

**SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S LEAVE IT TO ME****Ms. S. Annie Priyadharsini**

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The search for identity is one of the recurrent themes in post-colonial literature. The immigrant's experience of the clash of cultures and the search for their identity in an alien land is one of Bharati Mukherjee's major concerns. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well-known writers of the Indian Diaspora in the United States. Mukherjee is at her best in depicting cross-cultural conflicts and how her women protagonists take control over their fates. In her novel *Leave It to Me* published in 1997, she has portrayed the protagonist Debby DiMartyino's search for her identity in America, her adopted homeland. Debby's search for her identity is caused by her curiosity about "mugged identities." She begins her quest in Schenectady to trace her biological parents who abandoned her as a child in India. At the end of the novel, Debby/Devi, transforms herself as Devi, the avenging deity, kills her bio-father and merges with the elements of nature. Thus Mukherjee has vividly portrayed Debby's search for her identity in a foreign land.

The search for identity of immigrants in their adopted homeland is one of the major themes in post-colonial literature. The immigrant's experience of the clash of cultures and the question of identity the immigrant must face in an alien land is one of Bharati Mukherjee's major concerns. Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer. Her novels and short stories often reveal contemporary themes and concerns. One of these themes is the search for their true identity. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of the Indian women in America who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. They can neither detach themselves completely from their past nor do they have any certainty in the future.

Bharati Mukherjee's has paid special attention to the condition of Indian women in the United States. Her novels and short stories express the travelling instinct of Indians, who in their deliberate search for materially better life, migrate to the west and as a result, face tensions of adaptation and assimilation. She is at her best in depicting cross-cultural conflicts and how her women protagonists take control over their fate. Mukherjee does not impose readily available solutions to the problems faced by immigrant Asian women. She prefers to show them acquiring power in order to control their fates.

According to Mukherjee, people like herself and other immigrants to America, or multi-racial children born in America are no longer “mere ingredients” in a “melting pot” or “tossed salad”. The new metaphor she prefers to use to describe this group is “pickle” for they have imbibed the best flavour from India, America and the many other immigrants of nations that make the American ethos. She sees herself as an example of the “pickle”, the epitome of a consummate writer. Manju Sampat points out thus: “Debby DiMartino the protagonist of the novel is a member of this ‘pickle’ generation, a free-wheeling spirit, who is out to carve her own destiny.” (Sampat 27)

Mukherjee has portrayed the protagonist Debby’s search for her identity in her novel *Leave It to Me* (1997). When the story unravels, Debby Di Martino is a fun-loving twenty-three-year old American girl. She is the adopted daughter of Manfred and Serena DiMartino, an Italian-American couple of Schenectady, New York. Her bio-parents are “lousy people who considered her lousier still and had left her to be sniffed at by wild dogs like a carcass in a mangy shade,” (*Leave It to Me* 10) in the desert of Rajasthan, India. The Gray Nuns of the sisters of Charity save the child, name her Faustine after a typhoon and send her to the United States for adoption. Debby’s immigration to the United States is different from that of other immigrants. As Stanley Stephen rightly comments, “In the context of diasporic dislocations, Debby’s immigration is quite different from that of others. Her dislocation is neither a willing nor a forced one. Genetic conflict begins in Debby very early in her life. The crossing of signals and the conflicting impulses are a result of the struggle between nature and nurture” (Stephen 97).

Debby begins her quest in Schenectady, New York. Debby’s search for true identity in the context of vanishing cultural boundaries enables Mukherjee to question the stereotypical notions of identity, culture and nationality. As a product of multi-racial mix, Debby feels she is lucky to be an orphan. She can lead her life the way she likes with the traits she has taken from different backgrounds. She thinks about her relationship with the DiMartino’s family: “You’re just on loan to the DiMartinos. Treat them nice, pay your rent, but keep your bags packed” (17). This line is suggestive of an expatriate’s longing for his/her land of origin.

Debby’s relationship with Wyatt in her teenage is significant for the main reason that Wyatt is the first one to ask her about adoption. Her development from an adolescent lover to a mature lover begins in the summer of her junior high school year. Francis A. Fong, her first mature Asian lover falls first for her voice over the telephone and then for her charm. Frankie is also an important person in Debby’s life because he is the chief force behind Debby’s search for her roots or identity. She likes Frankie’s fake stories of his childhood spent in Asia. It is clear that Frankie instigates a strong fascination for Asia in Debby’s mind. Frankie is her first guide in her search for identity. Both Debby and Frankie

have their needs. But they are different in the sense, Frankie needs to remember whereas Debby needs to discover her roots.

Despite being brought up in mainstream America, Debby is aware of being an exotic misfit, especially after her brief affair with Frankie Fong, her boss at telemarketing job. When Frankie jilts Debby in preference to a Chinese woman, she sets fire to his house he had given her and leaves Saratoga Springs in search of her “bio-parents”. She ignores the pleas of her foster-mother to stay with them and sets out for California to confront her bio-mom. In California, she picks up the name Devi from a vanity license plate and christens herself Devi Dee. Debby’s transformation is an important episode as Mukherjee interweaves Hindu mythology at this point in the novel. The prologue to the novel clearly states Mukherjee’s intention to use myth as a framework for the immigrant story of Devi Dee. When Debby learns that Devigaon, her birthplace 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 shapes her life.

Debby’s search for her “bio-mom” leads her to the Haight-Ashbury, the notorious hang-out of the hippies and drug dealers of San Francisco. Debby slips easily into this street’s culture, which pushes her into encounters with drop-outs like Stoop Man and Loco Larry and other marginalized people who befriend her here. As Wendy Brandmark points out: “Among the other rootless immigrants, the characters and convivial disorder of Haight Ashbury, she searches the clues to the mystery of her birth and discovers that her mother is Jess, a hippie turned successful business woman whose lover she shares, and that her father, Romeo Hawk, religious charlatan, sexual predator and a murderer, may have died in Indian jail.” (Brandmark 22) She lives a life of “mugged identities” as “recyclable trash”, while “whole people brawled inside her”. She thinks that her transformation as Devi Dee has made her stronger, quicker, sharper and wilder. She believes that she is at the point of her ‘real’ inheritance.

Devi Dee’s philosophy is “when you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything.” (67) As a foundling, Devi Dee has the right to capture not just a city but an entire neighbourhood and make a block or two into a home. Finally, Haight-Ashbury becomes her home, her space and her ‘homeland’. Though Devi Dee chooses Haight-Ashbury, by chance, it is in this place that her bio-parents spent the best and sensual part of their lives. Haight-Ashbury is the notorious hang-out of the hippies and drug dealers of San Francisco which now becomes the home of Devi too. She feels a kind of kinship with outlaws and dropouts. She learns a lesson from Haight that, “Nothing in appearance or behavior need cost a drop of dignity”. (69)

Debby’s bio-mom Jess was a hippie who became a victim of Romeo Hawk’s sexual treachery. Jess, being tired of American life after the Vietnam War came to India for the

purpose of mental comfort, and Romeo Hawk, the guru became her guide, her lover, her god, and used her as cover to rob, cheat and murder gullible foreign women. Jess confesses: “He made me wanton” (223). Debby cannot live in peace, because she bears the corruption and guilt of her bio-parents. The dilemma of the immigrant arises out of many factors and the solution to this could be to leave him/her on their own and the identity crisis to resolve itself just like the protagonist of the novel Debby who wants to be left alone to deal with her own self. So she decides to find out if she is someone special or just another misfit. She starts questioning: “Who are you when you don’t have a birth certificate, only a poorly typed, creased affidavit sworn out by a nun who signs herself Sister Madeleine, Gray Sisters of Charity? . . . And in place of memory, impressions of white-hot sky and burnt-black leaves? Nothing to keep you on the straight and narrow except star bursts of longing?” (16)

Devi Dee’s search for her bio-parents is caused by her curiosity about “mugged identities.” (16) Such a curiosity is instigated in her constantly by her companions like Wyatt, Frankie, Ham Cohan and Fred Pointer. Devi Dee leaves her adopted parents abruptly in search of her biological parents and to take revenge on them for abandoning her as a child. She is nostalgic about her past, and derives pleasure in her contact with people who have been associated with Asia. Devi Dee is special in the sense, she is a wonderful combination of the east and the west. Her mother is a Californian flower-child and her father is a Eurasian. As the detective, Fred pointer says, “You are pretty special Devi.... Two continents went into your making.” (105) Devi has gained a wealth of friends in the multi-racial, multi-ethnic society like the United States due to her exotic self. She could have contributed positively to the host culture with this rich background. But she longs for her ‘psychic legacies’ and wants to belong to a remote part of India where she was born. In the search for her true identity, she could have remade herself by drawing the best out of all cultures; instead she wants to indulge in her exotic self. She does not understand that she would be exotic and special only in a multi-ethnic society. She begins her search for the unreal and ends up as a wanderer because of the persuasion of the fascinating part of herself.

Debby’s search for her bio-mom, brings her in contact, with Ham, a film producer and later her lover, who plays a vital role in her search for her identity. She realizes that she is emotionally dependent on Ham. Ham introduces Devi Dee to Jess Du Pree, her bio-mom and owner of Leave It to Me, the hottest media escorting agency. Ham also arranges a detective called Fred Pointer to get more details about Devi Dee’s bio-parents. Rajeev Raj, Fred’s contact in India gives essential clues about Romeo Hawk/Haque, the bio-dad of Debby/Devi, a sex-guru, a serial killer and his harem of white hippies in the Seventies. Romeo Hawk comes in the guise of MaVaruna, an author escorted by Debby herself for

Leave It to me. He kills both Jess and Ham as a vengeance for spending his years in Indian jail due to Jess' witness at court. Devi, who has been a silent spectator so far, transforms herself as Devi, the avenging deity, kills her bio-father. Having accomplished her mission, she blends with the ultimate reality.

Mukherjee's protagonists confront a multicultural society and are well aware of their social reality. Their displacement, alienation and search for identity comprise for them a kind of process which cannot be avoided. Thus Mukherjee has effectively portrayed an immigrant woman's search for her identity in her adopted homeland.

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