

**EVOLVING IDENTITY: A THEMATIC CRITIQUE OF BHARATI
MUKHERJEE'S *LEAVE IT TO ME***

Dr. Jyoti Tabita Hermit
Assistant Professor
Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Haryana

Abstract

Literatures across the world are raising the question of identity of women in the phallogocentric social setup and attempting to deconstruct patriarchal set up which is concerned with the representation of women in literary works. They deal with identity of women which is in the process of evolution as they question their gender roles and subvert them. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most significant authors of the Indian Diaspora who has undergone an evolution from 'Melting pot' condition to the situation in a 'Lifeboat.' Her transition reflects the case of thousands of migrant women who experience dramatic identity crisis, move towards acceptance and exuberance of a new culture and emerge as fighters and survivors.

In her novel *Leave It to Me*, Mukherjee's protagonist Debby is marked by certain qualities which enable her to build up her fragmented lives and to express her affirmation to it. She is a representative of liberated women who are survivors by the sheer dint of courage and will power. Being an enthusiastic and courageous character, she progresses from one stage of evolution to the other in an attempt to establish her identity and enter into the mainstream of the society.

Since time immemorial, literary writers have focused on themes related to women, particularly the issues of alienation, repression and identity-crisis associated with them, not only in the West but also in the East. The coinciding effect of the over-growing façades of democracy with feminist movements has awakened women to question their identity in the contemporary ethos. Writers in both the literatures of the developed and developing countries delineate the mental trauma of their characters in order to expose the domination imposed upon women in the society. Women protagonists have emerged as symbols of extraordinary power and courage, portraying an honest picture of women who strive to be their true selves.

Issues of identity are relevant in the present-day socio-cultural ethos of constantly reforming politics and gender identities, especially as identities are being treated relationally. In various fields, this is further heightened in the light of varying arrays of globalizations. Women's "identity" has emerged as a significant concept for much cultural and literary criticism in gynocentric texts. Literatures across the world are raising the question of identity of women in the phallogocentric social setup and attempting to deconstruct patriarchal set up which is concerned with the representation of women in literary works. They deal with

identity of women which is in the process of evolution as they question their gender roles and subvert them. Evolution can be described as a gradual process in which something changes into a different and usually more complex or better form. This process of evolution is much more than purely physical. It involves psychological evolution as well. Thus evolution of identity is more significant and major than physical evolution.

The evolution of women's identity has been a long process. The streak of strength has been vested in women since time immemorial but its outward manifestation was hampered by the dominating forces. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most significant authors of the Indian Diaspora. Having undergone an evolution from 'Melting pot' condition to the situation in a 'Lifeboat,' her transition reflects the case of thousands of migrant women who experience dramatic identity crisis, move towards acceptance and exuberance of a new culture and emerge as fighters and survivors. Mukherjee's protagonists of later novels like Jasmine and Debby are inheritors of "fluid identities" (*Darkness* 3). Debby, the protagonist of *Leave It to Me* is marked by certain qualities which enable her to build up her fragmented lives and to express her affirmation to it. She is an enthusiastic and courageous character who progresses from one stage of evolution to the other in an attempt to establish her identity. In an interview in *The Massachusetts Review*, Mukherjee firmly stated: "The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in American and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological makeup" (645-654).

Mukherjee's fourth novel *Leave It to Me* (1997), is a work which deals with the search for identity of a child abandoned by her Indian father and an American hippie mother. The author brings into focus how expatriates and exiles unstintingly reinvent themselves, shed their traditional identity and thus undergo a transmutation. Mukherjee views America as a country in which freedom has been translated into rootlessness and possibility into dislocation. Debby Di Martino, is a member of the pickled generation, an unrestricted individual who is out to carve her own destiny. She is abandoned as a child by her parents. Hence she suffers from an intense psychological problem of isolation and alienation. She is adopted and brought up by Italian American parents, Di Martinos in an extravagant milieu. But she remains deeply distressed. Debby Di Martino is the Italian name she receives from her adopted Italian parents. She feels that her existing identity is a result of her superficial existence and the essential part of her being lie elsewhere. Her life is an attempt to unravel the mystery surrounding her own unknown parentage. Di Martino utters these lines in a mood of psychological distress: "and so I made up my mind to find out if I was someone special or just answer misfit. I didn't write another poem but I began to understand about merged identities. There was something to nature over nurture and to the tyranny of genes" (*LIM* 16).

In the late 70's, Bharati Mukherjee had encountered several hippies and backpackers in Delhi who had been assaulted in India and Nepal. These reminiscences prompted her to write this novel post twenty years and inspired the characterization of Devi's bio - parents. Mukherjee says in an interview:

But Devi's generation is still a victim of those events, they're formed by post-Vietnam America. I've come to realize that one of the themes throughout my fiction is the changes in the way America thinks of itself and is seen by the rest of the world as a result of Vietnam. . . . The peace protestors were noble. . . . People were doing good, but at the same time they were self-indulgently satisfying their sensual and sexual appetites. . . .

Many of the people who went to India looking to escape Western civilization misunderstood and misapplied Indian traditions, and succumbed to the imperializing impulse. They thought that their version of India was the way India really was, without understanding Indian culture.

(The Beatrice Interview I)

Debby is saved by some catholic nuns, who name her Faustine and send her for adoption to America. Passed on from one foster home to another, she finally ends up with an Italian - American family who rename her after their favourite film star Debby Reynolds. Debby convinces herself that she was lucky to be an orphan, “from the families I’d been given I’d scavenge the traits I needed and dump the rest” (*LIM* 14).

Savagely impatient as she is to claim her roots, Debby has to begin somewhere. At the age of thirteen, she along with a friend, Celia, shoplifts stuff of over a hundred dollars. On being caught, they are arrested and get a police record. As penalty, Debby is made to do some social service, read books and improve her grades. She is also entrusted to the care of Wyatt, an attractive trainee and social worker for rehabilitation. It is his inquisitiveness to know about her adoption that arouses feelings of incompleteness and hollowness in her personality. However, she has a ruining effect on him. She turns her weekly sessions with Wyatt, into a love affair. He falls for her exotic heritage and becomes one of series of father figures whose lives she shatters. Not only does he release her of the punishment but also drops out of Graduate school to work for Sierra Club or to become a natural photographer. His predictions about her future not only turn out to be true, but also help in instilling self-confidence in her.

The feelings of alienation and displacement surface when Mr. Bullock, who has spotted her gift with words, tells her to write a poem about something she knew so well but could not see anymore. Hence she composes a poem about the dogs she had seen at the pond, pretending to be a lonely dog herself. She says, “It was as if a psychic with a 900 member had said to me through the poem. You’re just on loan to the Di-Martinos, treat them nice, pay your rent, but keep your bags packed” (*LIM* 17). She realizes the tragedy of her situation and begins suffering from identity-crisis. She feels like a tenant of the De Martino household.

Her job, selling exercise equipment over the telephone, introduces her to the power of voice:

My callers were romantics. They believed in me, not in salvation through Elastonomics. They begged, *If I call back, how do I know I’ll get you?* I made them effortless promises. Just ask for me, Helena. Or depending on the, mood of the day, Staci, Traci, Eva, Magda, Desiree. Some nights I tried out thirty personas. My lies paid off. (*LIM* 21)

Inspite of being brought up in mainstream America, Debby is aware of her exotic identity and feels a misfit in the American setup, especially after her brief affair with Frankie Fong, her boss at a telemarketing job. The middle aged, ex-star of Hong Kong kick-boxing films, is her first Asian lover. He is her first acquaintance with the continent she has her roots in: “before Frankie insulated himself into my life, I’d convinced myself that I was just another restless upstate daughter looking to make it medium big and marry medium nice in Manhattan” (*LIM* 32).

So spectacular is her sales record that Frankie Fong, a representative of racial amalgamation, becomes her lover. Frankie (who was named after Frank Sinatra by a show-

biz father who tours the world singing “One for My Baby”) is the former star and former director of a string of kick - boxing classics. He is rich, snobbish, streetwise, greedy, clever and most importantly a mesmerizing story teller: “I loved his made up childhoods. . . . He reminisced of pariah dogs and flying foxes, floating bodies, ancient ruins, temple bells, Muslim calls, diesel fumes, painted ‘lorries’. . . . Fevers, drugs, backroom – behind – the – beaded – curtain Asia.” (*LIM* 26). Frankie gives her traces of her long lost legacy.

His reminiscences of growing up in China, made her long for her native land. She desires to gain what she has been robbed of. She is charmed by Frankie Fong’s foreignness and his country makes her yearn for it, to claim it back. However, she feels cheated when she is presented to First Class Fong as a “simple Saratoga Secretary” (*LIM* 44). Baby Fong’s derogatory gift, the Singapore Airlines freebie toilet kit, hurts her sense of respect and integrity. She is roused to anger and in order to seek vengeance on Frankie, she sets fire to his house in Saratoga Spring. She says, “the costs I extracted - loss of past and loss of pride - were reimbursable and permanent” (*LIM* 53). This incident intensifies her desire to establish her identity.

The main basis of her existence is to know the history of what has pushed her to this identity crisis. She is an immigrant born to an American mother and Asian father and exposed to Italian foster parents. Her “mother identified herself as Clear Water Iris Daughter” and her father, was called “Asian National in the adoption papers” (*LIM* 13). She was “just a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail” (*LIM* 13). Her residence and upbringing are located in the west. Though born to an American mother, she feels that her American background is not her real side. The state of Di Martino being a cultural vagabond is worse than the state of being an immigrant. Her Indian father has avenged her American mother by making her an orphan through his illicit relationship with her American mother. It is the duty of the daughter to take vengeance on the Indian father who has made her life a cultural mess. It is in this process of taking revenge on her Indian father, she makes the search for her American mother.

Henceforth in order to reach for her “bio-mom” she becomes a client of Finders / Keepers, a family uniting service in Albany. She further discovers from Mama that her parents had a criminal record and thus some of the adoption documents were sealed. This revelation excites her far more and she moves to Haight Ashbery, California, the notorious hang-out of the hippies and drug pushers of San Francisco.

On the state border, she renounces her name and reinvents herself as Devi Dee, a pet name taken from a vanity licence plates. When she learns that Devigaon, her birth place in India was named after Devi, “the eight – armed flame – bright” Indian goddess, she does not regard this as mere coincidence but one of many divine interventions which shape her life (*LIM* 5). The petrifying aspects of the Mother Goddess are popularly symbolized in India by her projecting tongue. The association of the goddess’ tongue with fear, violence and vengeance appears in a sudden flashback of the final scene of catastrophe at the very beginning of the novel. The narrator sits with the head of a lover on her lap and “the ferrous taste of fear” in her mouth “as though my whole body were tongue” (*LIM* 10). Here the character Debby seems to merge with the image of the goddess, Devi. Ham Cohan introduces Devi to her Bio-Mom for the first time in a designer clothes store near Sacramento, where Devi has been trying different way of draping a layered, seven veils dress on herself. Jess Du Pree suddenly emerges from behind a rack of caftans and lays a possessive claim on Ham which Ham reciprocates with a long and hard kiss. Devi reaffirms

her presence by announcing who she is without stopping to “check for tongue position”(LIM113).

Just like other characters of Mukherjee, Debby goes on changing names and identities, from Faustine to Debby to Devi. Mukherjee’s gradual move to assert herself as an American is clearly evident in this novel. “Once in the Bay Area, she merges fearlessly with the human flotsam and jetsam . . . a kind of outlaw, on the side of other outlaw. . . . It seemed totally natural to identify with dropouts” (LIM69). The sense of rootlessness haunts her as she encounters a Chinese waiter and an Indian student on entering California. She envies them as they were aware of their origin and were leading a rooted existence. “The guys were geeks, but they knew who they were. They knew what they’d inherited” (LIM 66).

In Haight, her Corolla is converted into a motel room, her dirty laundry, rolled up, makes her bed, and freebie monthlies act as curtains to give her privacy. She resorts to “petty thievery” or fools tourists to make money for food, thereby fusing with the ethos of her adopted homeland. She makes friends with street people like Stoop man, Duvet Man and Tortilla Tim.

The street people made room for me in soup lines. They tipped me off on which stores had hidden cameras, what time the Japanese and German tour buses came by (“The famous corner of Haight and Ashbury, the cradle of Flower Power, ladies and gents”) so that I could do a little camera posing, chant my down-on-my-luck or my what-a shit-country-we-live-in sob story and squeeze wads of sympathy cash out of fat-cat tourists. (LIM 70)

Devi finds plenty of source material in San Francisco: “All my neighbours had come home to the Beulah rooming house from somewhere else. Vanuatu Man wasn’t the only refugee, and Loco Larry wasn’t the only war maimed. Everything was flow, a spontaneous web without compartments: Somalia, Vanuatu, Vietnam, Belgium, India, Schenectady” (LIM 98). Devi not only comes close to her mother’s world, but also accumulates grief and outrage of all these others.

Reiterating the Frankie move, she becomes the lover of a 1960’s survivor named Ham who is also the long-time boyfriend of Jess, who may or may not be her mother. Jess, Ham and their Berkeley gang “marched for peace, for civil rights, for women, gays, migrants”; and “they also drove big cars, lived large lives” (LIM 77). Devi is filled with bitterness: “But what about us, Vietnam’s war - bastards and democracy’s love children? We’re still coping with what they did” (LIM 78). She calls herself ‘we’, a melting pot of varied cultures.

Ham helps her not only get a job but also a detective, Fred Pointer, to help her find her Bio-Mom. However through the investigation report by the Bombay detective Rajeev Raj, who meets Romeo Hawk in prison, she comes to know that her biological father was a sex guru, a serial killer of mixed Asian descent who had a tarnished image in the India of 1970’s. Jess, her bio-mom had moved out of America under the garb of a hippie and had become a victim of his sexual treachery. Romeo Hawk, the guru from Hell, became her guide, her lover, her God, and used her as a cover to rob, cheat and murder susceptible foreign women. “He made me wanton”, Jess confesses (LIM 10). However, she betrays him by going to the police and launching a complaint against him. “She accused him of having strangled give or take seventeen men and women. The cops locked her up on drug-peddling

charges, and passed her stories on to Interpol. . . . She said nothing about the two killings in Devigaon” (*LIM* 123). Romeo Hawk is traced, accused of murdering nine people and sentenced to nine life sentences.

Debby is saved by the Grey Sisters who find her “under the poor woman’s skirt” who was dead(98). However when taken to her mother in prison, her mother refuses to accept her and further asks the Di Martinos for a ticket to the U.S. in exchange for adoption. Debby Di Martino is an Italian by upbringing, Indian by fatherhood and American by motherhood. She is unable to absorb her origin either into Italian or American parentage. Di Martino’s identity, experiences a deep dilemma of being an immigrant. Her cultural identity suffering various jolts leaves her desperate for her origin. Every step she takes, confirms her as a cultural immigrant from a rejected group. However, with intense courage, she subverts the dictates of patriarchal law and emerges as an avenging angel who showers no mercy on those who have destroyed her innocent childhood.

It is Jess who gives Devi her motto, “Leave it to me”, a gag on the name of her Media Escort agency through which Devi’s Devil Dad tracks them down, having escaped miraculously from an Indian jail. He burns Fred Pointer to death. Devi says “A woman walking her black Lab in Land’s End by the Sutro Baths found a badly charred body under a cypress tree. Like Rajeev Raj, like Madame Kezarina, I find signs all around me. The papers called it an accident, but Fred committed suicide. Fred’s despair burned as brightly as a funeral pyre” (*LIM* 164).

Having traced Jess, Romeo Hawk blackmails her by sending her the proceedings of his trial. Scared and terrified, she turns to Devi for help and entrusts the agency along with the clients in her hands. However, one of their clients Ma Varuna, turns out to be Jess’s ex-lover and Devi’s biological father Romeo Hawk. He has disguised himself as a spiritual guru. He sheds his drag before his daughter and orders her to take him to Jess so that he can settle scores with her. She drives him to her mother with a 9mm pointed to her head. Ham is killed by the Devil-Dad. Devi infuriated at the murder of her lover again turns into Kali and destroys the demon with a cleaver:

I claim my inheritance, kneeling Bio-Dad so hard as he tilts his head back to draw from the tiny bottle that it tumbles him. TAPE ROLLING. The cleavage fuses to my arm. It soars and plunges, soars and plunges. “Monster!” I scream. I keep screaming as I cradle Ham’s tormented face to my bosom. I am screaming as I dial 199. (*LIM* 235)

Goddess Kali or Devi is one of the most prominent archetypal images used by Mukherjee to suggest violent destruction of evil. Devi acquires the divine power to destroy evil just as Kali Mata destroyed the “Buffalo Demon, inheritor of the brute strength and physical appearance of his mother and the deceit and rage of his demon father” (*LIM* 5-6). Devi seems to have inherited similar qualities from her parents. This is perhaps what encourages her to seek a bloody revenge on the evil power. Mukherjee in an interview with Ron Hogan says, “What she understands, in retrospect, is that there’s a huge difference between vengeance and justice. Once that idea was articulated by my character, I realized that in order to make my concept of divine justice, which sometimes involves great violence, understandable to the reader, I’d have to dig into and share the Hindu mythology of the goddess Devi worshipped in Bengal, who was created by the Cosmic Spirit to do battle with the baddest bad ass of all the demons, the Buffalo Demon, and is therefore quite violent” (*The Beatrice Interview* I).

Devi Dee emerges as an individual who chooses what she prefers. Devi, in spite of having an Italian and American background and upbringing, prefers to turn to India and identify herself with Devi Durga of Asian Mythology. It is the power latent in her personality that drives her to make a choice. She airs the fire lying dormant in her personalities, subverts the gender roles assigned to her by the traditional society and reinvents her identity. She is a representative of liberated women who are survivors by the sheer dint of courage and will power. Hence, Mukherjee's fiction attempts to move women from the state of victimization and change their subordinate image. Her female characters progress from one stage of evolution to the other, define their identity, carve a niche for themselves and enter the mainstream of the society.

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