Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional works, with the exception of *The Tiger’s Daughter*; invariably reflect her embattlements with ethos, cultures and people of the land of her birth, i.e., India and the land of her immigration, i.e., the US. Mr. Aijaz Ahmed, a professional Fellow of the Centre of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library libeled her as “right wing.” The US publishers, on the other hand, told her again and again that “as a person of Indian origin I must restrict myself to writing ‘exotic’ and ‘nostalgic’ fiction about India, to be a Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth or Amitav Ghosh, who churn out lively and controversial stories on exotic, superstitious, poor and god-fearing people of India, for rich Americans and Europeans”. Bharati Mukherjee “resisted because I knew that the finest fiction evolves from writer’s personal obsessions. I have willingly paid the price exacted of pathbreakers.”¹ Her marriage with an American of Manitoba Quebec origins; her plight in Canada; her search for a house in America; her fight for recognition, not as a “sojourner” but as a “settler” in America; like Europeans and Africans, are qualities that make her fictional works, of exceptional nature.

“Even more than other writers, I must learn to astonish, to shock”, proclaims Bharati Mukherjee in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*² with a spirit that motivates her writing. The universally acclaimed ‘immigrant voice’, Bharati
Mukherjee has produced a body of work that both sustains wonder and evokes surprise. In her seven novels and two short story collections she has deliberately, and sometimes flamboyantly, fused many impulses, backgrounds and selves to create a “new immigrant” literature. Here is a ‘voice’ distinctly heard in today’s diasporic circle.

Mukherjee’s world of immigrants and their desperate need to belong to the new world bring a sense of cross-cultural adventure to her novels. Her immigrants, since they come from an Asian or non-European background, undergo experiences somewhat dissimilar to those of European immigrants in the past. For those European immigrants in early America, the challenge posed by the new world lay mostly in its totally different material conditions, what they needed most was to build a civilization out of the wilderness that confronted them. The Asian immigrants of America in the twentieth century are, however, confronted with a different set of conditions that pose a new kind of challenge and adventure. The colliding worlds of their exile and immigration also generate a number of psychological anomalies that merge into one another to form a curious blend of cross-cultural consciousness that can be measured only by its own ability to survive, succeed and change.

Transformation and migration are once more Bharati Mukherjee’s two major themes in her novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993). They are however, presented in a totally new and unique grab-for now there is no longer the usual
Indian protagonist, a Jasmine or a middleman seeking a new identity in a new world. Here it is 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’s *The Holder of the World* is a unique fusion of fiction and History. Here the author uses the technique of ‘virtual reality’ as a trope for dislocating and transforming literary, cultural, and historical topographies of Mughal India and colonial 17th and 18th century United States. Like Walter Scott, she enlivens her pages with a truthful story of an extraordinary American woman Hannah Easton, Mukherjee exposes the snobbery, hypocrisy and corrupt world of East India Company’s rule in India. Hannah, a puritan American woman, visits India along with her husband and discovers true happiness in the company of a Hindu Raja-Jadav Singh and returns home a changed and transformed human being. Thus in the present novel also Mukherjee’s focus continue to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals. However, it differs from Mukherjee’s other works as it has “a wide canvas that sweeps across continents and centuries, cultures and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign lands have always been the colour of Mukherjee’s plate and with The Holder of the World, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite
possibility and eternal time”.³ In a starting commingling of history and imagination, Mukherjee lights up the making and very nature of American consciousness in this novel. The inspiration behind this “fantastic” story was an ordinary incident on an ordinary day. In an interview, Mukherjee recalled.

The novel got started because I was at an auction of Sotheby in New York… Whatever money my husband and I save is spent on Indian miniature painting and my aesthetics for the novel evolves out of my love for Indian miniature painting.⁴

It was here that she saw a miniature titled “A European Women in Aurangzeb’s Court”. A Caucasian woman stood resplendent in full Moghul dress and Mukherjee “suddenly realized that I was looking at a woman who three hundred years back had taken a lot of risks, had transformed herself”. Earlier it was always the journey from East to West and the accompanying Chamelion-like changes, but now this trip is in the opposite direction.

The novel generated favourable response from the critics all over the world and people acknowledged Mukherjee’s skill in blending imaginary creations with historical facts. The New York Times Book Review admired, *The Holder of the World* in the following terms:

Ms Mukherjee draws us with vigour and scrupulous attention to detail across time—from the present to the 17th and early 18th centuries—and space—from Salem, Massachusetts to the Coast of Coromandel, in India-
into the footsteps of not one but two extraordinary women…. (an) extraordinary novel…

Such adulatory comment is not misplaced because The Holder of the World demonstrates a consummate artistry to blend fact and fiction head and heart, science and religion, East and West, history and imagination, the Old World and the new World. Mukherjee has dedicated this novel ‘To Ann Middleton, and all travelers to utmost shores’. Here she creatively travels in time and space, past and present, exotic and known and this lends to this novel an extraordinary dimension never seen in her writings before. It is a quest for identity, transformation of protagonist’s personality under the stress of the circumstances.

A quick summary of the plot of The Holder of the World indicates to what extent Mukherjee tried to meet the goals she had for herself. But it is really more accurate to talk about the plots of the novel, for it has a main plot and a subsidiary plot. The subsidiary plot tells the story of Beigh Masters, the novel’s narrator. Beigh is a very modern, very sophisticated, 32-year-old woman, making a living as an “asset hunter,” which is something of an euphemism for a job that involves ferreting out antiques and art treasures for rich collectors interested in the most elusive, and therefore the most precious, art objects. Beigh has a lover, a brilliant computer scientist named Venn Lyre,
whose family came to the United States from South India and settled in the Boston area. Venn works in an MIT lab for “a virtual-reality project”—that is, a project that involves feeding data into a computer to re-create a segment of time that has passed. Specifically, throughout the novel, Venn works to enable time travel to Kansas City on the afternoon of 29 October 1989. Beigh is intrigued by his project and near the end of her narrative actually does the time traveling for him. But Beigh’s job is to track down for a client a diamond called the Emperor’s Tear, reputedly the most perfect diamond in the world, and she travels from Boston to India and back again in search of the priceless object supposed to have been lost while in the possession of Emperor Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors who ruled India for two centuries.

The main plot of The Holder of the Holder of the World, however, has to do with the strange and surprising adventures of Hannah Easton, a New Engander who was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, to Edward and Rebecca Easton in 1670. Edward Easton died of a bee sting a year later, and Hannah’s chief memory of Rebecca Easton is of the moment when she arranged for Hannah to be left with a neighbour so that Rebecca could fly away to her Nipmuc India lover. Instead of turning her against her mother, though, the episode keeps stimulating Hannah to go beyond the strict parameters imposed by Puritan society. Consequently, although she grows up as the adopted child of a devout Puritan couple, Robert and Susannah Fitch, she readily agrees in 1692
to marry the dashing Irish adventurer Gabriel Legge, mainly because he appears to be the type who could take her into the unknown. And so, after a couple of years in England, where she has to stay while he goes out on his adventures, she finds herself in the Coromandel coast of southeastern India as the wife of the East India Company man Gabriel has become.

Eventually, Gabriel, always irrepressible and basically the type who will not be domesticated, turns pirate and leaves Hannah to fend for herself in India. Hannah ends up with an Indian lover, a Hindu raja named Jadav Singh. For a while she experiences with the raja the kind of bliss she associates with Rebecca Easton and her Nipmuc Indian lover. But the raja is embroiled in a struggle with the mighty Mughal emperor, and love only makes him an easier prey for the ascetic, driven Aurangzeb. Hannah makes desperate plea to the emperor to desist from destroying the raja and his kingdom. The emperor, predictably, is unmoved, and when Jadav Singh dies, Hannah finds her way back to Salem, where she takes along Pearl, the daughter she has had because of her affair with the raja.

The main plot and the subsidiary plot are linked through Beigh Masters, who in her quest for the Emperor’s Tear has come across a series of Mughal miniature paintings in a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts that feature “a yellow-haired woman in diaphanous skirt and veil,” who has become legendary as “Salem Bibi” or the mistress from Salem. Beigh, understandably,
is intrigued by the presence of a blonde woman from New England in
seventeenth-century India, the more so since in one painting of the series the
blonde seems to be holding the Emperor’s Tear while sharing the canvas with a
vanquished raja and a gloomy emperor. Beigh’s instinct tells her that Salem
Bibi was Hannah Easton, and so she embarks on two quests: she will not only
find out where the Emperor’s Tear could have disappeared to but will also
reconstruct the sequence of events that transformed Hannah Easton into Salem
Bibi and made her come back to New England after having loved a raja and
after having consorted with the mighty Mughal Aurangzeb. Beigh Masters finds
herself more drawn, however, to “Hannah Easton Fitch Legge aka the Bibi from
Salem” (the name changes, as in Jasmine, are significant\(^6\) than to the story of
the diamond-so much so that she “couldn’t care less about the Emperor’s Tear”
by then (p. 19). From this point on she spends over a year of her life assembling
the facts that will enable her to reconstruct the trajectory of Hannah’s life and
will satisfy her intense desire to know more about the intrepid seventeenth-
century woman who appeared to have led such a fabulous life  (p. 30).

It isn’t the gem that interests me. It’s the inscription and the provenance.
Anything having to do with Mughal India gets my attention. Anything
about the Salem Bibi, precious-as-pearl feeds me (p. 5).

Even the bald summary of the two plots of *The Holder of the World*
indicate how closely the novel sticks to the agenda Bharati Mukherjee
announced for her writing. Beigh’s patient reconstruction of Hannah’s story is meant to suggest that there were passages to and from India even in colonial New England and that lives have been lived across cultures in all centuries. Moreover, Mukherjee seems to be telling her readers that if we care to gather the stories interspersed in history, we will come to realize how intertwined lives are. To say that the West was West and the East was East and that the two had scarcely met or will ever meet is an excessively reductive and even static view of history. On the contrary, Mukherjee is bent on demonstrating through her novel a conception of history articulated in the novel through Venn, who observes that “everything in history ... is as tightly woven as a Kashmiri Shawl” Through Hannah Easton’s life, Mukherjee will strive to make the point that even a woman born in colonial New England could have internalized India and Indians into her psyche in a positive way.

Beigh lives with her Indian lover for nearly three years. “He animates information. He’s out there beyond virtual reality, re-creating the universe, one nanosecond, one minute at a time” (p.5). Both Beigh Masters and her Indian lover are dealers in the things of past. They claim “The past presents itself to us” (p.6). Venn is of the view that “Every time-traveler will create a different reality - just as we all do now. No two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality ... History is a big saving bank” (p.6). At this point Uma Parameswaran
has all praise for Mukherjee’s concept of virtual reality. In a review of the novel she writes:

In reconstructing a piece of Raj History, Mukherjee joins other novelists from her native India, such as Manohar Malgonkar (The Princes, The Devil’s Wind), Kamala Mrkandaya (The Golden Honeycomb), and more recently, Gita Mehta (Raj). She adds another dimension to linear narrativization by using the concept of virtual reality.7

The use of time travel to help Beigh (and the reader) unravel the mystery of ‘The Emperor’s Tear’ is a clever ruse. Her searches around museums, East India Company documents and colonial literature, her travels to India and auctions all over the world, are commendable efforts to reconstruct a daring woman’s odyssey. She makes it seem plausible that a seventeenth-century Puritan woman could have ventured into a different culture and met a Mughal ruler contemporary of the Sun King, of Peter the Great and of Oliver Cromwell. Beigh’s painstaking piecing together of Hannah’s life is like building a picture puzzle across time. Solving the last clue through computer magic turns it into the stuff of high-tech occult. While it satisfies emotionally, one obviously remains unconvinced.

Arshia Sattar comments that Mukherjee “is at her most eloquent and intelligent when she explores the complexities of cultural confrontation and the politics of “otherness”8 Here she presents the difference between the Old and
the New Worlds, represented by America and India, as a clash of value systems, a confrontation between an austere, stark society and a culture in which nothing is more important than the celebration of beauty. As the narrator proceeds, it unfolds the story of the Puritan woman of 17th century Hannah Easton, born in the American Colonies in 1670, “a person undreamed of in Puritan society” (p.59). Inquisitive, vital, awake to her own sense of self and purpose, she is “a spiritual aristocrat in an age of common believers.” “She is from a different time, the first person, let alone the first woman, to have had these thoughts, and this experience, to have been formed in this particular crucible” (p.59).

Indeed, what a summary of the two plots of *The Holder of the World* fails to bring out fully is the extent to which Mukherjee shows races interacting with each other across space and time, Beigh Masters, for example, at first appears to have little in common with Hannah Easton except her New England background and an Indian lover. But as she gets more and more involved with Hannah’s life, she begins to discover other significant points of contact. Beigh finds out, for instance, that Hannah’s mother was a cousin of her own ancestor. “Vaguely then,” she was part of Hannah’s story, “The Salem Bibi. ... part of the tissue” of her own life. But more significant is Beigh’s discovery of the kinship of spirit that she has with Hannah. Both of them, she realizes, are impelled by curiosity and romance, a thirst for the unknown and for a passion that could transform their lives; both have a “hunger for connectedness” (p. 11).
Hannah, like her mother, is drawn to the Nipmuc Indian culture, quite unlike their fellow Puritans. Similarly, Beigh has a very untypical interest in Indian culture, philosophy and lives that extends beyond what is required of her in her job or by her affair (Venn, after all, appears to be as North American as he is South Asian). Like Hannah, too, Beigh takes “sheer pleasure ... in the world’s variety” (p. 104).

Beigh visits the Museum of Maritime trade that ‘the curator’s note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism. There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth; it’s a fly’s eye view of Puritan history” (p. 12). She also comes across the Mughal opulence ‘flashy with decoration’ (p. 12) and she wonders over the gulf between two worlds:

What must these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been’... (p. 12).

The opulence of the Eastern World, their love for gold, diamond and jewellery drives the Westerners to disdain and despair. But their sense of snobbery does not permit them to kneel-down before the Eastern culture. They revel in their own sense of pride and superiority as is obvious from one of the inscriptions in the Museum, which records their reactions:

We beat those Asians because our posts are heavy and black and our pothooks contain no jewels. No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins of crude muslin and our women’s
virtue was geared by bonnets and capes and full skirts. Those Indian guys wore earrings and 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 up to their elbows so their arms were too heavy to lift, and they slipped new rings on their toes and thumbs so they could barely walk or make a fist (pp. 12-13).

Beigh Masters hunts for every minute detail about Hannah and she knows ‘traces of Salem Bibi pop up from time to time in inaccessible and improbable little museums like this one. They get auctioned, and sold to anonymous buyers. I believe I know her identity, and the anonymous donor’ (p. 14). She is an ardent researcher, full of vigour, bubbling with confidence and having faith in her sincerity to achieve her goal. She dilates on her personality and the mental make-up at this juncture:

There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love, or at least it promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden (p. 15).

She is confident of finding this Eden, passing through the jungle like obscure museums and auctions around the world. As she goes through the photographic records of Hannah’s life in a museum in Massachusetts she gets the vision of the Old World, its exotic inhabitants etc:
In a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts, I am witnessing the old world’s first vision of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, that only the Salem Bibi could have described or posed for (p. 16)

The largest painting bears a catalogue name *the apocalypse*, but the narrator calls it *‘The Unravish’d Bride’*. In this painting “beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort” (p. 17). In another painting she notices “Salem bibi’s love, once a sprightly guerrilla warrior, now slumps against a charred tree trunk. He grasps a nephrite jade dagger hilt carved in the shape of a ram’s head and, with his last blood-clotted breath, pledges revenge” (p. 17). Salem Bibi becomes a co-wanderer of Beign masters, a constant source of vital energy, inspiration, adventure, odyssey, always whispering in her ears ‘to go’:

Fly as long as hard as you can, my co-dreamer! Scout a fresh site on another hill. Found with me a city where lions lie with lamb, where pity quickens knowledge, where desire dissipates despair! (p. 19).

Now she has the confidence to claim that she knows Hannah’s ins and outs: I know her like a doctor and a lawyer, like a mother and a daughter. With every new thing I’ve learned, I’ve come imperceptibly closer to the Emperor’s Tear ...
Three hundred years ago, it existed in her hand; I know where she came from and where she went. I couldn’t care less about the Emperor’s Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi (p. 19).

With this claim of Beigh Masters sufficient ground of plausibility is prepared. Now, we are ready to plunge our head in the details of Hannah’s extraordinary life. Though, her movement has been circular one, by no means she remains the same Hannah on her return to Salem. India has transformed her sensibility with the resultant change in her personality.

Hannah Easton was the only surviving child of Edward and Rebecca Easton, nee Rebecca Walker of Brookfield, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. First the Walkers had settled in Boston, or even Rhode Island but by 1653 Elias Walker, his wife and infant daughter, Rebecca, arrived in Brookfield and leased, from their distant relatives the Masters, three hundred acres of prime Quabaug River bluff and bottom land. At that time, Brookfield was a hesitant hilltop Puritan outpost deep inside Nipmuc country. Elias Walker held the usual attitudes of his time, and ours, toward the Indians: they are children, they are trusting; they are proud and generous. Even capable of nobility. But at heart they are savages: bestial, unspeakably cruel. Eight years later, the Walkers gained a neighbour, a sickly looking but resourceful recent arrival (from England) by the name of Edward Easton, who purchased with his English savings a brown ribbon on a field, a rickety shed, a cabin with privy and two
barns. At the age of 15 in 1668, Rebecca Walker got married to Edward Easton, Hannah was born of this marriage after two years.

In Old World, Edward Easton had been an East India Company man with a sedentary occupation. Beigh searches for more details about Edward’s life and gets plenty of clues to reconstruct his life. She goes through East India Company ledger books, letters, books and papers stored in the India Office in white hall. Edward Easton’s entries stand out because of the singular primacy and angularity of his handwriting. Beigh, a twenty-year old girl, really contemplating her place in the universe and the ways of the World had appropriated an ancestor, a man who had gone before her, and though he was writing of strangers, she cherished his observations like an intimate letter from home:

A petty ruler on the Coromandel Coast of India is given the gifts of armour, a wool coat and a spying glass.

A ship on its way to Masulipatnam is stocked with 1420 hogs and 250 oxen (p. 23).

What is known about the life of Edward, Hannah’s father, is that he headed for the outer rings of settlements stopping over first in Billerica, then in Chelmsford, then in Lancaster. He was offered a modest book keeping job by John White’s son-in-law, the Reverned Joseph Rowlandson, Lancaster’s first minister – then in Worcester, and finally either running out of energy of finding
in Brookfield the dreamscape for starting over. Beigh is proud of her discovery and boasts:

I was perhaps the only scholar in the world who had traced the work of an obscure clerk from London to Massachusetts. I could sense all the movements in his life, his determination to remake his life before it was too late, to go west to the colony instead of east, where surely his East India clerkship could have led him. I felt the same psychic bond with Edward Easton that Keats did with the revelers on the Grecian Urn (p. 25).

On September 29, 1671 Hannah turned a year old and first toddled far enough away by herself to be brought back by a Solicitous Nipmuc. On that very day Edward Easton died of a bee sting while savouring the poetic paradox in an imported, treasured copy of *Paradise Lost* and the physical paradox of constipation’s painful pleasures in his outdoor privy. Hanna lost her mother Rebecca a twenty-two-year-old widow when the Nipmuc laid siege to Brookfield in the month of August in 1675. Rebecca loved to sing. The little daughter had a disturbing memory of her mother which haunted her wherever she went. Her mother had deserted her in a Brookfield forest to run away with her American-Indian lover. Hannah knew that “It is necessary not only to retain the memory of her beloved, absent mother, but to deny its final blinding, lustful image. To preserve above all the orphan’s tragic tale above the wicked woman’s
demonic possession” (p. 30). Hannah, a Puritan child was overburdened. “She had witnessed the Fall, not Adam’s Fall, Rebecca’s Fall. Her mother’s Fall infinitely more sinful than the Fall of a man” (p. 30). But one thing is without question that “Hannah Easton, whatever the name she carried in Massachusetts, in England, in India or even into history to this very day, loved her mother more profoundly than any daughter has ever loved a mother”(p.30)

Undoubtedly, part of Beigh’s skills in representing Hanna’s life comes from her training at Yale, where she took a seminar in Puritan history that required her to acquire the archival skills necessary “to deconstruct the barriers of time and geography” (p. 11). Nevertheless, it is Beigh’s increasing identification with Hannah and her “hunger for connectedness” that propel her on in her quest to unravel the details of Salem Bibi’s life. Not only does Beigh try to see what Hannah saw, to think and feel what she thought and felt, she also begins to project her own life into the seventeenth-century woman’s life. Always, Beigh makes us aware of the points of contact between her and her distant ancestor.

Here we see Beigh Masters, a modern American researcher claiming her affinity with Easton family, comparing the circumstances of her own life with that of Rebecca and Hannah Easton:
Like Rebecca, I have a lover. One who would seem alien to my family. A lover scornful of our habits of self clinging to an imagined continuity. Venn was born in India and came over as a baby. His family are all successful;...He grew up in a world so secure I can not imagine it, where for us security is another kind of trap, something to be discarded as dramatically as Rebecca stepped out of dog-blooded widow’s weeds into a life of sin and servitude (p.31).

Beigh tells us, for example, that she has come to a meaningful affair, as Hannah did with the raja, circuitously, for she went through “ten years of bobbing in the tangle and clutter of semiserious relationships” (p. 34) before she met Venn. Indeed, Beigh lets us know that her quest for Hannah is also a “kind of love song” to Venn; in piecing together the fragments that she has found of Hannah’s relationship with an Indian ruler, Beigh makes us aware that she is trying to consolidate her own relationship with Venn by going to his roots to bring out “the part of him” that she “can’t reach” and by exposing to him “the parts of me he’s afraid to ask about” (p. 60).

In making sense of Hannah’s life, Beigh is striving to make sense of her own life. Beigh is striving to make sense of her own life. Beigh’s work on Hannah teachers her among other thing, to go beyond her “cynical self,” her “well trained feminist self,” and to be aware of “multiple contingencies” in life. Even as a modern woman, Beigh can learn to value what she thinks impelled Hannah to accompany Gabriel to India: “Her curiosity, the awakening of her
mind and her own sense of self and purpose” (p. 89). Re-constituting Hannah’s life with Venn’s help will, ultimately, be far more than another job done; as she sees it, it will help her and Venn to “predict what will happen to us within our lifetime” (p. 91).

In the course of her search for the hidden life of Salem Bibi, then, Beigh Masters learns to treasure her relationship with Venn Iyer even more than she had at its beginning. Moreover, she herself is in a sense reconstituted by the search for Hannah and the Emperor’s Tear. Clearly, the most valuable lesson she learns from her quest is the subtle relatedness of all people. And just as Hannah teaches Beigh to savor her cross-cultural connection even more, Venn guides her into a belief in design and a knowledge of “a cosmic energy that quickens and governs the universe” and touches all lives (p.219), something that is and a knowledge of “a cosmic energy that quickens and governs the universe” and touches all lives (219), something that is central to Hindu religious philosophy. It is appropriate, therefore, that it is Venn who is able to take her on his “virtual reality” machine to the climax of her quest: an encounter with Hannah that will also reveal to her what really happened to the emperor intending to give it to her trusted maid-confidante Bhagmati so that she could bury it with her after she had committed suicide to escape a life of capacity with the Mughals. When, however, the virtual-reality machine makes Beigh appear in Hannah’s view, Hannah confuse the time-traveler with a
composite personality based on the two people she had trusted most in her life: Bhagmati and her New England friend, Hester Manning. In a sense, therefore, the secret of the Emperor’s Tear will never be disinterred - it could be in Bhagmati’s grave- but, in another sense, it doesn’t matter. Hannah has in intention if not in effect handed over the diamond to someone who will preserve it in somewhat differently, the Emperor’s Tear will sparkle forever in Beigh’s imagination as a memento of Hannah’s life.

The Holder of the World is thus to be interpreted as a quest narrative written to point to American readers of this age how lives have been intertwined and can be intertwined across space and time if we are willing to let go the superficial divides that separate us and if we are willing to make an emotional investment in connecting with each other. The theme of the subtle relatedness of lives is, of course, a development of the theme of immigration that Mukherjee celebrated in the third phase of her career in that she is going beyond the recent wave of immigration from Asia to America to exult in the movement across oceans and frontiers over the centuries. As K. Anthony Appiah has observed in his enthusiastic New York Times Book Review of the novel, The Holder of the World:

reminds us of the interconnections among cultures that have made our modern world” and additionally advocates a “vigorous” and (if need be) “better fusion” of peoples.⁹

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Another major theme of The Holder of the World is that of sexual awakening through an “other” lover. This theme, too, develops ideas Mukherjee has previously used in her fiction. We remember, for example, her narratives of wives leading unfulfilled lives, on the verge but not quite able to find fulfillment through an affair with a man from another race—works such as Wife, “The Lady from Lucknow,” or “A Wife’s story.” We also remember her tales of women who have finally broken through a moribund marriage to bliss or the promise of fulfilled life through a relationship with an alien—tales such as “Orbiting” and the novel Jasmine. Although Beigh has experienced the ash of sterile relationships and is relishing happiness with Venn, the theme of sexual awakening through an “other” is conveyed chiefly through Hannah Easton’s life—that is, the main thematic focus of The Holder of the World is in the romance of Hannah’s relationship with an Indian raja.

Even the first view given in the novel of Hannah Easton through Beigh’s scrutiny of the Salem Bibi miniatures in the Massachusetts museum hints at a woman whose movement seemed focused on contact with an “other.” What Beigh sees in the Mughal painting is a woman whose “hips are thrust forward, muscles readied to wade into deeper, indigo water. But her arms are clasped high above her head, her chest is taut with audacious yearnings” (p.16). The first memories of Hannah that Beigh can evoke is also of
her identification with Rebecca’s flight with her Nipmuc Indian lover; it is an image of fulfillment she will seek to experience in her own life for a long time.

Growing up among the ascetic Fitches in the strict Puritan community of Brookfield, Hannah has no occasion for expressing her sexuality. Only the embroidery work she takes up as an occupation gives vent to her feelings about her mother in articulate the stirrings with in her: “Her embroidery gave away the conflicts she had tried so hard to deny or suppress” (p.42). Still Hannah seeks inspiration for the future wherever she can find it. When Thomas Fitch tries to make her learn a verse from The Bay Psalm Book, what she remembers the corresponding verse from Psalms 2:8 that Rebecca used to sing to her: “Desire of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance; and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession.” Instead of being sobered by the biblical passage, Hannah promptly “emblazoned” the verse in “colors so tropical” that it becomes obvious to anyone who sees that embroidery that it had become “the embodiment of desire” (p.42).

Like Hawthorne’s Herter Prynne in finding an outlet for her emotions in her needlework, she is also like Hester in acquiring the skills of a nurse and becoming something of a ministering angel despite the suspicions of her fellow citizens. The Haster Prynne- like ambiguity that Hannah’s life is becoming is also shown when she blurts out her sacred letter in a delirium. “I is for
Independence” (p.55), she cries out, even though her best friend, Hester Manning, thinks that her sick friend has in mind her mother’s Indian lover.

Hannah’s opportunity to leave the secure but stifling world of the Puritans comes when Gabriel Legge wanders into it. Hannah marries Gabriel Legge, the same man who had been courting her intimate friend Hester Manning who was found one day dead, fully recognizing the fact that he is untrustworthy. May be she is unconsciously imitating her mother’s behaviour – running off with a treacherous yet exotic alien. “He claimed to be the son of the owner of the Swallow, three hundred and twenty tons. He had come from London, but hailed from Ireland, to scout the colonies for investment, for new forms of imports and exports to the New World to mark its growing stature, its great wealth and taste for finer things” (p. 62). The tall and dashing Gabriel Legge has an eye patch. But there is no doubt that he has an extraordinary capacity for making stories: “Tortured? Punished? Heroic? No one knew for sure. He had a thousand stories of imprisonment by Turks; banishment to forests; brigands, highway men, pirates” (p. 63).

Hannah’s acceptance of Gabriel Legge, a man of dubious character raises a lot of questions in the mind of the narrator and at last she comes to the conclusion that unconsciously she imitates her mother by this act:

Why would a self-possessed, intelligent, desirable woman like Hannah Easton suddenly marry a man she recognized as inappropriate and
untrustworthy? Why would she accept Hester Manning’s castoff, or betrayer? Guilt, perhaps, a need to punish herself for the secret she was forced to carry to carry? Unconscious imitation of her mother, a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien? Gabriel Legge with his tales of exotic adventure was as close to the Nipmuc lover as any man in Salem. She sought to neutralize her shame by emulating her mother’s behaviour (p. 69).

Later on the narrator takes recourse to philosophy and rationalizes her act:

We do things when it is our time to do them. They do not occur to us until it is time; they cannot be resisted, once their time has come. It’s question of time, not motive (p. 70).

Marriage to Gabriel, however, fails to fulfill her desires: the romance of the East he conveyed through stories proves to be as distant from her life as a housebound wife in England as it was in Salem. However, Hannah is inquisitive and tries to drink every draught of the life’s cup. When Gabriael goes to his mysterious missions she finds a good engagement in the duty of a nurse. She can now use the same needle efficiently to the skull of men, which she once used on clothes. Gabriel Legge proposes her to accompany him to India where he works as a junior factor in East India Company. Such is the curiosity of Hannah that she instantly accepts the offer and sets for India leaving aside her fortune and reputation in Stempney, England. While in England Hannah’s perceptive eyes are quite alert to notice the attitude of American colonies
towards the English Crown. She notices mutually contradictory feelings in two
groups of people. On the one hand there are colonists who are “not grateful or
respectful enough to the Crown and the Mother Country; the colonists were
ignorance personified and insufficiently ashamed of their backwardness” (p.
72). For them ‘England was refined and cultured’ and colonies were ‘soiled and
sinful’ (p. 72). On the other hand, there are colonists who are ‘proud of their
backwardness.. They revealed in using and broadening their own American
accent, which had already ironed out the multifarious wrinkles of British
regionalism” (p. 73).

Hannah’s arrival in India in 1965 is set against a period of tumultuous
political and economic activity. Here she, as well as, we the readers confront
the surly realities of British industrialists in India. “They had not come to India
in order to breed and colonize, or even to convert. They were here to plunder, to
enrich themselves” (p. 99). But Hanna’s primary concern in this new world
appears to be ‘to peel the superficiality and social grace and dwell beneath it in
a quest for a meaningful life. In fact, as soon as she steps on the shores of the
Coromandel Coast, she feels an instinctive sense of belonging and decides that
she did not “aspire to return to England upon the completion of Garbriel’s tour”
(p. 104). Hannah knew ‘she’d been transported to the other side of the world,
but the transportation was more than mere ‘convincing’, as it was for Gabriel
and the others. Many years later she called the trip, and her long residence in
India, her “translation” (p. 104). Hannah is alive to the life around her. She is not afraid of the ‘exotica’ instead she is thrilled. It is this curiosity and enthusiasm towards life, which makes her a contemporary of the narrator who cannot withhold her sense of admiration:

Of all the qualities I admire in Hannah Easton that make her entirely our contemporary in mood and sensibility, none is more touching to me than the sheer pleasure she took in the world’s variety (p. 104).

She knows that she has come half-way round the globe and the life in the Indian sub-continent is entirely different. She cannot use her own western parameters for measuring this world. Her reaction are that of a tourist:

She was, in some original sense of the word (as a linguist is to language), a tourist. 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 or of Christianity (p. 104).

But at the same time Hannah keeps looking for opportunities to transform herself in contact with Indians; here, as before in her life, the paradigm she will live by is the vision of her mother transforming herself by mingling with the Nipmucs:

She did not fear the unknown or the unexplored. Her character was shaped on romps with Rebecca in the woods around Brookfield. And she
needed time to sort out her errands – oh, so many errands! – in this vast new jungle (pp. 104-105).

During their voyage her husband endlessly talked about the life and society in India. He had tried to explain her that every one on Coromandel, belonged to a caste, if he was Hindu, a right-hand or left-hand caste, and everyone was either Shia or Sunni if he was Muslim. They all spoke different languages, they owed fidelity to different masters, they worshipped different gods, and their ancestors had come from different countries. It was all nightmarish for her. The immense variety was thrilling and exciting but it had been inconceivable to a Pruitan soul like Hannah’s. Her world was not so varied, not so diverse. So she wondered that here are “not just pagans and Muhammadans, but different gods and different ways of worshipping the same God” (p. 100).

Right from the moment Hannah sets her feet on Indian soil she is aware of the fact that she belongs to the land and people of this country are her brethren, and that she has got nothing to do with the race of those Britishers who have come here to plunder, to lead life of comfort, lechery and convenience. Her encounter with English women, the wives of other factors, furthers her impatience with their pretensions to nobility and their self-conscious superiority among the local community. These were women who led
ordinary lives in England but claimed command and respect here, always eager to display it in all its vulgarity. Martha Ruxton and Sarah Higginbotham are both examples of English snobbery and disdain characteristic of the women in the colonies. Their life reason and etiquette is sharply opposed to the dubiously adventurous and morally ambivalent lives of their husbands whose ‘bibis’ become the primary topic of conversation among these women:

Any servant with a new sari, any cheekiness detected, anything missing, meant a good serving girl had passed over to bibihood. Bibis were simultaneously beneath notice, no more than cute little pets like monkeys or birds, and devious temptresses, priestesses of some ancient, irresistible and overpowering sensuality. (p. 131).

Hannah senses this obsession with bibis early during her stay in Fort St. Sebastian: “It seemed to Hannah that bibis, suspected and real, were at the center of female conversat8ion in white town” (p. 131). The bibis are characterized by their sheer fleetingness and inability to tie down the English man for a lasting commitment. From the women’s point of view, the bibi was an object to be at once ignored and overlooked but also to be suspiciously avoided. The bibi, Hannah is told, has to be admitted as a natural consequence of married life for “accommodation was synonymous with expatriate femininity” (p.134). Hannah’s bemused reception of this ordained truth testifies to her open-mindedness and capacity to view a situation from a perspective
other than that of conventional society. She treated her situation as much redeemed:

Hannah felt herself exempt from the bibi jealousies of a Sarah or Martha ... She had not led the desperate sort of life, like Sarah, that substituted gratitude for tolerance. She was a faithful wife who had attracted her share of suitable beaux and suitors, and who resisted courtings and temptations even when expectations and opportunities presented themselves (pp., 43-44).

While fusing history with fiction, Mukherjee never shirks from reflecting post-colonial anxiety. The lucretious life style, cruelty, lechery, the Britishers’ feeling of disdain towards the natives are contradicted with the deplorable plight of the Indian masses. “The fort in which the Britishers lived was Little England. The Fort St. George Council’s penal code encouraged straight and narrow living. Uncleanness, lying, cheating, drunkenness, swearing, missing morning or evening prayers, using seditious words, mutinying, dueling, all were punishable with whippings, mountings of the “wooden horse,” confinement and fines. When caught. When admitted (pp. 127-28). The factors believe that their life in India is extraordinary and they are like in view of their ‘White superiority.’ “Self-pity, unaccountability and hypocrisy were recast as virtues and renamed forgiveness, solidarity and tolerance” (p. 128). The novel also focuses our attention on the mysterious deaths of these factors who were more
or less victims of intrigue planned by their own counterparts. The Chief Factor Cephus Prynne’s body was recovered in deplorable condition. However, Hannah “looked on Cephus Prynne’s murder as emancipation... the workings of an alien providence” (p. 163).

Hannah has an altogether different experience with the first manifestation of a bibi that she comes across in the form of Bhagmati. Pulling herself down from the terrace of Hannah’s house, she is dressed in sheer muslin white, which mesmerizes Hannah’s consciousness. It is an image that persists in her mind as suggestive of the sensuality, magical attraction and passionate representation of this land. In fact, as Gabriel Legge sets out with the Marquis on a mission of piracy, Hannah feels no remorse or longing for her old world, for she has yet to come to terms with this passion, with the sensuality and life of emotion which Bhagmati represented in that fleeting moment on the terrace:

She was not ready to entomb herself in Morpeth or London. She didn’t feel bereft – of roots, of traditions – as Martha and Sarah professed to feel. Instead she felt unfinished, unformed (p. 163).

Now “Hannah felt herself no more at home in England than she did in the Coromandel. She was deficient in that genetic impulse toward teary-eyed patriotism” (p. 164).

With Gabriel Legge turning to piracy and becoming ‘the Robinhood of the Coromandel Coast’ (p. 167) she is not left with much option. She will be
frustrated in her quest for self-fulfillment also by her husband, for Gabriel neglects her, driven as he is by his own obsessions and by wanderlust. Left to herself almost all the time, she spends her “days in a dream of sensuality”(p.132). She is at this juncture of her life a woman waiting to be awoken. She takes every opportunity that comes her way to walk the back lanes of “Black Town” vulnerable to the scandal-mongers of “White Town.”

The one occasion that Beigh Masters is able to record when Hannah manages to snatch a moment of sexual bliss with her husband comes about when the chief factor of the company enrages Gabriel by casting aspersions on Hannah’s encounters with an Indian merchant. Enraged, Gabriel arranges for the murder of the chief factor. Delighted by her husband’s gallantry, Hannah decides to reward him by making love to him one night on a beach. This much Beigh thinks she can deduce from the fragment of a verse written by an Indian fisher boy who witnessed the couple’s embrace and went on to dramatize it in a play produced on the Restoration stage.

But this moment of bliss that Hannah has with Gabriel is unusual for them, and Gabriel actually deserts Hannah immediately afterwards to turn pirate. Gabriel departure does not devastate her; she has become used to these sudden partings from the husband. In addition, she now looks forward to being on her own, for “the Coromandel had started something as immense as a cyclone deep inside her body and mind.” In a way, “to let Gabriel go was also
to let herself expend”(p.163). And when he leaves this time she begins to talk more freely to Bhagmati and learns in the process further increase her desire to immerse herself in the life of the subcontinent.

Eventually Gabriel returns, rich from his privateering expeditions and ready to set up a trading enclave in the Coromandel coast, which would rival the one owned by the East India Company. Although Hannah does not know it yet, he now has his own Indian mistress. It is only when a conjunction of events reveals his infidelity to her as well as shatters the fragile peace between the Mughals and the company, and when she is sure that Gabriel has drowned in a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal (Beigh’s research tells her he survived it and ended life as a Muslim fakir or holy man in Calcutta), that she is forced to leave the company’s enclave.

Circumstances of her life start changing at frantic place in the year 1700. First she lives Gabriel on grounds of faithlessness and next sees his ship sinking. She herself should have been drowned when a bridge collapsed but she is saved by Jadav Singh, the Raja of Devgad only to become his bibi afterwards. Is it not ironical that the same Hannah who leaves her husband for keeping a ‘bibi’ in the and becomes a ‘bibi’ herself carrying an illegitimate child? However, this incident is imperative for the total transformation of her personality, because her yearning for a kind of passionate salvation as a way of recreating her mother’s choice in the forest is largely fulfilled in her encounter
with Raja Jadav Singh. “Her courtship with the Raja indicates a relationship based entirely on Indian, ‘Eastern’ values and morality with little reference to the life left behind.”

Hannah Easton has, in effect, entered the world of romance, and true to the logic of romance, she now is going to have the grand affair of her life with the Raja. No doubt Rebecca Easton’s plunge into the arms of her Nipmuc Indian lover had made her similarly heady and disdainful of restraint and reason, for Hannah now abandons herself to the Indian king. It is love at first sight for her and sex is the first close encounter; explained only by “the brief cryptic reference” that Beigh Masters has come across in Hannah’s Memoirs: “An Angel counseled me; a fantasy governed me; bliss descends on the derangers of reason and intellect”(p.228).

He offers Hannah a life of limitless possibilities and sensuous pleasures undreamed of in the English world. It is this experience of being overwhelmed in love, of being possessed to the point of distraction that Hannah embraces with the totality of her being and little moral speculation. “In Massachusets Bay, life had being so hard, the summer so short, that the freaks of nature were given less opportunity to emerge and no comfort to thrive”(p.173). But India opens new avenues of life for her. She is now ready to embrace like her mother ‘Ravana’, her alien lover. She identifies herself completely with her Indian lover. She has seen ‘Firangis’ plundering the Indians but what mesmerizes her
is not the profit-hungry motives of ‘firangis’ but “the sturdiness of a religious faith that allowed hundreds of thousands of devotees to worship a god-head that chose to reveal itself as a scarlet-faced, yellow-furred, long-tailed monkey” (p.170). She is very afraid before coming into actual contact with Raja Jadav Singh. She cannot hide her scepticism towards the Eastern faith:

The idea of Hinduism was vaguely frightening and even more vaguely alluring to Hannah. English attitudes saw Islam as a shallow kind of sophistication; Hinduism a profound form of primitivism... (p.290).

She had “a Christian’s skepticism about other faiths, bolstered by a Muslimized intolerance for idolatry” (p.220). On entering the new world, the world of Hindus she discovers in herself an urge ‘to be able to name and memories the new’ (p.225). She wants to embrace this world only to sacrifice herself at the attar of true love:

She wanted the Raja and nothing else, she would sacrifice anything for his touch and the love they made. What she felt for the Raja was of a different order from what she had felt for Gabriel,... . The Raja was an agent of Providence. He had saved her life, then saved her from the chilly, unfulfilled life of a governess (pp.229-30).

For a few weeks Hannah and the raja made love every light and experience the high tide of love. This alters the sensibility of Hannah. The Eastern love makes her more emotional. While her whole life has been
transformed by him, and she can think of nothing else except their love, the raja comes to her for part of the night and takes her only as his white Bibi. Nevertheless, Hannah is content to be only a mistress, for she has finally “felt her own passionate nature for the first time” and has discovered “that a world beyond duty and patience and wifely service was possible, then desirable, then irresistible” (p. 237). What she had to repress in Puritan Salem, what marriage to Gabriel failed to bring out in her except possibly once, she experience in the raja’s palace, and in the process she comes “to understand the aggressive satiety of total fulfillment” (p. 237).

Ultimately Hannah discovers that “the survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules” (p. 234). This comes as an indirect message of the author herself. She stresses now and again in almost all her fictional writings that only those people can survive in an alien world who are elastic and who can shape themselves according to the availability of space by improving upon their native rules.

But the raja is in the middle of a war with the emperor, and Aurangzeb has sent a vast army and his best general to destroy the Hindu king who had become a major irritant for a man bent on building a Muslim empire in the whole of India, and passion can make Jadav Singh only much more vulnerable to a Mughal attack. Inevitably, his forces are defeated, and he himself seriously wounded. Like heroines of romances who dare all to save their knights, Hannah
braves it to the battlefield to rescue the fallen raja, only to be captured by the Mughal general. She manages, however, to kill the general, rescue the unconscious raja, and bring him back to his palace. Hannah’s surgical skill revives the raja, but even in the world of romance ancestral hated proves more potent than the ministrations of love. The raja rejects her proposal to run away from the feud with the emperor. Even her disclosure that she is carrying his child will not deter him from his resolution to do battle with the emperor and avenge the wrong done to his father by the Mughal king. Finding him implacable, Hannah crosses the battle line in a desperate bid to persuade Aurangzeb to agree to peace. Aurangzeb is impressed by Hannah’s determination, but he, too, will not be moved from his plans to annex the raja’s kingdom to his empire. Her plea before the Emperor to stop the war against her lover is a superb piece of oratory:

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, not Hindu people or Muslim people, not Sunni or Shia, priests or untouchables, 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 had committed atrocities on the children, the women, the old people? Who has poisoned the hearts of men? (p. 268)

And so the final confrontation between the two armies takes place and the raja is killed in battle. The emperor lets Hannah go back to the
English zone. She heads back for Salem, giving birth to Pearl on a ship somewhere in the Atlantic. Once in Salem she locates Rebecca Easton. With her mother and her daughter, she manages to eke out an existence in the margins of the Puritan community. Not daunted by the taunts of the people of the colony, she is content to keep alive in her memory her great romance and to nurse its fruit, Pearl. In fact, she seems to even revel in the independence she has achieved in the process of waking up to true love. It is this sense of self-worth that will enable her and her daughter to lead the chant for the freedom of the colonies from the fellow citizens for her nursing skills, “the wealth of her story-telling, the pungency of her opinions” (p.285).

Thus, *The Holder of the World* portrays an entirely different picture of jostling of culture – the Eastern and the Western and the result thereof. Hannah Easton’s voyage is mental and ‘interior’ rather than physical. It seems that the movement of the narrative is circular since the story ends in the same vein as it opens but the person (Hannah) does not remain the same. Her whole personality goes under a sea-change during her restless moves from Salem to Stepney, Coromandel to Devgad and then back to Salem:

In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coat to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja; a murderer (she murders Morad Farah, one of the Great Generals of Aurangzeb), a window, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most
powerful man in India … She wan’t Hannah anymore; she was Mukta, Bhagmati’s word for ‘pearl’ (p. 271).

Beigh Masters, the narrator, passes the final judgment about Hannah’s character and personality when she acknowledges:

Wherever she stayed … she would have changed history for she was one of those extraordinary lives through which history runs a four-lane highway (p. 189).

By inscribing Hawthorne into The Holder of the World, by having Beigh masters link explicitly the “morbid introspection into guild and depression that many call our greatest work” with Hannah’s life (World, 286), and by taking every opportunity of associating her novel with The Scarlet Letter, Bharati Mukherjee is making two points: she is asking her readers to place The Holder of the World in the tradition of American romance inaugurated by Hawthorne and is emphasizing the historical dimension of her novel.

Hannah’s journey to India is fraught with images of adventure, action and passion. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society. Like Jasmine, Hannah finds final contentment and joy in the adapted land and it is the morality of this land that Hannah carries along with her. Bharati Mukherjee describes The Holder of the World, as a “post-modem historical novel” but at its most basic level, it is a novel of
expatriation, of quest not only to geographically diverse lands but to culturally variant societies as well. Hannah’s life succeeds in requisitioning and discovering new ways of defining reality in a world, which was essentially orthodox. Hema Nair is assertive in her comment:

Hannah is stunning creation, a bold mind striving for identity in strange surroundings, a timeless creature trying to survive in a rigid, inexorably defined society.¹²

*The Holder of the World* is written to show that what makes a historical novel come alive is the writer’s imagination. By using an extract from Keat’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as the epigraph for each of the four parts of the novel, Mukherjee is, in fact, emphasizing the role the creative imagination plays in transforming what would otherwise be seen as silence or slow time into events and characters full of life.

Indeed, Mukherjee implicitly makes the point in her novel that the creative imagination can evoke the past much more effectively than a mechanical system of retrieval, such as the one Venn uses, where data is piled on data. That is why Beigh Masters is disappointed by the trip she takes on Venn’s machine to experience the “virtual reality” of a Kansas day on 29 October 1989. Venn’s time machine can take her to a moment on that date, but it cannot make that moment come alive for her. Whereas when Beigh uses the same machine to find out what happened to the emperor’s Tear, she gets a much
better result because of her imaginative investment in and identification with Hannah Easton. Thus, while at the end of her trip to Kansas city on 29 October 1989 Beigh cannot see the point of Venn’s project-what can be the point of going through all the trouble to “intercept a lady in her yellow jacket demonstrating faucets in a Kansas City bathroom?” (p. 279)-at the climax of her voyage to Hannah’s Indian world on that same machine, Beigh can connect with Hannah and even speak to her in an Indian language. Significantly, Beigh has in the process what Venn observes is “a near-death experience” and has the feeling in her gut that she incubated in it “an enormous diamond” (p. 283).

Again and again in The Holder of the World, we see Beigh Masters going beyond the facts in her possession after her research is done to aphoristic: “Before you build another city on the hill, first fill in the potholes at your feet” (p. 91). On other occasions Beigh Masters peaks in the tone of a Yale graduate sharing her research with an academic audience: “For three hundred years, young Solomon [Pynchon] has twisted in agony, a symbol of importance and futility. (p. 57)

Thus The Holder of the World is an impressive work. It shows Mukherjee reaffirming her Indianness while asserting her Americanization. She appears to have found through this novel a way to reconcile the Indian part of her heritage with the part that wants to celebrate immigration to America. In fact, The Holder of the World shows a “hunger for connectedness” Mukherjee has not
displayed in her previous fiction. E.M. Forster, one of the subjects of Mukuherjee doctoral dissertation and the dominant influence on her first novel. *The Tiger’s Daughter*, had urged almost wistfully in his fiction, “Only connect,” and in this novel Mukherjee tries to meet this goal. Forster’s *A Passage to India* was a major influence on Ruth Prawer Jhabval’s *Heat and Dust*, a novel that is like *The Holder of the World* in consisting of two parallel stories about cross-cultural connections skillfully put together, and it is interesting to speculate if Mukherjee is extending Forster’s tradition, too, through her forth novel as she is adding on to an American one begun by Hawthorne.
REFERENCES


