

The holder of the world analysis essay



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Time is sometimes said to be precious because it is the one thing which can never come back and which can never be replaced. To live life to the fullest and to seize the day because life is impermanent are just some of the principles that people uphold in their life just because they see the invaluable nature of time. However, what people sometimes fail to notice is that though time can never come, it can still be relived—something which occurs in Bharati Mukherjee’s “The Holder of the World”, a novel of one woman who travels time, space and place just to get in touch with one woman’s past.

Though this time traveller, Beigh Masters, aims to discover Hannah Easton’s life out of a professional cause, there is also an underlying possibility that Masters is just out to satisfy her own curiosity and prove what a voyeur she is in (in a good sense) as she does not only glimpse the life of Masters—she delves into it. This essay will explore that possibility—that Beigh Masters is a curious voyeur as she unearths secrets of people and countries as she seeks to find out the mysterious person named Hannah Easton.

The book can be summarized simply: Beigh Masters, a novelist who lives in 20th century America is out to discover Hannah Easton, a beautiful and mysterious Western girl who lived in 17th century India as Easton gains access to one of the most powerful figures in the world—an Indian emperor who is known for being known as “The Holder of the World” for the power and riches that he has. Masters uses all her resources and wiles to unearth stories about Easton—journals, diaries, hearsays, personal stories.

It is almost too exhausting for a research if one is just to do a book. But this enthusiasm and penchant of Masters to find out almost anything about Easton is a proof that she harbours more than a professional cause to her purpose nor a mere curiosity over the illusive figure. She is actually already very much hooked to the secret life of Easton as becomes voyeur to Easton's dreams, ramblings, complains, experiences and secrets.

Master was also drawn into the Easton's character as she discovers that Easton was not just a mere weak woman but she was a woman who had such a strong tenacity about her that a war ensues because of her. A woman so naive and even wrong in her convictions can sometimes wreak such havoc for the people around her and this is indeed what Easton does to her cause but in the end, she manages to redeem her character by being a bridge to opposite peoples and cultures.

And Masters finally finds her answers at last, more than being some courtesan or concubine what Jee Yoon Lee supposes in the essay, "The Rude Contact of Some Actual Circumstance", Easton was actually more than a courtesan, she was an advocate for peace: For Mukherjee, the relationship with museum objects, and in particular an Indian miniature of a woman who was both white and blonde, triggers her reimagining and rewriting of Hester Prynne as an Asian courtesan. (972)

This "Indian miniature of a woman" seen by Mukherjee would later be proven important when related to the Keats' poem, "An Ode to a Grecian Urn" as it proves that some things which are just mere things can actually mean a lot as it would evoke a history or even represent an entire history of

a nature—one thing which both the author or the book and the author in Masters fully realizes. In the book, Easton may seem like she is the protagonist and the most important character since it her story which is being unfolded right before the eyes of the readers.

However, there is but one thing which is also important to look at—that of the fact that Easton's life is being discovered because Masters is doing the discovering. Thus, just because Masters is a mere bystander in the book, it does not make her character less of import compared to Easton. Masters is the discoverer and Easton is the discovered. There would have been no plot if there was no Easton and there was no story of hers to tell—but there would have been no story at all if Masters does not exhibit her overzealous curiosity in trying to find out who Easton is.

This becomes Masters overall purpose in the book as she becomes the presenter of Easton's life on a platter. Over all, though the Emperor Aurangzeb is known as “ The Holder of the World” because of his richness and power, though Hannah Easton can be considered as the holder of the worlds for bringing two cultures and countries together, it is Beigh Masters who is the true holder of the world because she is able to present to the readers the worlds of the emperor and that of Easton. It is Beigh Masters who is “ The Holder of the World”.

On a different note, in the book, Mukherjee uses John Keat's famous poem to drive a point—that time is a continuous spectrum that never manages to keep still. When something has already happened is already long gone, long dead—a distant past, this does not mean that it is not important or living.

The past can be considered as something as living dead because those who live in the present can still continuously seek it, relive it and even be influenced by it. For example would be Master's perverse nature as she tries to seek the answers to Hannah Easton's mysterious and glamorous life as a lover and mistress to an emperor.

The present and the past and even the future is merged together in one complicated web as Masters lives in the present and then goes back to the past. The year is sometimes 20th century, sometimes 1600's and sometimes 1745. Going back, Keats' "An Ode to Grecian Urn" is used to drive this point—that time is merged together and that the dead can come back to the living because the dead will always be alive. In the poem, Keats writes, "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness/ Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time" (lines 1-2), pertains to the never ending magnanimity of the urn—the allure it holds just because it is an inanimate object.

In the same way, Masters is attracted to Easton's life because she is long gone—a kind of mystery that is so tempting to unearth and discover. Thus, what Keats' poem provides is a clue for the readers that the book is going to be a form of time travel for them—and indeed, this is what Mukherjee gives her readers—a riveting exploration of centuries and worlds very different from one another and yet, very alike. This difference in time frame can be illustrated in how different India was in 17th century from the 20th century and how different America was in the 17th century and 20th century.

Thus, what Mukherjee was able to provide is not just a comparison of two cultures and two time frames but four comparisons of cultures and time

frames. The India in the 17th century versus the India in the 20th century is very different in the way that modernity and liberal ideas has seeped through the country more in the 20th century. This just means that the India in the 17th century was more traditional, rigid and very strict. However, the fact that Easton was able to come to the shores of India back then and meet an emperor and even become that emperor's lover says so much about India back then.

It just means that India was already opening itself to people very different from its own and accepting certain practices and actions that could have been condemnable before. On the other hand, the America in the 17th century and 20th century was also like that of India's situation. America in the 17th century was more traditional that certain values had to be kept and certain practices had to be followed, including that of a woman having her chastity and virtues intact.

The ironic thing is that the America in the 17th century was more traditional than India back then considering the fact that America is now very much liberal. This change in the two time frames and two cultures says so much how on great things can change in an instant and how different those changes can be. In the book, the plot both gets humorous and riveting as Easton (through Masters) gets caught up in her woes of being a researcher in a distant country so different from her own.

She gets reprimanded by the emperor, she gets into trouble, she gets other people in trouble to the point that many people even got killed, and in the end, she definitely also wins over the emperor. In some way, Easton is living

through Masters as Masters reads Easton's story and life. In a metaphysical sense, Easton possesses Masters and comes alive through her. In conclusion, Masters is a voyeur in the sense that she is privy to the life and thoughts of Easton. A person does not usually have such access to a person's entire life and yet Masters was able to do this, proving her own strength as a character and her own tenacity.

Her exhaustive research would have proven to be just that—too exhausting that anyone without her zealousness would have given up. And yet Masters persists and endures, just so that she can know who Easton is. In some way, though Master's life is not as riveting or action-packed as Easton's, Master's life can be juxtaposed to Easton's since because of her, people would not even know the kind of life that Easton led. Easton may have caused a war and loved an emperor, but it is Masters who is the real holder of the world.