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## Bharati Mukerjee's Diasporic analysis of "The Holder of the World"

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Bharati Mukherjee (1940–2017) was a highly acclaimed Indian-born American author, widely recognized as a major voice in postcolonial, diasporic, and American immigrant literature. She was a prolific writer of novels, short story collections, and non-fiction, often exploring the experiences of migration, cultural identity, and the transformation of the self in a new world. The story operates on two parallel timelines, linked by the central mystery of a legendary diamond and a remarkable woman who traveled across continents. Main characters in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Holder of the World* are divided between two different time periods, with their stories intertwining to form the narrative:

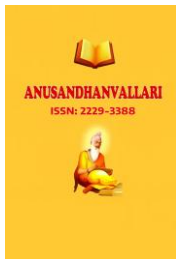
**Keywords:** Quest narrative, exploring identity, migration, and blurring of cultural boundaries.

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### Introduction:

*The Holder of The World* is a novel that centers on themes of immigration and transformation—the complex collision of different worlds. In an interview with the journal *Jouvert*, Mukherjee states that she considers herself not a postcolonial, expatriate, or exilic writer—but an immigrant writer. She is preoccupied with the celebration of the "...swagger of immigration, the energies released in the process of transformation." As seen in *The Holder of The World*, she employs a "Mughal-inspired narrative aesthetic," drawing from a traditional style of painting wherein landscapes are crowded with multiple, concurrent scenes—rich and layered with "narrative, sub-narratives, sometimes meta-narratives.

Much like how the vanishing point is foreshortened in Mughal paintings, Mukherjee collapses boundaries such as linearity and compartmentalized biographies. She plots a zigzagging narrative route, compressing different places and periods on the same plane. Her view of history as interpenetrating threads is one she attributes to her Hindu roots, which instilled in her "the existence of many universes." Venn, Beigh's partner, echoes this sentiment in the novel, asserting that history is "as tightly woven as a Kashmiri shawl."

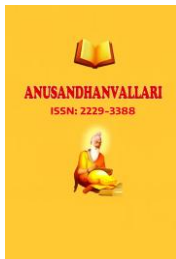


*The Holder of The World* quotes Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" in four different places, marking the beginning of each part of the novel. The Grecian urn that the poem refers to is similar to Mughal paintings in that it depicts a myriad of scenes and landscapes. Its inclusion draws attention to one of the novel's main points—one needs imagination to make sense of history. However, while the poem centers on a series of images immortalized and frozen in time, *The Holder of The World* configures history as dynamic—as active experiences in which one may participate. "I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I don't mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future."

- **Beigh Masters:** The central protagonist of the modern timeline present day. She is a data analyst and "asset hunter" who specializes in finding lost historical objects. Beigh is an American woman of Indian origin, and her quest to find the fabled "Holder of the World" diamond leads her to uncover the life of Hannah Easton.
- **Vernon Schatz (Vernon Chowdhury):** Beigh's partner and a neurologist who uses advanced computer modeling to reconstruct historical events and locations. He helps Beigh with her research, particularly in "mapping" the past events in India. He is also of Indian descent.
- **Hannah Easton 17<sup>th</sup> century historical character (The "Salem Bibi"):** The novel's central historical figure. She is a spirited, independent young Puritan woman from Salem, Massachusetts, who marries an English trader and moves to India. She eventually becomes a prominent figure in the Mughal court, known as the "Salem Bibi" (Lady of Salem), and the mistress of a powerful ruler. Her transformation from a rigid Puritan to a figure of power in a foreign culture is a key arc of the novel.
- **Emperor Aurangzeb:** The historical Mughal emperor during the time Hannah is in India. He serves as a distant, powerful, and often ruthless figure whose political actions dictate much of the turmoil that affects the characters' lives.
- **Jocelyn:** An important character in Hannah's life in India, who represents the complexities of English colonial life and relationships with the local populace. These characters are intricately linked, as Beigh's exploration of Hannah's past fundamentally shapes her understanding of her own heritage and identity.

The novel follows Beigh Masters, an American asset-hunter and a woman of Indian origin living in Boston. Her job is to locate and retrieve lost or stolen valuables. Beigh embarks on a quest to find the "Holder of the World," a priceless diamond that disappeared from the Mughal treasury in the 17th century.

During her research, she uncovers the life story of an extraordinary woman named Hannah Easton, a distant ancestor whose life is intertwined with the diamond's history. Beigh becomes obsessed with uncovering the truth about Hannah and her connection to both Colonial America and Mughal India. The narrative shifts to the 1680s, focusing on **Hannah Easton**, a young, adventurous Puritan woman from Salem, Massachusetts. In defiance of the expectation her conservative community, Hannah marries an English trader and travels with him to India. In India, she encounters a vibrant and complex world of Mughal opulence, political intrigue, and cultural difference. After a series of dramatic events and personal upheavals, Hannah transcends her Puritan origins. She becomes the mistress of a powerful regional ruler who briefly rebels against the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. She is known in history as the "Salem Bibi" (Lady of Salem). **The theme and Resolution:** The climax of the novel occurs in both timelines: **In the Past:** Hannah's story reaches its tragic end amid political turmoil and war as the Mughal Empire begins to fracture. Her courageous actions and eventual death are revealed, explaining the diamond's disappearance. **In the Present:** Beigh successfully tracks the diamond's location and unravels the complete history of Hannah's life. This journey gives Beigh a deeper understanding of her own hybrid identity and heritage, contrasting the rigid boundaries of 17th-century life with the multicultural reality of modern America.



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## Conclusion

**Cultural Hybridity:** The novel challenges fixed notions of identity, showing how characters like Hannah and Beigh navigate and merge multiple cultures. **Challenging History:** Mukherjee deconstructs official historical records by focusing on the untold stories of women and immigrants. **Transformation:** The characters are constantly transforming their identities to adapt and survive in new environments.

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