Chapter V

*The Adventurous Hannah*
Bharati Mukherjee’s fourth novel *The Holder of the World* was published in 1993. The novel is a celebration of the life of Hannah who lived three centuries ago. She travels from the Puritan Salem in America to the distant Coromandel shores of India and feels that her search is finally over. She falls passionately in love with Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad who was at war with the powerful Emperor, Aurangzeb. To prevent the war between them and stop the destruction, Hannah seeks audience with the Emperor and fearlessly argues with him. She fails in her mission but the Emperor is impressed. He calls her ‘Precious as Pearl’. The novel is named after Aurangzeb who is called ‘Alamgir’, ‘the World Taker’, though he makes his appearance only towards the end of the novel.

In a review, Anthony Appiah is all praise for the novel. He remarks that the novel celebrates the border lands without any sentimentality. “Ms. Mukherjee draws us with vigor and scrupulous attention to detail across time – from the present to the 17th and early 18th centuries – and space – from Salem, Mass., to the coast of Coromandel, in India – into the foot steps of not one but two extraordinary women.”

Shakuntala Bharvani says the themes of transformation and migration are presented in this novel in a totally new and unique garb. She
observes that the novel is very much a colonial novel with several details of colonial life woven into it. “In the 1990s,” she says, “She (Mukherjee) attempts to give colour and interest to the kind of novel which has had its day – early history of the Sahibs and Memsahibs in India.”

Sandhya Rao Mehta feels that the novel reinforces expatriation as a journey of the human mind. “Like Jasmine who travels westward, Hannah Easton’s voyage to the orient is a pre-determined truth which effectively voices and manifests the latent tensions, aspirations and ambitions of the protagonist. Hannah, like Jasmine, becomes an expatriate as a result of a quest for a vital life of feeling and emotions.”

Lakshmi Parasuram comments that through her novel Mukherjee communicates a new kind of global consciousness that provides a sense of connectedness beyond the barriers of time and geography.

According to Shyam Agarwala, the story of Hannah is a metaphor for the process of uprooting and re-rooting. He says that in the novel, “fictional characters, incidents and events coalesce with historical personages, places and events and incidents, to give it a local colour and habitation, like the history plays of Shakespeare.”

Pradeep Trikka observes that the novel, having a cross-cultural back-drop, brings together a panoramic view of socio-cultural experiences
of characters in India and America. He says it is “a novel about the quest of characters in search of stability”. 6

Subhash Chandra points out that *The Holder of the World*, like the other novels of Mukherjee, “dramatizes cultural interface that takes place when a protagonist ‘dehouses’ himself/herself and rehouses in an alien ambience, going through in the process certain psychic conflicts and confusions”. 7 Subhash Chandra discusses the novel as an anti-war novel, and says that Mukherjee, through Hannah, castigated the inhumanity and cruelty that inheres in war, victory, power, and ego.

Mukherjee said, “When my writing is going well, I know that I am writing out of my personal obsessions”. 8 The obsession behind *The Holder of the World* was a seventeenth century Indian miniature painting of a Caucasian woman in ornate Mogul court dress. Mukherjee saw the painting in 1989 at a pre-auction viewing of art at Sotheby’s in New York. She thought, “Who is this very confident looking seventeenth century 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?” 9 Out of this wonder of Mukherjee has emerged the novel in which she imagines the inner lives of the people “who acted out the facts of history”. 10 But it is not all imagination. Mukherjee researched her novel in the log books of European
trading companies, in memoirs from Colonial Massachusetts and in seventeenth century travellers’ accounts.

The novel is divided into four parts. As in the case of Jasmine, the narrative shuttles between the past and the present. The past deals with the life of Hannah, the present with the efforts of the narrator Beigh Masters to trace Hannah’s life. Beigh, as she says, lives in three time zones simultaneously – the past, the present, and the future. Her field of work is searching through auctions and acquisitions and uniting people and possessions. Her friend Venn Iyer “animates information beyond virtual reality, re-creating the universe”. By establishing a grid, a data base, Venn and his co-researchers want to work on the interaction with a personality. This information is given in the first chapter of the First Part of the novel. This sets the stage for the story of Hannah to unravel.

Beigh worked on a research project on the Musters/Masters (her ancestors) for a seminar on American puritans. This seminar “set in motion a hunger for connectedness, a belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. Maybe that led, circuitously, to Venn. And to the Salem Bibi and the tangled lines of India and New England.”(11)

On the look out for a lost diamond, The Emperor’s Tear, for a customer, Beigh stumbles upon the Salem Bibi who begins to interest her
more than the diamond. In a maritime museum, in an old fishing village, she finds Salem Bibi’s stuffs in two large wooden crates and five miniature paintings in the folds of an old rug. The five paintings depict the Salem Bibi, a yellow haired woman. The largest of them is named ‘The Apocalypse’ and pictures Salem Bibi on the rampart of a Hindu fort. In the backdrop, her Hindu lover slumps against a tree trunk. The Emperor is pictured on a distant road. Salem Bibi’s hands hold aloft a golden orb and a clear multi-faceted diamond. Beigh Masters, the narrator, puts together Hannah’s story from a hundred sources. Hannah’s 1745 Memoirs forms the basis of her early life.

Hannah Easton was the only surviving child of Edward Easton and Rebecca Easton of Brookfield in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When Hannah was one year old, her father died of a bee sting. When the Nipmuc Indians attacked Brookfield, Hannah lost her mother as well. Of that night of August 1675, when her mother took off with her Indian lover, Hannah had a disturbing memory. Her mother wore the clothes brought by the Nipmuc who killed their dog and smeared her old clothes with its blood. Then they took off on horse back. Hannah was carried off by a Nipmuc woman and dropped on the door step of the Fitches household, “deflecting forever the natural course and location of her girlhood.”(30)

The Fitches were a tender couple and Hannah was the centre of everyone’s concern. When Brookfield was attacked by the Nipmuc Indians
and the houses vandalized, the Fitches went to Salem and settled in a modest house with their crippled son Thomas. Hannah discovered in herself "an obsessive love of needle work, which was, she suspected, an overflow of nascent fascination... with finer things." (40) Hannah never talked about her mother's disappearance. But her embroidery gave away the conflict she tried hard to suppress. Her needle work celebrated the trees, flowers, birds and fish of her infant days. Her work became well-known in the town. Susanna Fitch, her adoptive mother, also appreciated her work "but feared the wantonness of spirit."(42) Hannah learnt from Thomas Fitch to read and write and learnt house keeping tips from Susannah and also one new skill, the sewing and healing of scalped heads. Hester Manning was the closest friend of Hannah. She was vivacious and imaginative and any one looking at these two young ladies "would have thought them to be destined for opposite fates: Hannah to linger in Salem, Hester to reposition the stars."(52) The arrival of Gabriel Legge in Salem changes the destiny of both the maidens. Hannah was twentyone then "with slim expectations of being married. The barrenness of her future had to do with genealogy and poverty, and the hints of non-compliance, of contrary independence that her character had begun to reveal."(61)

Gabriel Legge, tall and handsome but with an eye patch, first courts Hester. When she dies of drowning, he visits Hannah's house and asks for her hand. He explains that Hester was willing to go only half-way with
him, up to England and that he had not guessed the depths of her feelings. Hannah is thrilled at his sea-faring yarns. Though she does not believe him, she accepts his proposal. They are married by the time of his ship’s departure and Hannah leaves with him. And “it would be ten years before she saw Salem again.” (69) The narrator Beigh Masters sees in this action of Hannah an unconscious imitation of her mother, “a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien.” (69)

The second stage of Hannah’s life begins in London. She is often left alone, as Gabriel was a compulsive sea farer and was often gone for six months at a stretch. He wanted Hannah to spend freely and she did, “at first to oblige her husband; later because she loved fine things.” (79) In the first two years in Stepney, “Hannah polished her correspondence, observed the world that passed outside her cottage, tended her garden” (78) and was content. Then Gabriel decides to test her loyalty to him and sends the false news of his death through his friend who then stations himself in a nearby house to watch the goings on in Hannah’s life. Donning the role of a widow, Hannah withdraws from society completely. An accident in front of her house changes her life once again. She saves the boy with a serious head injury. The word spreads that she is blessed with healing powers. People begin to throng before her house “for poultices, for bone setting, for the laying on of hands.” (83) A young scholar, Hubert, comes to her with a fractured hand. He becomes a regular visitor to the house. He feels Hannah
needs a more stimulating company and suggests that she should go to Cambridge where she could find lodging and employment as a governess. His words excite Hannah. “She was tired of waiting at home, of not bestirring herself in the rich new world opening out at every hand.”(86)

But Gabriel’s sudden and unexpected return overthrows Hannah’s “prospects of a widowed Cambridge governess or as the wife of a placid introvert like Hubert.”(87) Hubert is dispatched by Gabriel’s friends. Gabriel, without offering any excuse for his long absence, announces that they would sell the Stepney house and sail for St. Sebastian since he has joined the East India Company. And thus Hannah’s next phase of life begins as she sails with Gabriel on the Fortune in May 1964 for St. Sebastian on the Coromandel coast.

Part Two of the novel deals with this phase of Hannah’s life, her life in India and St. Sebastian. This is also divided into twelve chapters. The narrator Beigh Masters, delving into the past of Hannah, visits India and St. Sebastian. Moving among the ruins of St. Sebastian, Beigh can orient herself in time as well as in place. Led to the cemetery by the guide, she finds the tombs of Hester Hedges, Henry Hedges and other white people of those days: “Three hundred years ago, Europe converged in a cove on the Bay of Bengal.”(98)
It was a time of the greatest upheaval in East India Company's history. The narrator Beigh tells how she gathered information about those times. She had the daily meteorology observations of Mir Ali who logged the contents of every ship; she had the sales receipts of every licensed store in the fort, and a record of official exports, to construct a model of St. Sebastian. She pleads with Venn to tell her when she has enough information and to make his next program X-29-1695. He tells her in course of time computer-assisted time reconstruction is possible.

On arriving on the Indian shores, Hannah watches the local labourers unload the cargo from the ship and thinks she has been transported to the other side of the world. In St. Sebastian, the Legges are given the house which earlier belonged to Henry Hedges. On the first day itself the Chief Factor Cephus Prynne makes overtures to Hannah after taking her on to the balcony. An alarmed Hannah pushes him away.

Hannah’s only white women companions were Dr. Ruxton’s wife Martha and the Second Factor Higginbotham’s wife Sarah. They tease her with the talk of black bibis and insist all English men make secret marriages with black girls. Hannah feels Henry Hedges too has kept a secret wife in the house. She feels his presence in the house as well as his bibi’s.
Gabriel falls out with Cephus Prynne and the relationship between them gradually deteriorates. A frustrated Gabriel decides to join the pirates. Cephus Prynne suddenly disappears and a highly decomposed body is found three days later. After the body is buried, Gabriel announces to Hannah he was joining the Marquis as a pirate. Hannah knew he could not be persuaded against it and allows him to sail on the Esperance, the Marquis’ sloop, to England. But she does not ask him to take her back to England: “She was not ready to entomb herself in Morpeth or London.”(163)

For Hannah to allow Gabriel to go was to allow herself to expand. She looked on Cephus Prynne’s murder as emancipation. She was sure Gabriel had killed him. Like her, the Company officials also believed that Gabriel murdered the Chief Factor. The act was condemned by Fort St.George’s Council which cast the Legges out. But they were allowed to stay in Henry Hedges’ house, and Hannah, like Mr.Hedges, puts herself into the hands of Bhagmati. “Ostracism opened up unwalled worlds for her.”(164) Bhagmati takes her into the room where she kept a shrine for Henry Hedges.

Gabriel, after joining the Marquis, organizes the coast’s stateless English men into a joint stock association with a huge common fund. For him piracy meant raising his own flag and being the boss. Through the merchant Pedda Timanna’s influence with Nawab Haider Beg, he acquires
for his company of pirates an imperial farman to raise revenue and administer a square mile of land near St. Sebastian. He names this 'New Salem' as a tribute to his wife.

Gabriel's piratical exploits worry and anger Higginbotham who became the Chief Factor after Cephus Prynne's death. He visits Gabriel’s house to issue a waning, writes letters of complaint to the Nawab and the Company's directors in London. The Nawab only advises the Company to settle its debts and the company directors also advise him — as Indian cloth was becoming popular — “to starve supply to guarantee a bloated price.”(194) Thus blocked in the expansion of his trade, the destruction of Gabriel Legge becomes his life's end. His wife Sarah’s sudden death further unhinges him. He sends a cart load of explosives disguised as fireworks as a gift to Gabriel with Tringham and a Dubash. When the Dubash sets fire to them, Gabriel was in his black bibi's hovel and escapes unhurt. But half the valley is blown up. The innocent Tringham is caught by the angry mob and delivered to the magistrate. Tringham's eloquent pleading saves him from death sentence but his nose is cut off.

The explosion and the disclosures in its wake shatter Hannah's marriage. "All around her now, she saw chaos. New Salem, shared with an arrogant wench who had fathered Gabriel’s son, in a society that had effectively turned on her for her husband’s piracies was a prison that no amount of riches could soften. She had lived with and accepted, the
possibility that Gabriel might never return from any of his voyages, and
that uncertainty had bound her closer to him. But the certain knowledge of
his unfaithfulness, his preference of a bibi to her, was a matter that her
pride would not permit forgiveness.”(188)

Hannah decides to leave Coromandel for London. She asks
Bhagmati to go along with her. But Bhagmati does not want to cross the
seas and to desert the shrine she kept for Henry Hedges. Until her journey
to London could be arranged, Hannah goes to stay with Martha. She
intends to claim the status of a widow in London and to find work as a
governess. Hannah fears it would be a “bleak, gray and dismal life” (199)
after the excitement and colours and violence of the Coromandel Coast.

When her supposed journey is two weeks away, Hannah returns to
New Salem to pack her trunks and to bid farewell to friends. Gabriel
appears sullen but is fair minded. He promises her resettlement money and
agrees to send her cash at regular intervals as long as his business
prospered. But Hannah’s plans are upset by an unexpected turn of events.
Even as she watches from the roof, Gabriel’s boat upturns in the turbulent
sea. The Nawab’s men gather on the shore, spear the dead bodies and kill
the survivors. The men killed were all Gabriel’s friends known to Hannah.
A shaking Hannah is dragged away by Bhagmati who then takes charge.
She wraps Hannah in a coarse cotton saree, daubs her face with brown
muddy paint and hurries her away saying the white town is a place to flee.
Rumours spread that another Mecca bound pilgrim ship was sacked. The Nawab’s men were patrolling beaches searching for ‘firangi’ men who had sacked the ship. The word of piracy was sent to the Nawab by Higginbotham himself bent on destroying Gabriel. But this time too Gabriel escapes. He lies underneath the upturned boat and is not seen by the Nawab’s men.

The narrator Beigh got the data on Gabriel’s later life when she stumbled on Hannah’s things stuffed in a cardboard box in the maritime museum in Marble head. Gabriel lived a comparatively long life, dying in 1720, and was buried in the British Cemetery in Calcutta. A miniature painting of Gabriel was found in the Salem bibi series. A veiled black woman stands beside him. The man’s eyes are shrunken and an embroidered cap sits on a shrunken forehead. “There is no doubt that the figure is Gabriel and the painting a concentrated story of how he survived the drowning and butcheries of December 1700.”(207)

That day history was rewriting Hannah’s fate. Bhagmati takes her to a servant’s house. As Tringham who was to go with her waits at the locks for the ship, Hannah sleeps and sleeps in the hut. The ship comes and goes with only Tringham on board. Hannah does not make the journey that day. She is thought to have died in the riots.
Part Three of the novel depicts the next phase of Hannah's life, her life as the paramour of Raja Jadav Singh. The Raja makes his appearance in the first chapter of Part Three. The disguised Raja was in the crowd that had gathered to witness the cutting off of Tringham's nose. He was master of guerilla strategies and of incognito disguise. He was the King of Devgad, "a deeply embedded thorn in the flesh of Emperor Aurangzeb."(211)

The Raja was raised in a Shia King's palace. His father was the King's Subedar but called himself a King. He, his wife and the boy's tutors taught Jadav Singh to be a king. He was taught Kautilya's *Arthasastra* which drove home to him the art of survival in a ruthless but elegant age. Aurangzeb, intolerant of heretics and infields, had installed Hasan Beg in Roopkonda to kill or drive from power all Shia Sultans and to expel all Hindus from positions of power. Jadav Singh's father too was humiliated and turned out of the fort. "The son had sworn revenge and had carried the pledge forward to the Nawab's son and to the grand Mughal himself" (212). Panpur was the seat of one of Jadav Singh's vassals and the Raja stationed himself in the fort to harass the firangis, the Nawab and finally the Emperor himself.

Hannah, asleep in a servant's hut, is woken up by a cyclone. Bhagmati hurries Hannah around uprooted trees and waist-deep mud pools. She finds a donkey and hoisting Hannah onto it, leads her towards the.
They cross the bridge. When they are in the middle, the bridge breaks and they fall into the river. The Raja rescues them and they are taken to the Panpur fort. When Hannah wakes up in the Panpur Tower room, Bhagmati assures her that they are not prisoners but guests of Raja Jadav Singh. Hannah has the first glimpse of the Raja when she sees him from the window of the tower room. She wonders why he had saved her. Was it out of a royal instinct for chivalry, or "was he just another schemer like Prynne, Higginbotham, and Gabriel himself? Or was he merely using her, a firangi haj-insulter's widow to taunt his potent enemy, Aurangzeb, the Grand Badshah?" (226)

The Raja visits Hannah. He speaks to her in English and presents her a small colourful bird in an enormous bamboo cage. He tells her she could stay in his fort as long as she felt comfortable. Thereafter she receives occasional gifts from him and like Bhagmati begins to make a 'fetish' of his gifts. She develops deep passion for him. "The void of her life became a 'pleasurable pain', subsuming all the old Salem virtues. She wanted the Raja and nothing else, she would sacrifice anything for his touch and the love they made." (229)

Hannah feels that the Raja was an agent of Providence. "He had saved her life, then saved her from the chilly, unfulfilled life of a governess." (230) She feels that the only woman who could understand her feelings was her mother. She turns the tower into a museum of indirect tokens, embroidered samples expressing sentiments of which Susanna
Fitch would have been ashamed. To compensate, Hannah tattoos a pink alphabet of guilt all over her body and teaches the song bird fanciful tunes from the puritan service.

The Raja courts Hannah for one pahar, one quarter of each night. Hannah does not ask him where he went after he left her. She feels it is fatal to cling to Europe's rules in India as "everything was in flux on the Coromandel Coast line. The survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules."(234) The Raja is so taken up with Hannah that he ignores the duties of a king. Severe drought conditions begin to prevail in Panpur but love for Hannah "isolated the king from the pleas and sorrows of his subjects."(234) Even when he stirs uneasily, Hannah, whom love had made a selfish guardian of their privacy, prevents him from leaving her. Nawab Haider Beg sends his most ruthless commander Morad Farah to head an invasion force to lay siege to the fort. The Raja's Subedar is killed and finally the Raja is forced to come out. He sends his minister to Higginbotham requesting English gunners and long range guns in exchange for rebates on indigo prices. But the English man, loyal to the Nawab, refuses to meet him. The Queen mother's messengers to the Raja are also caught by the enemy and punished. "A cornered rat, the Raja withdrew to a windowless cell in the corner of the fort, into foodless and waterless period of meditation."(238/239)
After meditating the whole night, the Raja comes to a decision on his further action. He would beg for peace and then slip out of the fort before the treaty was signed. He would escape to Devgad which was more defendable and more fully provisioned. Hannah copes with his alien concept of heroism – appear weak before a boastful enemy; hit hard, flee fast. The Raja sends Morad Farah a petition for truce in exchange for Panpur fort, gold, silver and a cash tribute of eight lakhs. The General accepts the offer and sets up the treaty signing in his tent for the following day. He says the Nawab wanted the lady to accompany the Raja. But the Raja knew, if he went there, he would be tortured and killed.

Jadav Singh sets out for Devgad that night, leading his army with Hannah and Bhagmati following in a palanquin. At a small fort on the way he is informed that Panpur and the outlying villages are burnt and the people butchered. The Raja continues his journey without camping there and in the morning finds Morad Farah’s soldiers ambushing his path. Within minutes his men are struck down and he himself falls. Morad Farah, seated on an elephant back, begins to survey the battlefield. Bhagmati takes out a dagger and suggests Hannah should use it. Hannah does not catch her meaning. When Bhagmati tries to kill herself, Hannah prevents her. Both of them fall down. Morad Farah’s elephant approaches them and untangles their bodies. Hannah sits up as she does not want to be crushed like an ant. She saw the elephant crushing the faces of the dead soldiers. At Morad’s
orders, the animal picks up Hannah and deposits her behind him on the howdah. The General resumes his survey and finds Bhagmati attending on a wounded Raja. But before he could order his elephant, Hannah stabs him hard with her dagger and pushes him over. The elephant dutifully drives its foot down upon its master's face. Then the two women lift the unconscious Raja onto the howdah platform and climb on it themselves. With Bhagmati guiding the elephant, they reach Devgad.

The Queen mother, a bent old lady, receives them. At her orders Jadav Singh is carried inside. She orders Hannah who was covering the Raja's wound with her palm to take her hand away. Bhagmati tells the Queen that the firangi lady plucked the Raja from the fields of death and killed the enemy. But the Queen is not appeased. Defying her, Hannah attends on the Raja and using her surgical skills treats his wound. She stays with him, sleeping beside him, changing bandages and administering the barks and the herbs. The Raja wakes up on the tenth day and finds his right arm hanging limp. If he was stronger he would have killed himself. "His grief set the palace to weeping. The old Queen Mother called for the expulsion of the witch who had done the only thing worse than murdering him, made him unable to function."(254/255)

When the Raja is at last ready to listen, Hannah confesses her love for him and tells him she wants to marry him. He laments that he is of no use to his people now and he must die. Hannah suggests that he should go...
with her to her country and tells that she is carrying his baby. It gets an unexpected response from Jadav Singh. He slowly stands up and reminds her of the time when he had told her how she could know she was no longer welcome. He says the women’s rooms were attached to his mother’s palace, she and her child would always have a place there. After that day, Hannah does not see him again until the night of the fearful final panel in the Salem Bibi’s series.

Hannah is consigned to the zenana. She decides she would offer her life if necessary to end the war. She dresses herself carefully in the regal garments of the child widow (of Jadav Singh’s father) to set out on her mission. After failing to dissuade her, Bhagmati accompanies her, a reluctant guide and a stout protector. They enter a secret passage out of the fort and after travelling for one day, emerge in the Northern border of Jadav Singh’s kingdom. They find the emperor’s men making preparations to build a city. When Hannah enters the war camp, demanding an audience with the Emperor, she is seized and bound and taken to the harem. After scrutiny she is dressed up in Mughal garments and then escorted to the Emperor.

Hannah finds the Emperor a very old man, sharp featured and commanding, and dressed in very simple clothes. A golden globe is suspended over his throne, cupped in the cradle of a golden replica of Aurangzeb’s hands and on the top of this gold universe is embedded a
large beautiful diamond. The Emperor talks to Hannah with the help of an interpreter. She is told she would not be executed and it would be convenient to her to be obedient. Hannah gets angry and shouts at him calling him a despot and a tyrant. She hates him "for his self-righteous terrors that forced him to see her not as a person on a mission but as a pawn in his endless game of shatranj ... Her only value for him was her bibi power to lure the Raja, as Ravana had lured Sita, outside the white circle of the hill fort's safety."(265/266)

Hannah and Bhagmati are taken into a tent. That night Hannah roams the tent city and watches the Emperor's preparations for the battle. Knowing the condition of the Raja's armaments she thinks his mission is suicidal and wants to call it off. She wants a chance to speak to the Emperor. She regrets she had allowed herself to be the Emperor's bait. Though Hannah fails in her mission of peace, the Emperor is impressed by her boldness. He sends her gifts, boxes of jewels and pearls. He calls her Precious as Pearl. She rejects them but they are re-presented with the message, rejection will be taken as insult. So Hannah wears the pearls. The Emperor wants her to view with him the destruction of the Raja in the battlefield. "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, a widow, a peace maker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India."(271)
In Part Four of the novel, the story of Hannah is brought to a culmination. The narrator Beigh Masters' search for the Emperor's Tear also ends. It took Beigh one and a half year to assemble the notes, take pictures, attend auctions and then reconstruct Hannah's story. Venn bought her the painting 'The Apocalypse' or 'The Unravished Bride' at a small auction. Beigh says, "I've always seen it as a painting about a woman misplaced in time."(277) All the notes Beigh Masters had made on Hannah—the five hundred books consulted, the endless paintings, engravings, trade records, journals, the travel and documentary pictures stacked up in her study looked impressive. From them she reconstructed a life through three continents and thirty years. Her friend Venn, was looking for his crystal garden, the data plasma that would generate a fully interactive world.

Venn absorbed Hannah's manuscript and all the documents, the travelogues, East India records, and chronicles of the emperors of Mughal dynasty in his computer. He found a way of rendering her words into images. The programme was interactive and would give what she most cares about. The mind searches through the programme, interacts with his thousand answer questionnaire until it finds a place to jump in.

Beigh is taken into Venn's laboratory by him and fitted with the helmet, the goggles and the special gloves. Her mind is taken back in time and dropped in the battle scene. She is transformed into Bhagmati, Hannah's Hester. She reaches out to hold Hannah's hand and Hannah
turns. She was a beautiful woman with crinkly golden hair. The emperor is
seen standing with his back to the battle ground, facing the inner courtyard
where the wounded Jadav Singh slumped. The emperor holds the diamond
aloft and turns. Suddenly Hannah snatches the diamond from him and runs.
Hannah and Bhagmati/Hester/Beigh run along the parapet and Hannah
passes the diamond to Bhagmati. They fly down the steep stairs and run
into the battle field. Bhagmati is hit by a bullet. She takes out her knife and
plunges it into her stomach and plunges the diamond into the deepest part
of her.

In the laboratory Venn finds Beigh screaming, writhing and crying
and shouting partially in his language, which she did not know. She tells
Venn that now she knows where the diamond is. It is in India, it lies in the
remains of Bhagmati, Hester Hedges. Now the name of Hester Hedges in
the grave yard of Fort St.Sebastian becomes comprehensible. She must
have been given a Christian burial by Hannah in order to preserve her body
as a carrying case. Jadav Singh was taken back to Devgad for the proper
‘public grieving and ceremony.’(233)

Hannah’s life after she returns to Salem is also reconstructed by
Beigh from letters, journals, Memoirs, shipping and housing records.
Hannah, now called Pearl, returns to Salem with her infant daughter. The
daughter, Pearl Singh, was born in 1701 on the long voyage back home.
After her return, Hannah searches for her mother and finds her in a work
house for the mad and poor, speaking some tribal language and insisting on wearing her outmoded woolens with the shameful 'I' boldly sewn in red to her sleeve. Hannah stayed on in Salem until her death in 1750 at the age of eighty. Hannah and her daughter were called White Pearl and Black Pearl by the town's people. Their small house, jammed with brass and copper items, was called by many the House of Enchantment. Children were warned about the house whose children carried the double taint of voluptuous blood. Hannah and her daughter were heard to mutter "We are Americans to freedom born". (285) Hannah earned a living as a nurse, a veterinarian, and some times a doctor. Though responsible citizens avoided her services, she enjoyed "a clientele of diverse men and women who came from curiosity and stayed for the wealth of her story telling, the pungency of her opinions."(285) When Hannah returned to Salem, Joseph Hawthorne, son of witch craft judge, John Hawthorne, was only nine years old. The boy often came to Hannah's house. He found in her company, doing odd jobs and running errands for her, a corrective to the orthodoxy of his household. His great grandson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was born in Salem in 1804. The narrator claims that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is based on Hannah's story and that he shied away from the real story of the brave Salem mother and her illegitimate daughter. Commenting on this, Anthony K. Appiah says, "And when, at the end, Bharati Mukherjee has the hubris, the Chutzpah, the sheer unmitigated gall, to connect her book..."
with Hawthorne's novel ... it is, I think, a connection she has earned. Nathaniel Hawthorne is a relative of hers. And, like Hannah Easton (or Beigh Masters?), she has every right to claim her kinship across the centuries."

Like Mukherjee’s earlier novel *Jasmine*, this novel also tells the story of a survivor, a brave, adventurous woman quite ahead of her times. As Appiah says it is the story of two remarkable women: one is the narrator Beigh Masters who sets out to reconstruct the story of her ancestor, the Salem Bibi, Hannah Easton and the other, Hannah Easton herself. “Each of these women is written eloquently into full being.” The novel is richly populated and each character, even the minor ones, is sketched with care.

The protagonist of the novel Hannah Easton/Fitch/Legge emerges as a very remarkable woman in every way. Changing identity is the theme once again. But through her multiple identities, Hannah displays remarkable courage, strength of character and resilience. The fact that she never reveals her mother’s secret to any one even as a child reveals a trait of a strong willed person. Etched in her memory, her mother occasionally steps out and speaks. Hannah’s babbling in her sick bed, when in her teens – ‘A’ is for Action, ‘B’ is for Boldness, ‘C’ is for character, ‘D’ is for Dissent, ‘E’ is for Ecstasy, ‘F’ for Forge and ‘I’ for Independence – speaks of her mother’s influence. Her long stay as Hanna Fitch in the Puritan household of the Fitches could not suppress it. But it does produce a
conflict in her mind. She experiences the contrary love of her two mothers.
Susan Fitch, afraid of the mob psychosis of the street, advised moderation.
But Rebecca, "whose blood quickened her, and whose memory for its very
remoteness knew no abatement, counseled confrontation."(64)

Hannah is portrayed as an intelligent woman with a discerning and
analytical mind. The diary she kept while in London, intended as letters to
a distant mother, offers "as vigorous an assessment of English life in the
Dutch King William III's years as any record."(74) Her written record is
"one long chronicle of discoveries, her curiosity extends to every branch of
knowledge she ever had contact with."(76) She displays her immense
confidence, boldness and efficiency when she treats a boy injured in an
accident in front of her house in Stepney. She bores a hole in the boy's
head to remove the blood gathered; she tells the doctor when to remove the
leeches. She argues with him and prevails upon him. When the doctor says,
"Madam, I am a physician and bleeder trained by the Royal College," she
replies, "And I am a survivor of Indian massacre."(82) The boy recovers
beyond the expectations of the doctor and the doctor seeks her out on other
cases of head injury.

As the narrator Beigh remarks, Hannah had traits even a modern
woman can relate to - her curiosity, the awakening of her mind, and her
sense of self and purpose. Beigh says, "of all the qualities I admire in
Hannah Easton that make her entirely our contemporary in mood and
sensibility, nothing is more touching to me than the sheer pleasure she took in
the world's variety."(104)

In India, Hannah is initially confined to the white town and leads the
life of the English woman in early colonial times. She visits and receives
the wives of the other company employees – Martha Ruxton and Sarah
Higginbotham. They tease her with the talk of the black Bibis and hint that
Gabriel might be having a black Bibi. But Hannah is not worried. She only
wonders – "Why would our husbands? Are the women in this land more
beautiful?"(132) India fascinates Hannah. Years later Hannah called the
trip to India and her long residence there as her translation. She easily
adapts herself to Indian conditions. "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. She did not hold India up to inspection
by the lamp of England upon the completion of Gabriel's tour" (104).

When Gabriel becomes a pirate, Hannah's life is transformed once
again. The Legges are cast out of the white town. In the absence of the
companionship of the white women Martha and Sarah, Bhagmati becomes
her only companion. Bhagmati opens the doors to Indian culture for
Hannah by telling her stories from Indian mythologies during the long
nights. Sita's story fascinates her. It reminds her of her own story and that
of her mother. Though in Bhagmati's story, Sita is a self-sacrificing ideal
Hindu wife, in Hannah's imagination, she assumes an entirely different shape "of a woman impatient to test herself to explore and survive in an alien world."(174/175)

In her life with Gabriel, Hannah clings to Salem's 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Hence his taking a black bibi was intolerable to her. In her life with Jadav Singh, she realizes that in India it was inappropriate and even fatal to cling to Europe's rules. She abandons herself to a life of sheer pleasure with Jadav Singh. In her Memoirs she makes a cryptic reference to their relationship: "An angel counseled me, a fantasy governed me; bliss descends on the derangers of reason and intellect."(228) Her passionate nature which was suppressed hitherto is brought forth for the first time. She feels the first hint that "a world beyond duty and patience and wifely service was possible, then desirable, then irresistible."(237)

In the battlefield when Morad Farah's elephant approaches her, she sits up - "she would agree to die, but not in the way of some simple ant, some worm on the ground."(246) The indomitable Hannah kills Morad Farah before he could order his elephant to crush Jadav Singh's face. In Devgad, she defies the queen mother, and attends on her lover and saves him from death. When a dejected Jadav Singh indicates that she is no longer welcome, she takes it in her stride. Yet she does not give up. She refuses to be cowed down, refuses to be confined to the zenana. She dares to meet the frightful Aurangzeb and fearlessly argues with him against the
battle. Though he does not agree with her, Aurangzeb is so impressed that 
he sends her gifts and calls her ‘Precious as Pearl’. But it is 
incomprehensible why Hannah seizes the diamond and runs off with it 
leaving a wounded Jadav Singh.

Back in Salem, Hannah is a rebel. Unmindful of what society might 
think, she searches her mother out and keeps her and her half-Nipmuc 
children with her. She is not disheartened when responsible citizens avoid 
her house. She is happy in her own world. In the words of Beigh Masters, 
Hannah, “wherever she stayed... would have changed history, for she was 
one of those extraordinary lives through which history runs a four-lane 
highway.”(189) A woman of independent and indomitable spirit, Hannah 
carves out a niche of her own wherever she lives.

Bhagmati is the only friend and companion who stays with Hannah 
throughout her stay in India. She is the window through which India is 
revealed to Hannah. She stands by Hannah through thick and thin and 
protects her when the Nawab’s men attack the white town. Bhagmati is a 
fit companion to Hannah. She too had refuted convention when she refused 
to die after being violated by pirates and thrown into the river “She had 
swum against the currents... she had survived... Individual effort thwarted 
divine fate. She had never wanted to die, nor known how to drown...”(223)
She becomes a victim twice after being disowned by her family. She had “run from her family, from her village, from all the familiar taboos and traditions” (224) just as Hannah had run from Puritan taboos and restrictions. She finds her love in Henry Hedges who treats her first like a servant, then as a queen. He wants to take her to London with him but he meets with an untimely death. After his death she keeps a shrine for him, and walks the parapets of his house at night, sometimes in his clothes and sometimes in hers. She is so loyal to his memory that she refuses when Hannah asks her to go with her to London. “It wasn’t religious. She could not conceive of England without Hedges. She preferred to keep his shrine alive, to walk the parapets in his clothes, in her queenly skills, than to abandon him to the Coromandel Coast.”(224) She shows the same loyalty to Hannah, accompanies her to Aurangzeb’s presence risking her own life, and then to the battlefield.

As Pradip Trikha says, Mukherjee’s characters – Dimple, Jasmine, Rebecca, Hannah, and Bhagmati defy estrangement in the society they live in. They reject the roles of cultural stereotypes and develop a life of their own outside their home. Hannah’s husband Gabriel Legge’s character is fully developed. He was tall and dashing and a fabulous liar. He claims his father was a ship owner who turns out to be an indebted drunk from Morpeth. He serves as a means to Hannah providing her an escape from the
There were two Gabriel Legges, the wild and expansive Gabriel Legge who'd shown up in Salem with tales of mountains and camels, deserts and lakes; Gabriel Legge the jealous lover and husband, the democratic Gabriel Legge who, alone among company factors, seemed to enjoy the hardship postings, the company of rough and low-born privateers, local traders and artisans. And then there was the cautious Gabriel Legge, who worked grudgingly under Cephus Prynne and Samuel Higginbotham, men of small compass and meager imagination. (241)

The suspicious Gabriel Legge stages his own death to test Hannah's loyalty and kills Cephus Prynne on suspicion that he visited Hannah in his absence. His becoming a pirate changes Hannah's life yet again, closing the doors of the white society on her and opening the doors to a new, rich culture. The narrator Beigh remarks, "Every now and then we hear of a gentleman robber, a polite soft spoken white collar wannabe who enlists respect from his victims and sympathy from the public: Gabriel Legge the 'Robinhood of the Coromandel Coast,' seems to have been that kind of pirate." (168) The capturing and hanging of the pirate Captain Kidd leaves a sobering effect on Gabriel and he intends to retire from piracy. But before
that can happen, Higginbotham’s jealousy causes a riot that leaves an irrevocable effect on the life of Gabriel as well a Hannah.

Raja Jadav Singh transforms Hannah’s life, gives it a new meaning and fulfillment. Only after meeting him does Hannah experience a consummating love. At first he displays a casual attitude towards her. When she asks him why he had saved her, he answers, “I was not looking to save you, or any one, I am not in the habit of pulling bodies out of water.”(226) He is a true follower of Kautilya. He kills his half brother to safeguard his own interests; sends for a truce and gives a slip to Morad Farah. When Hannah asks him what will happen to the people of Panpur Fort if he leaves them, he answers that they will understand and that they helped him get away. “Guilt did not enter his make up, only duty, and his duty was to lead, to defend, to fight.”(241)

A true warrior, Jadav Singh is inconsolable when he discovers he is crippled and cannot move his right hand. He laments that he is of no use to his people and therefore must die. His reaction to Hannah’s revelation that she is carrying his baby is strange. He consigns her to the zenana. Yet it is for Hannah’s sake that he is drawn out of the fort and is killed in the battle with Aurangzeb. A true Indian Prince he feels it a personal dishonour that his woman is imprisoned by the enemy. In Jadav Singh, Mukherjee portrays a typical Indian Prince.
The characters that people the novel offer a rich variety. The puritans in Salem, the English seen through the eyes of Hannah, the East Indian Company men, the Indian traders are vividly drawn. Henry Hedges, though unseen, emerges vividly as well. Aurangzeb, introduced directly towards the end of the novel, is also portrayed with sympathy. He is not painted as a villain. And it is Aurangzeb who provides the title of the novel.

In the novel, Mukherjee adopts a style and language quite in keeping with her story. The story and its period are thoroughly researched. The narrator of the story, Beigh Masters tells how she gathered information about Hannah’s life and it is obvious that she speaks on behalf of Mukherjee. The society in which Hannah moves, the Salem society where her childhood is spent, the English society into which she moves after marriage, and then the society of the White Town in India, the lives of Sahibs and Mem Sahibs of early Colonial times are portrayed in detail.

*The Holder of the World* is a celebration of the life of a very remarkable woman who lived three centuries ago, a woman who was quite ahead of her times; “a woman whose triumph is one of courage, of unyielding passion, of the obstinate will to survive”. Mukherjee had said “I don’t want to write that 500-page conventional historical novel, because that’s a mimicry of a form. I want to bring the world into the 300 page novel without losing the complexity. What novelists have the power to do
is imagine the inner life of people who acted out the facts of history. And do it with sympathy for every side. That is what exactly Mukherjee does in the novel. She makes the narrator Beigh Masters imagine and piece together the inner lives of the protagonist Hannah and the many interesting characters that play a role in her life.

While *The Holder of the World* portrays the life of a very brave woman of the Colonial times, Mukherjee’s next novel offers a very different story, that of a modern orphan’s search for her parents. But it has the same theme: search for identity.
References


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