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A TALE OF GROWTH: READING BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD AS BILDUNGSROMAN

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional novel which can be read on many levels. It is a fascinating account of greed and ambition, lust and power, battles and betrayals, travel and history, interesting ideas and difficult concepts woven around the

life of an unusual 17th century American woman, Hannah Easton and her travels through England and then Moghul India, and the way it affects her personality. An attempt has been made here to examine if it is a kind of bildungsroman, a distinct kind of novel in its own way. To this end the term 'bildungsroman' has been elucidated and the novel has been considered in the light of its understanding. The enquiry reveals that the novel can be described as a bildungsroman as it shows from childhood the youthful development of its protagonist, Hannah Easton, who attains maturity through varied experiences and crisis in her life which ultimately lead her to the realization of her identity and role in the world.

KEYWORDS:

bildungsroman, Hannah Easton,



development, understanding, journey.

INTRODUCTION :

Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940) is one of the prominent writers of the Indian Writings in English. Born and brought up in an affluent Hindu family in Bengal, India, she received her B.A. in English in 1959 from the University of Calcutta and later earned a Master's degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda. She went on to pursue Ph.D. from the University of Iowa, and while at Iowa met Canadian writer Clark Blaise whom she married and settled first in Canada and later

in USA. She is a novelist, short story writer and essayist. Jasmine, Desirable Daughters, Wife, The Holder of the World, (novels) Darkness, The Middleman and Other Stories, (short story collections) are some of her famous works of fiction. The lives of immigrants and refugees mainly from South Asia, victimization of Indian women, rootlessness, and individual verses traditional and communal identities are some of major issues she handles in her works.

The Holder of the World (1993) is a story of seventeenth century white American woman named Hannah Easton told by her distant relative Beigh Masters living in the twentieth century America. According to the novel's back cover, the novel is a story about, "Hannah Easton, a unique woman born in the American colonies in 1670, 'A person undreamed of in Puritan society', inquisitive, vital and awake to her own possibilities, Hannah travels to Mughal India, with her husband, an English trader. There she sets her own course, 'translating' herself into Salem Bibi, the white lover of a Hindu raja." Beigh Masters is a history graduate, a researcher and an "Asset hunter" who while tracking the Emperor's Tear, a precious, rare diamond, gets obsessed with digging up the life of Hannah Easton born in the New England of America in 1670. The story of Hannah thus unfolds before us, bit by bit, from the old East India Company records, Mughal India paintings and some private journals. The novel spreads over three continents and two centuries, and in the words of Masters proves that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. Within this narrative framework Bharati Mukherjee tells a fascinating story of an unusual woman Hannah Easton. Although there are many ways that the novel can be understood, an attempt here is to see if it is a kind of bildungsroman, and if yes, how and in which sense. To this end the term bildungsroman has been elucidated with some of its important aspects and ramifications in the light of which the novel has been examined.

DISCUSSION:

Being a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional work The Holder of the World can be read on many levels. Bharati Mukherjee weaves a tangled web of stories that deals with many lives, many places, many cultures and many ideas. It is an imaginative re-narration of the centuries old encounter between India and England as also an examination of America. It is an exciting and inspiring narrative full of greed and ambition, lust and power, battles and betrayals, travel and history, interesting ideas and difficult concepts woven around the life of an unusual 17th century American woman, Hannah Easton and her travels through Moghul India and the way it affects her personality. It shows Mukherjee's experimentation with certain aspects of scientific fiction, captivity narrative and historical romance. It also shows Mukherjee's focus on the fate of immigrant women and their conflict with and freedom from repressive norms and relationships in order to assert their individuality and identity. In the course of which Mukherjee also touches upon her other pet subjects like making of America, making of new Americans and the important role of Asia that has always been in the making of America. The same focus also allows her to deal with other important issues of contemporary world like multiculturalism, identity crisis, rootlessness, individual and collective identities, lives of immigrants, and the consequences of immigration on individuals and societies.

But most prominently it seems a novel that tells the story of coming of age of its protagonist, Hannah Easton. It is the story of making of a woman who emerges as a mature individual after going through a series of adventures and misadventures, ups and downs, falling and learning from life experiences. In this sense it could be described as a kind of novel which is described as bildungsroman. Etymologically the term 'bildungsroman' is derived from German language which was coined in 1820 by Johann Carl Simon Morgenstern and is more or less synonymous with the German word Erziehungsroman which literally means 'upbringing' or 'education' novel. According to A Dictionary of

Literary Terms and Literary Theory (1998, edited by J. A. Cuddon), "Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine...It describes the process by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life." M. H. Abrams too opines that "The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world". (Abrams, 1999: 193) Wieland's *Agathon* (1765) is cited as the earliest example of bildungsroman while Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) is considered as the most famous and perhaps also the most often imitated one. In English, Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* (1749), Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1849), Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915) are the famous examples. Bildungsroman is a kind of formation novel. It is described as a novel tracing the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social development and growth of the main character, usually from childhood to maturity. The study of Hannah Easton's character in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* shows that the novel is bildungsroman in some sense as it shows the development of Hannah character from childhood to maturity. But the limitation of the argument is that although Hannah is a central character and it is her character which occupies maximum space in the novel and yet it is her character that is seen from a certain distance throughout the novel. The reader is neither fully exposed to the inner working of her mind nor to her motives and intentions. Hers is not a fully revealed character. Admitting this limitation in the portrayal of Hannah's character the status of the novel as bildungsroman has been examined. Having said that let's now glance over the major developments in the novel related to Hannah's character.

The story of Hannah can be briefly stated thus. Hannah is a white Christian American woman of seventeenth century. She has a painful childhood. When she is eight years old her mother Rebecca, taking advantage of the chaotic warlike situation, faked her own death to elope with a Nipmuc, a native American tribal, considered inferior among the race-conscious white community. Hannah alone knows her mother's 'dirty' secret and grows up with a sense of humiliation hating mother. Shortly after this Hannah's father too dies of bee-sting and the poor girl becomes orphan at a very young age. A hard working but puritan couple Mr. and Mrs. Fitch from Salem adopt her and raise her comfortably but in a puritan atmosphere. As Hannah grows up she becomes obsessed with learning and mastering needle work and later nursing, partly to drown the painful memories of her mother's moral fall.

Hannah is a sensuous and delicate woman of twenty when she meets Gabriel Legge, a dishonest but dashing sea farer. Lured by his tall claims of father's wealth in England, Hannah marries him hoping happy, prosperous and stable married life and comes from Salem to Stepney in England. Soon she finds Gabriel's claims of wealth hollow but has no option but to stay with him. Being a sea farer Gabriel remains largely away and Hannah keeps herself busy by working in the garden and writing letters to friends in Salem. News of Gabriel's death at sea almost devastates her and makes her lonely. However he resurfaces miraculously and joins East India Company. From Stepney in England, the couple thus comes to Coromandel Coast in South India.

Hannah finds herself in the alien land, among the alien people and alien culture. She lives comfortably, the comfort that comes with being a wife of an East India Company official but Gabriel is rarely near her as greed and ambition takes control of him. He is busier on the sea and in merry making. Tired of his unfaithfulness and wayward ways Hannah decides to go back to England but her boat gets caught in storm. She would have got drowned but luckily survives owing to the timely help of her Indian maid Bhagmati. Meanwhile, Gabriel joins a group of pirates and pays for it as he gets killed during one of his misadventures.

Widowed Hannah seeks shelter from the Hindu king of Devgad, Raja Jadav Singh. The two form deep friendship and Hannah becomes his willing mistress or biwi. This is against her puritanical upbringing but she also realizes during this crisis that "The survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules." (Mukherjee, 1993: 234) The loving care of Jadav Singh makes her fall deeply in love with him and the two spend some blissful days together. But the bliss does not last long. Morad Farah, a dreaded and ruthless Mughal commander attacks Jadav Singh in order to capture Jadav Singh along with his firangi biwi and the rare diamond called 'The Emperor's Tear'. Fierce battle follows. Jadav Singh gets fatally wounded. Seeing this, furious Hannah takes Jadav Singh's dagger and thrusts it into Morad Farah, much to the chagrin of his master. Hannah thus becomes a murderer for the sake of her lover.

Jadav Singh would have succumbed to the fatal wounds but for Hannah who with her knowledge of herbs, and of needle work and nursing not only stitches Jadav Singh's wounds but eventually saves his life. It is a different matter that Jadav Singh's family members just never accept her but she does not lose heart. Terrible devastation and suffering caused by war leads Hannah to take a bold step and risking her own life she manages to meet the most powerful man of India, 'the holder of the world', the Mughal Emperor Alamgir Aurangzeb to plead for peace. Offended Aurangzeb imprisons her for her misadventure but is also impressed by her extraordinary boldness and passionate, persuasive speech. She pleads before the Emperor:

"I have come late in my life to the feeling of love. Love for a man, love for a place, love for people. They are not Devgad people or Roopconda 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 has committed atrocities on the children, the women, the old people? Who has poisoned the hearts of men?" (Mukherjee, 1993: 268)

Aurangzeb frees her. Hannah has sense of satisfaction of having performed her duty to the best of her ability. Having done her job and pregnant with Jadav Singh's daughter, she decides to call it quits and go back to Salem, the land of her childhood and youth. Back in Salem, she meets her long lost mother about whom she has by now developed more understanding, and spends the rest of her days serving her mother, looking after her mother's five other children and rearing Jadav Singh's daughter.

Thus ends the eventful journey of Hannah. The journey that takes her, from, Salem in New England, America to Stepney in England, Stepney to Coromandel in India, Coromandel to Devgad, and from Devgad back to Salem. It is the journey that covers three continents, three oceans, and alien cultures. It is the journey of her self-discovery in which she is seen in different roles: a self-conscious child full of sense of humiliation, an insecure orphan, an adopted child having secret fears, a sensuous, dreaming young woman brought up in puritan atmosphere, a devoted wife, a widow with uncertain future, a willing concubine, a warrior woman, a passionate beloved who becomes a murderer for the sake of her love, a bold and persuasive orator, a prisoner, and finally Mukta who is no more a puritan woman. Hers is a life of courage, passion and will power. At the outset she is just a young girl who is ashamed of her past and heritage. By the end of her journey she emerges as a mature woman who accepts life as it is and develops a sense of identity. She realizes she is neither British, nor Indian, but a New Englander who has led a unique and extraordinary life. Her journey proves the belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence, we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. She is a kind of female hero who begins her journey from Salem and finally settles in Salem, a journey that helps her understand the meaning of existence. She is born as Hannah Easton, brought up as Hannah Fitch, renamed after marriage as Hannah Legge, becomes a Salem biwi of a Hindu king in an alien land of South India, and finally becomes what Bhagmati calls her, Mukta, a truly free spirit having no bondage and baggage. A journey that is no less extraordinary for a seventeenth century woman brought up in

puritan family, in the course of which she not only buries her puritanical past and discovers her true identity but also emerges as a real fighter of life. The novel while detailing her journey from childhood to adulthood shows her evolve as a person, developing her individual thinking and identity and thus attaining maturity through the bitter-sweet experiences of life. By the end of the novel she seems a rich woman, not materially, but emotionally. She has no anger, bitterness or ill will left for anyone. The new understanding she develops for her mother by the end in which all the dust and cobwebs of the past are washed away leaving her pure, clean, sympathetic and considerate shows a new Hannah who has rediscovered herself. Hers is a journey from immaturity to maturity, ignorance to knowledge, instability to stability, and agitation to sobriety. Hannah's journey also illustrates the power wielded by unconventional, bold women of substance in traditional, puritanical societies and the revenge that such societies exact and the price such women have to pay for not conforming.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion it can be said that the novel *The Holder of the World* is a bildungsroman as it shows the youthful development of its protagonist, Hannah Easton, from childhood to adulthood. The sequence of events in the book and the way it affects the mind and course of life of Hannah shows the process by which Hannah attains maturity. The various ups and downs of her life and her encounter with alien peoples and cultures is a kind of learning process through which Hannah attains this maturity. The novel deals largely with the development of Hannah's mind and character from childhood through varied bitter-sweet experiences and crisis which ultimately lead to her realizing of her identity and role in the world. The new understanding of life she develops by the end of the novel and the kind of attitude of acceptance of life as it is also shows the maturity of her mind and the development of her character. The novel describes the journey of her self-discovery in which she is seen in different roles. Her feeling at the end of this journey that she after all is a New Englander who has led a unique and extraordinary life is itself a new realization that brings her peace of mind and sense of satisfaction, and truly, this is no mean achievement for the woman of her station and background.

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