

American / Indian: Metaphors of the Self in Bharati Mukherjee's "The Holder of the World"

NALINI IYER

I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grandparents had passed through Ellis Island. Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world.

BHARATI MUKHERJEE, *Darkness*

IN RECENT YEARS Bharati Mukherjee's writing has gained significant recognition because she voices immigrant experience, particularly that of the South Asian diaspora in North America. The immigrant experience in Mukherjee's novels is multifaceted and emphasizes the problems with cultural identity that immigrants face. This problem of identity is strongly connected to the geopolitical space that the immigrant occupies and is manifested in the novels not as a simple nostalgia for one's country of origin but as the need for immigrants to construct for themselves a narrative of home. Mukherjee's work emphasizes the need for immigrants to *choose* their home by constantly adapting themselves to the new homeland and by constantly renegotiating their relationship with the old homeland. The immigrant's relationship with the old home and the new home is neither static nor monolithic, and Mukherjee's fiction, novels and short stories, emphasize the heterogeneity of the immigrant experience.

As with other contemporary first generation immigrant writers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Mukherjee's place in a literary canon is ambiguous at best and is appropriated by scholars and anthologists into different canons to serve various political needs.¹ This process of inclusion or exclusion of immigrant writers into various canons needs to be interrogated. Without

trying to suggest a master narrative on the position of all first generation immigrant writers in the United States, this essay examines Mukherjee's narratives where she problematizes her position as a North American writer who belongs to an immigrant community. Mukherjee's recent writings, particularly *Darkness* (1985), *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Holder of the World* (1993), show her increasing preoccupation with her sense of place and location both geographically and ideologically. As geographic space, location becomes a metaphor for self-fashioning for the immigrant characters in her works. As ideological space, location in Mukherjee's narratives is the author's interrogation of such self-fashioning by questioning gender, race, and ethnicity as they render identity as a fluid rather than a fixed entity. In addition, Mukherjee also questions the location of a writer within a specific literary canon and the ideology of such canon formations.

Mukherjee's preoccupation with location and identity is evident in the "Introduction" to *Darkness* in which she names herself an American writer and argues that she is as American as any writer whose parents or grandparents came through Ellis Island. Her assertion that she is a "North American writer"² strikes the audience as odd in that her strident verbalization of the claim seems to indicate its tenuousness.³ In addition, Mukherjee in claiming her "American" identity is rejecting the label "South Asian American" which many immigrants and second generation people from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh embrace as a political claim to solidarity. Some people reject this South Asian identity claiming that it is a mask for Indian domination in the region and it creates a homogenous regional identity where none exists (Islam 242). However, what is significant is not Mukherjee's claims to South Asian identity but her seemingly naive embrace of "American." Further, her ambiguous use of American to mean both the United States (as in *Darkness*) as well as North American (during her book tour in 1993) suggests that as a writer she is trying to find her place within a specific literary canon.

Mukherjee comments on her evolving identity as a writer and discusses an ideological change from expatriate to immigrant in the "Introduction" to *Darkness*. "Expatriate" suggests being in

exile and renouncing a "national" identity whereas "immigrant" indicates moving from one country to another in order to settle and accept a different "national" identity.⁴ The crucial difference in meaning between the two terms is not so much the spatial dislocation as the acceptance of a geographical space as "home." The expatriate and the immigrant are important figures in Mukherjee's writing because she uses them to interrogate spatial location and dislocation. Both the expatriate and the immigrant live on the margins of American society, and as Carmen Wickramagamage has argued, Mukherjee uses this marginalized position to contest "the dominant culture's definition of center and periphery, which automatically relegate[s] America's nonwhite immigrants to a hyphenated existence on the periphery, at best" (172). However, it is not just the dominant culture's image of the hyphenated Other that Mukherjee problematizes; she also interrogates the immigrant's evolving sense of self.

In an essay on colonialism and the postcolonial condition, Satya Mohanty argues that location is more than personal, geographical, or sociological facts; the consequences of location are to be found in the "epistemic role our location plays in our lives" (109). He posits that location is not an objective feature of the world one lives in. Location does not simply constitute various positions of power or powerlessness but "our location is causally significant; it shapes our experiences and our ways of knowing. It can limit the possibilities available to us, since it helps frame our choices by organizing the habitual patterns through which we perceive ourselves and our world" (110). In a reflective essay on being an Indian woman in the United States, Chandra Talpade Mohanty observes that "the very process of constructing a narrative for oneself—of telling a story—imposes a certain linearity and coherence that is never entirely there . . . home, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities and friendships" (*Our Feet Walk the Sky* 357). Such a relationship between narrative and the construction of identity and how the location of the immigrant woman circumscribes her way of knowing as well as the framing of her narrative

is what Mukherjee explores in her writing. Her fiction has sought various narrative frames for the immigrant woman's experiences from a third person realist narrative in *Wife* to Hindu myth in *Jasmine*, and more recently to virtual reality in *The Holder of the World*.

Mukherjee herself remarks that her understanding of the epistemic role of location is recent in her work. In the earlier narratives, she had seen the immigrant as "put upon and pathetic" and the expatriate as "self-aware and ironic" (*Darkness* xiii, xiv). In her two recent novels, *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee examines how experiences constitute one's self and one's frame of reference. Both "Indianness" and "Americanness" are presented as metaphors for comprehending the world.

By identifying herself as both "Indian" and "American," Mukherjee has deliberately positioned herself within the discourse of American literature. In doing this, she challenges the exclusivity of the American canon and interrogates the process of literary canon formation. Although she places herself within the canon of American literature, the distinctions between post-colonial, minority, woman, and American get blurred in her work. *The Holder of the World* playfully explodes these categories by reworking a "Great American Novel," Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, while at the same time Mukherjee plays with the Raj narrative, particularly its representation of women. In this novel she works toward a transnational, transcanonical position. This essay examines Mukherjee's self-conscious scrutiny of location and narrative in *The Holder of the World*.

The structure of *The Holder of the World* is complex; it spans two historical periods, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. The primary narrator, a twentieth-century American assets hunter, Beigh Masters,⁵ from Massachusetts, uses the help of her Indo-American lover (a computer scientist) to recover the narrative of a seventeenth-century woman, Hannah Easton Fitch Legge. Beigh's initial motivation for piecing together Hannah's story is to find the Emperor's Tear, a jewel given to Hannah Easton by the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzebe. Beigh's narrative traces the story of Hannah from her New England origins

through a brief stay in England as the wife of an English sailor to her subsequent travels to India with her husband, who becomes an East India Company factor and later a pirate. Hannah's existence as a Company spouse is transformed radically by her husband's wanderlust that leaves her in India at the mercy of a Hindu king and eventually as the mistress of the Great Mughal, Aurangzebe. Beigh juxtaposes the narrative of Hannah with a narrative of her own life where we see her growing understanding of her role as writer, narrator, historian, and assets hunter. As Beigh delves deeper into Hannah's life, she begins to lose interest in the Emperor's Tear and becomes very involved in the intricacies of Hannah's extraordinary life. The jewel ceases to be a material object and becomes symbolic of the essence of Hannah's existence. Very early in the narrative, Beigh recognizes her changed objective and comments, "I couldn't care less about the Emperor's Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi" (19).

Beigh constructs the narrative of Salem Bibi (the name given to Hannah by Mughal India) through meticulous research into artifacts such as paintings, embroidery, diaries, and folk narratives, and begins to put a book together. Beigh's more traditional academic research and narrative methods are contrasted in terms of objectivity by the virtual reality program created by her lover that enables him to feed vast amounts of seemingly random data to produce in virtual space the actual event. Beigh's narrative and Venn's recreation of experience uneasily coexist in the novel, and Mukherjee uses them to question subtly the relationship between experience and its narrativization. In this novel, the tension between Beigh's narrativization of experience and Venn's virtual recreation of the experiences suggests that the Salem Bibi/Hannah Legge's identity and the cultural spaces she occupied are constructs, and in imposing a narrative structure on her life both Venn and Beigh are structuring their own individual and cultural identities. For Beigh this self-formation is through identification with Hannah as an American woman (she even sees a remote family connection between herself and Hannah), and for Venn the identity construction is in opposition to Hannah as a white woman complicit with early mercantile

imperialism in India. As they read Hannah's diaries and interpret stories about her, she eludes both their attempts to categorize her. At the end of the novel, Beigh's research data is fed into Venn's computer program. This brings both their narrative methods together in an attempt to allow Beigh to transcend time and space and appropriate the identity of Hannah's friend and servant, Bhagmati. The competing narrative structures in this novel raise questions not just about colonial relationships and experiences but also how they are signified. This novel illustrates Homi Bhabha's observation that the postcolonial project, theoretically speaking, has forced us to rethink the discourse of cultural difference. According to Bhabha, "To reconstitute the discourse of cultural difference demands not simply a change of cultural contents and symbols; *a replacement within the same time-frame of representation is never adequate*. It requires a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the 'sign' in which cultural identities may be inscribed" (171; emphasis added).

Mukherjee's novel, like her previous works, focuses on such familiar topics as the displaced immigrant woman, troubled marriages, the search for identity in an alien culture, and the clash between Indian and American values. However, this novel shows an evolution in Mukherjee's aesthetics of the immigrant novel in that the form of the narrative questions the mode of inscribing cultural difference rather than simply acknowledging the existence of difference. The novel exists simultaneously in two time frames, the twentieth and the seventeenth centuries, and at the end of the narrative, the two time frames collapse into one. This erasure of time allows Mukherjee to explore cultural identity as purely a function of space or location. Beigh remarks of Hannah's relocation to the Coromandel Coast as follows: "She knew she'd been transported to the other side of the world, but the transportation was more than mere 'conveyancing,' as it was for Gabriel [Hannah's husband] and the others. Many years later she called the trip, and her long residence in India, her 'translation'" (102). The pun on the word "translation" is significant here. On one level, the word refers to linguistic transformation, or literally changing an expression from one language to an-

other. On another level, it refers to the ability to convey a person, place or condition to another condition. In the seventeenth century, the word was commonly used to describe physical transportation. But in this novel, it is used simultaneously in the dominant seventeenth and twentieth century meanings, thereby suggesting that Hannah has been translated linguistically by Beigh's narrative into a simultaneous existence in the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. Similarly, Venn's "computer-assisted time reconstruction" also provides "time on a scale of 1:1, with a new concept of real time. He won't call it time-travel. Neither we, nor time, will have traveled an inch, or a millisecond" (138). The suspension of time in both Venn and Beigh's reconstruction of Hannah's experience allows Mukherjee to reduce the significance of time in narrative and to "translate" culture, thereby interrogating the discourse of cultural difference.

Cultural translation is, for Bhabha, a part of the "spatial histories of displacement." Bhabha argues that culture is both "transnational" and "translational." It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific historical situations of displacement such as the Middle Passage or the migration of Third World peoples after World War Two. It is translational because it makes "the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue" (172). Mukherjee's novel translates culture by creating a virtual space in which the narrator can suspend time, effectively dehistoricizing the narrative. This critical move—in what is a historical novel—allows her to consider how location influences experience and allows the immigrant woman to construct a subject position. In other words, the novel allows Mukherjee as an intellectual in the postcolonial world to question the translational and transnational aspects of culture along with a critical examination of the historical contingencies that produced them by playing with the concepts of history, time, and space.

Subject formation becomes an issue in the novel because the function of the author, especially the immigrant author, is divided among three characters—Beigh, Venn, and Hannah. Beigh is the accredited historian, one who does research into the provenance of *objets d'art*. Beigh's profession is significant be-

cause she seeks historical accuracy and origins in a world where both are ambiguous and complex. Venn, the computer scientist, is less interested in human interpretation of history than he is in the accuracy of his program. For both Venn and Beigh, history is a commodity—for one, it results in large commissions from wealthy collectors; for the other, it is graduate research that is potentially lucrative. Both Venn and Beigh are conscious of their authorial functions in this narrative. Hannah is the author in the most commonly used sense of the term—she records experiences and memories in journals and translates them into embroideries that tell her tale. These pieces of embroidery (the pun on embroidering as needlework and as embellishment of tales is obvious) create unusual landscapes in which Massachusetts flora and fauna coexist with tropical Indian ones. Hannah's tales told by needlework also achieve a suspension of time in that these panels, like Keats's Grecian urn, are both static and dynamic in their tale telling; Mukherjee quotes Keats's ode in epigraphs to the various sections of the novel. In bringing together two vastly different landscapes in one piece of embroidery, Hannah's work suggests that location is not so much physical space as it is an imagined landscape constructed in art/narrative. Beigh uses these pieces of embroidery to construct her own narrative of Hannah's life. However, as Beigh's narrative progresses, she tells Hannah's tale using the omniscient point of view, thus blurring the distinctions between what Hannah leaves behind as records of her life and Beigh's interpretation of them. The Beigh and Hannah authorial functions combine at the end of the novel where Beigh enters Hannah's experience with the aid of Venn's programme; at this point, the distinctions between real experience, virtual experience, and narrative disappear.

The story of Hannah retold by Beigh and present in fragments in Hannah's own voice focuses on the transnational and translational aspects of culture and location. At first, Hannah's history is that of spatial displacement. Hannah's parents emigrated to the New World and she is born in America. However, before Hannah can constitute an identity for herself by naming herself as "American" or "English," she loses her father to a bee sting and her mother, Rebecca Easton, to her Native American lover. Rebecca

Easton's cultural transgression is the first spatial dislocation in the novel that crosses racial lines, and it foreshadows Hannah's own breaking of racial and geographic boundaries. The "orphaned" Hannah is raised by the Fitches, marries a sailor, and moves to England. In the early part of this narrative, Hannah does not associate herself with any specific national identity. In Mukherjee's terms, she is an expatriate, a citizen of the world. Hannah's experiences with location suggest that location is constitutive of neither cultural nor national identity. At this point in her life, Hannah sees her identity as transcending space, nation, race, and ethnicity, but this construction of identity by Hannah changes as the narrative progresses.

In presenting Hannah's identity as transcending geographic space, Mukherjee examines location as ideological space and interrogates how race and gender constitute a fluid rather than a fixed identity. Hannah's fluid sense of race and ethnicity, signified by her constant renaming—Hannah Easton to Hannah Fitch to Hannah Legge to Salem Bibi to Mukta—and Bhagmati's similar renaming—from Bindu Bhashini to Bhagmati to Hester—suggest that one's identity is constituted by the narrative that one constructs and the actual experiences one undergoes. As Chandra Mohanty has argued, our sense of home, community and identity "fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities and friendships" (357). However, Mukherjee's narrative suggests that some identities are not necessarily political choices as they are constituted by violence and become survival tools. For instance, Hannah's avatar as Aurangzebe's Salem Bibi is enforced for she is his prisoner of war. So also Bhagmati's transformation from Bindu Bhashini to Bhagmati is a consequence of rape: it is not an identity she chooses but one she accepts and then reshapes in order to survive. The similarity between Bhagmati's experience as victim turned survivor with that of Hannah's suggests that one's identity is not completely circumscribed by one's racial or ethnic origin, and it is tempting to read the growing friendship between the women as a paen to universal sisterhood. However, Mukherjee deflates this possibility of global sisterhood by using the story of Sita as the narrative that both women use to fashion their identity.

For Bhagmati, Sita's story⁶ is part of an oral tradition she keeps alive, and this story represents for her an ideal of womanhood and marital relationships. She uses Sita's story to assimilate Hannah into Indian culture, but Hannah herself is unable to syncretize her experience of relocation and sexuality with Sita's dislocation in Lanka and her fear of rape by Ravana, her captor. When Bhagmati recounts Sita's story, Hannah wonders about Sita's own version of the events, which she finds intriguing in its absence. Mukherjee presents Hannah's story as the opposite of Sita's. Unlike Sita, who is abducted by a man from another culture, Hannah is rescued not abducted by an alien man, Jadav Singh, and contrary to Sita who remains faithful to her husband, Hannah seduces Jadav Singh, thereby gaining sanctuary in an alien land. Unlike Rama, Sita's faithful husband, Hannah's husband, Gabriel, is neither faithful nor concerned about Hannah's welfare. Hannah's rescue by Jadav Singh is also the point at which she consciously crosses racial boundaries, and like her mother, Rebecca, takes a lover from another culture, thus violating colonial laws that prevent white women from cohabiting with the natives. Bhagmati's story also stands in contrast to Sita's: Bhagmati was raped and immediately disowned by her family, whereas Sita was rejected later for the public's perception of her lack of chastity; and subsequently Bhagmati managed to survive by becoming an English factor's mistress. An important distinction between Sita and Hannah and Bhagmati is that neither Hannah nor Bhagmati abstained from forbidden sexual relationships, whereas the mythical Sita's chastity is a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood in the patriarchal Hindu culture. The crucial distinction between Hannah and Bhagmati is that of choice. Bhagmati's rape disempowers her in a culture that values virginity and chastity, whereas Hannah chooses to break social norms concerning interracial relationships and the power of women to choose their sexual partners. Both Hannah and Bhagmati appropriate and adapt Sita's story to reconcile and understand their individual experiences as women. But the difference in their narrativization and appropriation of Sita's story suggests that identity formation for a native woman and an immigrant woman are different because of cultural location and

racial identity rather than similar because of their shared identity as women.

This novel marks a significant shift in Mukherjee's concept of immigrant identity. Until the publication of *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee's protagonists, particularly in her novels, have been mostly women of Indian origin who have migrated to North America. Hannah is her first lengthy portrayal of a white woman. In a self-conscious moment, Mukherjee uses Beigh to comment meta-critically on her narrative that "It is the story of North America turned inside out" (160). Specifically, it is a reworking of *Jasmine*, set in seventeenth-century India and America. *Jasmine* is the tale of a young Indian widow, an illegal immigrant in the United States, who is raped; rather than allow her experiences in India and the United States to demoralize her, she adopts various identities to survive. *Jasmine* is the story of one young woman's grit and ability to resist the attempt of such dominant cultures as India and United States to define her as widow and pathetic immigrant respectively. Mukherjee tells *Jasmine*'s tale by using Hindu concepts of the transmigration of the soul and the female power of the Goddess Kali to overcome the limitations of the realist novel.⁷ Whereas *Jasmine* focuses on the difficulty of writing about Indian immigration to the United States within the cultural and narratorial confines of the realist narrative, *The Holder of the World* reverses the racial identity of the familiar protagonist in the Mukherjee canon and explores the experience of migration by examining how race constitutes the discourse of migration. *The Holder of the World* also creates an alternative narrative form that allows for the voicing of immigrant experience. Mukherjee's blurring of her protagonist's racial identity through Hannah's breaking of racial boundaries and Beigh's ability to become Bhagmati and participate in her experience through the computer program indicate her desire to examine critically the immigrant experience by altering racial identities, albeit temporarily, in her narrative.

The cross-cultural female relationships in this novel allow Mukherjee to voice her concerns about the politics of American feminism, an issue about which she has been particularly strident. She was among the earliest to challenge American femi-

nism's white, middle-class orientation during the 1970s and early 1980s. She specifically attacks white feminism in *Wife* and some of her interviews. In response to the recent move in American feminism to consider consciously race and class when discussing gender issues, Mukherjee's attempted blurring of racial identities is entering a new phase. She seems to be moving toward a consideration of female subjectivity as a complex issue rather than one overdetermined by biology. *The Holder of the World* could be read as a narrative about a woman's ability to survive and achieve empowerment. However, the location of the novel in India during the early days of the East India Company, and the complicity of Hannah in imperialism works against so simple a reading of the novel. The powerful relationship between Hannah and Bhagmati crosses racial boundaries; however, Bhagmati's position as Hannah's servant never quite completely recedes. The native woman is presented as the confidante, rescuer, and facilitator of Hannah's assimilation into Indian culture. Yet, it is always Hannah's narrative that Beigh emphasizes; Bhagmati's story remains incidental to that of Hannah. Beigh's narration of Hannah's story and her appropriation of Bhagmati's identity in virtual space point to the problems of narrativizing postcolonial women's lives in the context of Western culture. Beigh's dominating consciousness does not allow Bhagmati a voice; she is always re-presented by an interlocutor. Although Beigh also retells most of Hannah's story, Hannah's narrative breaks through Beigh's dominant one in the form of fragmented diary entries and pieces of embroidery. Beigh considers race an unimportant issue in female relationships, but Mukherjee's narrative emphasizes Beigh's naivete on the issue. Mukherjee presents immigrant women's narratives as being always re-presented in the West.

In creating a white woman as her protagonist, Mukherjee also has brought into focus the construction of white femininity in narratives. Although much has been written about the construction of white female characters in novels by white men and white women, little has been said about the construction of the white woman in postcolonial narratives. Mukherjee is not the first woman of color to create a white protagonist; for in-

stance, Miriama Ba in *Scarlet Song* writes about cross-cultural sexual relationships and creates a white female protagonist. Mukherjee's white women characters, Beigh and Hannah, are not stereotyped. Hannah is not presented as a cantankerous memsahib unable to deal with India's climate or culture. Also, the novel does not equate Hannah's whiteness with power. In tracing Hannah's story, Mukherjee presents the powerlessness of the immigrant woman in the New World and the hardships that women faced in Puritan New England. She depicts also Hannah's rejection by English women because of her colonial origins. Yet, when Hannah comes to India, Mukherjee presents her as a person not entirely free of cultural prejudices. For instance, Beigh comments on Hannah's response to Gabriel's ill treatment of Indians. She argues that she finds irony in Hannah's narration of the event but admits that she "had hoped to find censure . . . [She] cannot defend Hannah to Venn" (115). This episode and others where Hannah leads the life of a typical Company Wife indicate Hannah's complicity with mercantile imperialism. When her circumstances change, Hannah, like Conrad's Kurtz, goes native. Here, "going native" is not so much a descent into moral depravity as a process of assimilation and cultural exchange. Even as Hannah adopts Indian clothing and manners, Bhagmati is becoming more anglicized. They give each other names; Hannah becomes Mukta (Pearl) and Bhagmati is named for Hannah's deceased best friend, Hester. For each of the women, this alteration of identity is enabling, and each creates a subject position for the other. The white woman's sense of Self/Other is reflected in the mirror of the native woman whose understanding of Self/Other is created by the white woman. Mukherjee suggests that the native woman and the white woman or the native and the immigrant both create the other in the image of herself, thus indicating that identities are fluid and not overdetermined by sex or race as is often theorized.

The creation of the Pearl and Hester identities is also part of another game that Mukherjee plays in this novel—the rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*. This intertextuality serves two purposes: first, it allows Mukherjee to redefine the canon of American literature; second, it implies America's complicity with British

imperialism. In her audacious rewriting of Hawthorne, she suggests that Hawthorne censored parts of Hester's story by not revealing that her child was the product of an interracial relationship. *The Holder of the World* criticizes canonical American literature's white centredness, by forcing the recognition of the immigrant experience and the multicultural aspects to American history. Hannah, who returns to America as Hester, brings with her Black Pearl, the daughter of Hannah and Jadav Singh. Black Pearl is Indo-American; her very existence signifies the merging of cultures. Hawthorne's Pearl is white, and in creating Black Pearl, *The Holder of the World* forcibly inserts immigrant culture and history into the American canon. In this audacious reworking of a venerated American novel, Mukherjee is also claiming a place within the canon of American literature for immigrant writers like herself. It is in this sense that she sees herself as an American writer; by calling herself American, she is not naively adopting an alien identity but is refusing a hyphenated existence as an Indo-American writer.

The Holder of the World also rewrites the Raj narrative popular in British literature. These colonial narratives often tell tales of forbidden relationships between white women and native men, which the English characters perceive as rape, and such alleged rape of the English woman is a central trope of these narratives. E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* (televised as *The Jewel in the Crown*) are typical of such narratives. The alleged rape in these narratives signifies the English fear of the native and also becomes symbolic of the Englishman's burden—the protection of his women from the native's moral depravity.⁸ Usually, the alleged rape is followed by a riot that leads to increase of colonial controls. In *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee rewrites the Raj narrative by making the English woman (Hannah is seen as English in India) an agent in her sexual life rather than a passive subject. Hannah's interracial liaison with Jadav Singh is initiated by her, and when she is abducted by Aurangzebe as his prisoner of war, she argues with him about his militant policies and then manages to escape. She is not raped by either. The chaos and war in which she finds herself are not the result of her sexual liaison but of her relation-

ship with Jadav Singh. The rape trope is transformed in this novel into the woman's choice of sexual relationships that is enabling rather than imprisoning.

The elaborate game playing with geographic and ideological space, with literary canons and tropes, makes *The Holder of the World* a fascinating intellectual experience. However, Mukherjee's use of virtual reality as a narrative method causes problems. It allows her to suspend time and to consider only location; it allows her to make characters become each other and partially experience another's life; it allows her to theorize that race and gender are overdetermined categories in the discussion of subjectivity and agency. Further, the increasing preoccupation with game playing in this novel renders the immigrant woman's experience as almost entirely textual. As one reviewer cautions, the novel tends to be more interesting to think about than to read (Messud 23).

NOTES

- 1 Born into a middle class Bengali Brahmin family, Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the first generation of Indians raised in independent India. In 1961, she came to the United States in pursuit of a graduate education, and she has since lived in Canada and the United States.
- 2 She made this statement at a book promotional tour before a reading from *The Holder of the World* at Seattle's Elliott Bay Book Company, in October 1993.
- 3 In "Predicaments of the Hyphen," Visweswaran remarks: "I wonder at the ease with which Bharati Mukherjee can proclaim 'I am an American,' words which were forced back down my throat in grade school, words I was never permitted to say with any certainty" (*Our Feet Walk the Sky* 306).
- 4 Mukherjee's shift from expatriate to immigrant is not necessarily typical of all South Asian experience. The rather curious "resident alien" (also known as "green card holder") status bestows upon many a permanently transitional stage where the individual lives and works in the United States but holds a non-American passport.
- 5 This primary narrator, Beigh Masters, shares her initials, B.M., with Bharati Mukherjee, and one could read her character as a mocking self-referential gesture towards the author of a text.
- 6 The story of Sita is a popular part of Hindu mythology. The following synopsis is a combination of the various versions of her story. Sita is a foundling, who is raised by the childless King Janaka as his own. She is married to Rama, crown prince of Ayodhya, at an early age. Rama's inheritance of the kingdom is disputed by his step-mother, Kaikeyi, who wants the kingdom for her own son, Bharata. To avoid complications for his father, Rama goes into exile in the forest accompanied by his wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshman. In the forest, Sita becomes the object of lust of the demon king, Ravana, who tricks her and abducts her. She becomes a

prisoner in Ravana's island home of Lanka. With the help of an army of monkeys led by his General Hanuman, Rama fights a battle and wins Sita back. Before returning home with Sita, Rama makes her walk through fire to prove her chastity and she passes the test. They return to Ayodhya and rule as King and Queen. Sita becomes pregnant with twins when a citizen of Ayodhya comments on the inappropriateness of the King's acceptance of a woman whose reputation is sullied by her captivity. To avoid controversy, Rama sends his pregnant Queen to the forest where she is taken care of by a kindly hermit, Valmiki, and she raises her twins with the help of the hermit in the princely tradition. Many years later, the King, while on a hunt through the forest, encounters his twin sons, now grown, and wishes to take them back to Ayodhya. At this point, Sita remarks that her duties on earth are over, and she prays to her real mother, the Earth Goddess, who opens up a chasm beneath her daughter and takes her back. Rama is venerated as God and is seen as a model king and statesman by the Hindus; and Sita is held up to Indian women as the model of the ideal wife.

7 For a detailed discussion of this novel see Wickramagamage.

8 I am indebted to Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* for the discussion of the rape-trope.

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