and against despair. She is pleading before the emperor to stop the war against her lover.

“I have come late in my life to the feeling of love. Love for a man, love for a place, love for a people. They are not Devgad people or Roopconda people, not Hindu people or Muslim people, not Sunni or Shia, priests or ntouchables, servants or Kings. If all is equal in the eye of Brahma as the Hindus say, if Allah is all-seeing and all-merciful as you say, then who has committed atrocities on the children, the women, the old people? Who has poisoned the heart of men?” (p268)

Hannah is ready to protect her Indian lover in spite of his disassociation from her. The suspension of morality and the openness to new experiences make Hannah confront Aurangzeb and even bow to his gifts of Pearls as a symbol of his superiority and might. Her duty finally accomplished, she returns to Salem.

“In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen clad English marriedwoman 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””. (p271)

Hannah represents the ties between England, America, and India; each has been a “Holder of the World” in its own right. America and India are often paralleled through Hannah's interpretation of the struggles in each country, namely the violence and the injuries she witnesses as the native dwellers of both continents struggle with Western colonization. “The Holder of the World” takes on a more individualized significance through Hannah's story. Her ability to limit immersing herself in one culture is similar to a sage identity in that Hannah can adapt quickly to different countries and political environments. Hannah adapts so successfully that she recognizes parallels between places in ways that indicate her capacity to move into a postcolonial mindset much more quickly than her white English or American counterparts. It also gives her the inner premonition to stay in India after her husband is presumed dead, which results in her no longer calling herself an English woman.

“As Orphans, Wanderers, Martyrs, and Warriors, we find our identities in

opposition to a world imaged as hostile and dangerous. As Magicians, we claim the universe as home, a friendly inviting place to be, and in doing so, we reclaim innocence. Our relationship with life, we learn, is like that with a potential lover” (p117).

Hannah eventually kills Morad saves Jadav’s life and brings him back to Panpur. She decides to offer her life to end the war goes to transact with the Emperor but is taken hostage by him. Whenever, Aurangzeb comes to see her, she is reminded of Ravana the demon king of Lanka in Muslim disguise. Though she fails in her mission for armistice between the Raja and the Emperor, somehow, she purloins the diamond-the Emperor’s Tear. She hands over the diamond to Bhagmati. The diamond is ultimately found by Beigh Masters in a cyberspatial finale. 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. Hannah Easton buries her puritan past and emerges as a real fighter

of life. The love she gets from Raja Jadav Singh makes her reckless and daring.

She finds a good friend in Bhagmati, her Indian ayah, who brings to her the glimmerings of understanding of an aged civilization. She narrates fragments from ‘The Ramayana’. She 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. The God of Fire, Agni, embraces her and expels her unscorched. An interesting parallel is that Hannah’s life was also a trial by fire. Bhagmati, too, resists complete identification with Sita, for she did actually experience rape and dismissal by her family but nevertheless survives on her own with no rescue from a Rama-figure.

3. Outcome

Bharati Mukherjee’s heroines are bold and assertive; they have the strong potentiality for adaptability, they live in the firm ground of reality and accept the bitter truth of their life. Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. By sheer force of a vicious

custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over woman which they do not deserve and ought not to have. The wife's role was to complement her husband, reflecting credit on him and herself. She should have the capacity to feel, judge, discourse and discriminate. Women were commended for their devotion to their families. Attitudes were harshly defined, but the roles performed were based on the practicality of performing them. Thus Mukherjee advocates independence and assertiveness in women by depicting her characters as survivors who successfully bear torment both physical and emotional and raise a voice against the brutalities and violence surrounding them.

Hannah undergoes a process of reincarnation throughout these travels and, considers herself to be a concierge of others. She adopts several lives along with several names. Hannah's naming allows her to transform herself without fully losing her connections to her past selves. Hannah is born Hannah Fitch and becomes Hannah Legge who eventually becomes the Salem Bibi and Precious as Pearl. The role of concierge allows each character to initiate positive transformation in other as

reincarnation transforms the individual's identity. Hannah shows a proficiency of balancing her need to clinch her new selves in India with the desire to wield a fostering influence. Through Hannah's travels, colonial India and colonial America become related in their struggles for independence and the influence each has had on their respective nationhood's.

Mukherjee's female characters are living in a society where the independence had also inspired women who had decided to throw away their veil, which had covered all their mental abilities and accomplishments. They had decided to move out of the four walls and go into the world with a new confidence and determination. However they had to face a lot of hurdles, created not only by men but also by other women. There were a lot of actions and reactions. Mukherjee who has given voice to women's feelings and problems in their fictions. They have expressed the feelings of women and their struggle for existence in society. Her novels chart the dramas of entrance into a new land, adapting to a new way of life, in personal, social and historical terms. Her depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the

dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their situation.

Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed. It was determined that the more virtuous women maintained a more stable home life. Hannah is her first lengthy portrayal of a white woman. *The Holder of the World* could be read as a narrative about a woman's ability to survive and achieve empowerment. In creating a white woman as her protagonist, Mukherjee also has brought into focus the construction of white femininity in narratives. Although much has been written about the construction of white female characters in novels by white men and white women, little has been said about the construction of the white woman in postcolonial narratives.

Mukherjee says that woman has every right to live her life to develop her qualities, to take her decisions, to be independent and to take charge of her destiny. Her novels portray the suffering and deprivation of a woman's pains, her cries, and her anxiety. Nature has created her for the exploitation and use and for bearing

every trouble, sorrows, blows and pains bestowed on her by man. Tolerance, nurturing, adjustment, self-sacrifice are the good virtues expected from a woman. Men are not bound to fulfill these expectations. Hannah returns to her native land not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society. Hannah finds final contentment and joy in the adopted land and it is the morality of this land that Hannah carries along with her. Hannah's life succeeds in questioning and discovering new ways of defining reality in a world, which was essentially orthodox. The novel ends with Hannah's return journey to Salem where she locates her mother in a mental asylum, brings up her 'black' daughter Pearl Singh and fearlessly stays in Salem all her life along with her mother's five half Nipmuc children. Even though the story ends in the same vein her whole personality undergoes a sea change during her restless moves from Salem to Stepney, Coromandel to Devgad and then back to Salem.

4. Conclusion

The novel reveals an intimate and domestic chronicle of subtle tyrannies suffered by woman to the conditions which must be fulfilled before the self-knowledge can be attained. It is the story of the personal

journey and the effects of the journey as expressed in the novel. The suffering of the heroine is brought to the fore and the cause of which is forcing her to come out of the shell, she has chosen to live all these days. Mukherjee constantly creates characters that are not infallible creatures but are burdened, alienated victims. But the victim-protagonists in her fiction are not like those in the absurd literature because she endows them with sufficient power to overcome ignominy, personality flaws and to explore for values by which to complete their lives. The shaping of these characters accords with her belief that the power of the imagination should reveal the greatness of human beings.

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