

**“Myth and Reality” in Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave It to Me***

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**Abstract**

In world history, the dispersal of the Jews in different parts of the world away from their homeland is referred to as ‘diaspora’. The terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘expatriate’ in general refer to persons who live outside their country by choice. But in the works of ‘Bharati Mukherjee’ these two terms assume distinct connotations. Migration is as old as human history. The ‘immigrant’ willingly transforms herself / himself to fit in and absorb the best in the host culture. *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Leave It to Me* form a trilogy in Mukherjee’s oeuvre. The female probibi and Debby/Devi-are on a quest for real identity. The only difference among them is their varied subject positions and the places from where they begin their quests. Jasmine, a Punjabi widow, begins her quest in a village called Hasnapur, whereas Hannah Easton, the puritan girl begins hers in Massachusetts, Bay Colony. The adopted American girl Devi Dee begins her quest in Schenectady, New York. All the three protagonists are free-wheeling spirits who want to carve their own destiny. Devi Dee’s quest for true identity in the context of vanishing ethnic boundaries enables Mukherjee to problematise the stereotypical notions of identity, culture and nationality. Debby Devi, the protagonist kills her father Romeo Hawk when he unleashes a lot of violence. At the level of mythology, Devi Dee enacts the myth of Devi, killing Mahishasura.

**Key Words:** *Migration, diaspora, immigrant, expatriate, trilogy and stereotype.*

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**Introduction**

Migration is as old as human history. The Bible talks about the exodus of Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land. Exodus of a different kind and for a different purpose takes place every day in different parts of the world. In world history, the dispersal of the Jews in different parts of the world away from their homeland is referred to as ‘diaspora’.

The terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘expatriate’ in general refer to persons who live outside their country by choice. But in the works of ‘Bharati Mukherjee’ these two terms assume distinct connotations. The ‘immigrant’ willingly transforms herself / himself to fit in and absorb the best in the host culture. The immigrant experience, therefore, becomes a transformative process of the ‘self’ in its relation to society.

**Myth and Reality**

The idea for *Leave It to Me* came from a year spent by Mukherjee in Delhi twenty years before the publication of the novel. At that time the Delhi police created a sensation by arresting an Asian serial killer and three of his white-hippie-women accomplices. The man, it was said, had the knack of befriending, robbing and killing people, particularly tourists from Europe, the United States and Canada in brutal ways. The victims were in variably young backpackers who were deceived by the serial killer’s physical attraction. Mukherjee attended the trial which was conducted in a dusty courtroom in Delhi. There was tension in the court because the accused was also highly skilled at the art of escaping. The prisoner was a short muscular man with fiery eyes and arrogant manner. Mukherjee felt that she was in the presence of evil for the first time. She felt repelled and fascinated by the evil incarnate. It took twenty years for Bharati Mukherjee to convert this disturbing confrontation with evil into a novel.

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 Di Maartino, 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’ (L 10) in the desert of Rajasthan, India. The Gray Nuns of the Sisters of Charity save the child, christen her Faustino after a typhoon and

send her to the United States for adoption. 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 nature. While shoveling snow in Schenectady, Debby smells "heady hibiscus scented breezes" and feels the "tropical heat and humidity" (L 9-10). While composing rhyming couplets in high school, she stumbles on her "psychic legacies" (L 52).

Mukherjee's characters Tara Cartwright, Jasmine, Hannah, Tara Bishwapriya and Padma are passionate lovers, so is Debby. As a girl of thirteen, she falls for Wyatt, a twenty two year old graduate student at the University of Syracuse. Her relationship with Wyatt is significant for the prime reason that Wyatt is the first one to ask her about adoption. Besides, their relationship becomes a "power trip" (L 11) as Wyatt has all her police files. Wyatt leaves Debby abruptly with the prediction, "You know Debby, I can tell you're going to be tall and beautiful very soon, and someday you're going to be rich and powerful very soon, and someday you're going to be rich and powerful" (L 14).

As a product of multi-racial mix, Debby feels that she is lucky to be an orphan. She can programme her life the way she likes with the traits she has picked up from different back grounds. But it is difficult to explain to the Di Martinos that she needs to believe in a bigger picture as all orphans do. She thinks, "You're just on loan to the Di Martinos. Treat them nice, pay your rent, but keep your bags packed" (L 17). This view is in line with an expatriate's longing for his/her land of origin.

Debby's progression from an adolescent lover to a mature lover begins in the summer of that year. Francis A. Fong, her first mature Asian lover falls first for her voice over the telephone and then for her voluptuous charm. Frankie is also an important person in Debby's life because he is the prime mover behind Debby's search for roots. She likes Frankie's fabricated stories of his childhood spent in Asia. It is evident that Frankie kindles and fosters a strong fascination for Asia in the mind of Debby. Frankie himself 'as a lad of Asian genes' is her first mentor in her search for identity. He opens up a whole continent for Debby. Both Debby and Frankie have their needs. But they are different in the sense, Frankie needs to remember whereas Debby needs to discover. Swayed by Frankie's stories about Asia, Debby feels 'connected'. She wants to emulate Frankie's model of an 'immigrant.' In his case, there is no "crippling gratitude" and "Steerage" (L 29) to the host culture. Because of the changed political situation in Hong Kong, he relocates his family in New York. Frankie manages to change Debby's perspective of America. To Frankie, the New World is 'as green and crisp as a freshly counterfeited hundred-dollar bill' (32). If Frankie had not jilted Debby in preference to a Chinese woman, Debby would have married him or even been his concubine. Embittered and infuriated by Frankie's betrayal, Debby torches the house that Frankie had given her and leaves Saratoga Springs.

Despite this regression in her attempt to get 'connected', Debby continues her search for her bio-parents. She ignores her foster-mother's pleas not to leave her and sets out for San Francisco. Posed with different options, she decides to confront her "deadbeat mom" (L 59). On the Donner Pass, Debby picks up the name Devi from a vanity car plate and christens herself Devi Dee. Debby's transformation to Devi Dee is an important episode in the novel as this is the point at which Mukherjee interweaves Hindu mythology into the novel. The prologue clearly states the author's intention to use myth as a framework for the immigrant tale of Devi Dee.

Devi Dee realizes her fractured identity when strangers claim her as a fellow lost in China town. In MacDonald's, an Indian blurts, "wanna catch a new Amitav?" Deep down Devi Dee envies both the Chinese waiter and the Indian student. They know who they are and what they have inherited. They cannot pass off as anybody else, whereas Debby's identity is ambiguous. She thinks that her transformation as Devi Dee has made her stronger, quicker, sharper and rowdier. She believes she has come into possession of her 'real' inheritance.

"When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything" (67) is Devi Dee's philosophy. As a foundling, Devi Dee has the moral right to seize not just a city but an entire neighbourhood and fashion a block or two into a home. Finally, Haight-Ashbury becomes her home, her space and her turf. Though Devi Dee's choice of Haight-Ashbury is coincidental, it is in this place that her bio-parents spent the best and sensual part of their lives. She makes friends with street people like Duvet Man, Tortilla Tim, Gabriel, Beamer Bob, Snorting Sam and Whammy Pammy. She feels a kind of kinship with outlaws and dropouts. The lesson that Devi Dee learns from Haight is, "Nothing in appearance or behavior need cost a drop of dignity" (L 69).

The next person who is crucial in Devi Dee's quest is Ham the filmmaker and her future lover. 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. Her job is to accompany authors on promotional tours of their books. 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 vital clues about Romeo Hawk, a sex-guru, a serial killer and his harem of white hippies in the Seventies. Fred Pointer dies under mysterious circumstances. Romeo Hawk comes in the guise of Ma Varuna, an author escorted by Leave It to Me. He kills both Jess Du Pree and Ham. Devi, who has been a mute spectator so far, transfigures herself as Devi, the avenging deity, kills her bio-father and merges with the elements of Nature.

The title of the novel, *Leave It to Me* is very significant. The title can be interpreted in many ways. It could be a statement of an immigrant who wants to remake/reinvent himself/herself on his/her own terms. Immigrant experience is essentially an individual experience. Devi Dee wants to be left alone to deal with her fragmented self. At another level, the novel deals with the universal theme of the struggle between Good and Evil. As the ferocity of Evil in the world becomes rife, Goddess Devi wants the mortal beings to leave it to her to deal with. As Nature also

forms a part of the apocalyptic moment, Leave It to Me is the call of Nature which is ready to dispense natural justice according to the rules governing the universe.

Devi Dee's image changing self comes to light when she understands that she has different features of her sister Angela. Her junior-year growth spurt ends leaving her nearly at five-nine. She is a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an exotic girl in a very American town. Her voice is a throaty whisper in a family of choir singers and a town of chirpy sopranos. But she is not tall, beautiful or exotic enough to trust any of it, and she makes up her mind to find out if she is someone special or just another misfit (16). 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)

Actually Devi Dee's search for her bio-parents is triggered by her curiosity about "mugged identities" (16). Such a curiosity is fostered constantly and Fred Pointer, Curiosity about one's unknown past is understandable, but the goal of an 'immigrant' should be to master the past and head on to the future. Instead, Devi Dee burns the edifice she has built in the host culture and sets out on a search for her bio-parents. Under the pretext of taking revenge on her bio-parents, she traverses the length and breadth of the host culture. Ultimately, as irony would have it, she discovers her adopted land. She discards her foster parents and neglects her participation in a big life in the United States. She romanticizes and exoticises her past. She derives vicarious pleasure in her contact with people who have been associated with Asia. Mukherjee's writings explore the theme of the making of new Americans and the consequent transformation of America. These themes have thrust themselves into her fiction because of her personal daily experiences as a naturalized American citizen.

"You are pretty special Devi [...] two continents went into your making" (105) says Fred Pointer, the detective. Devi Dee is special in the sense, she is a wonderful combination of the East and the West. Her mother is a Californian and her father is a Eurasian. Born in India, she is also the product of the sensual phase in the cultural history of the world. Her exotic self has won her a wealth of friends in the multiracial, multiethnic society like the United States. With this rich background, she could have contributed positively to the host culture. But she craves for her 'psychic legacies' and wants to belong to a remote part of India where she was born. As her identity is yet to be fixed, she could have remade herself drawing the best out of all cultures. But she wants to wallow in her exotic self. She does not understand that she would be exotic and special only in a multi-ethnic society. Tempted by the intriguing part of herself, she begins her search for the illusory and ends up as a drifter. Her fragmented self is the product of the tug of forces between the adopted land and the land of origin. Such a conflict does not help in integrating the self but instead results in further change of the self.

There are other ‘immigrant’ characters in the novel that are worth mentioning. The Martinos are ‘immigrants’ in the ideal sense of the term. They are European immigrants from Italy settled in the United States. They have remade themselves in the adopted culture. But, Frankie Fong, the ex-lover of Devi Dee is a typical ‘expatriate’. As an expatriate Asian, he distances himself from the host culture and differentiates himself from others. In his mind, Asian and American are two different mental constructs. Frankie believes that Asian’s philosophy of life is to convert their desires into basic needs whereas Americans convert even their basic needs into desires. This makes a lot of difference between the Asians who live in order to earn and hoard whereas Americans earn only to live. Frankie philosophises, “Americans convert needs into wants; Asian wants into needs” (35). Frankie lives in America only to transact business. But Devi Dee does not belong to any of these groups.

As in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee has made use of the Hindu myth of Maha Devi bring out effectively the struggle between the good and the evil. The final encounter between Devi and Romeo Hawk has more to do with justice rather than revenge. This is the point at which the story gains mythical strength. When asked why she investigated such a disturbing personal encounter with evil through the lens of myth, Mukherjee said:

I wrote the story of Goddess Devi in the prologue to provide a template for reading the novel. I hoped the prologue would allow the reader to react to Debby/Devi’s actions. In the myth I use, Devi the goddess slays the Buffalo Demon because she is charged with that mission by the Cosmic Spirit. The Cosmic Spirit makes her its agent for ridding the world of evil on that occasion. I intended for all of Debby/Devi’s experiences to be interpreted by the reader as visitations from God. [...] Jess, Debby’s biological mother, is villainous on a pettier, more human scale. She is just a flower child gone nasty. The story of the Goddess Devi-also known as Maha Devi or the Great Goddess-is also very much a part of my personal experience. It is recited with great feeling in Sanskrit during the most important Bengali Hindu religious festivals. I can still hear my father, who was a scientist and the founder of a successful pharmaceutical company. Chanting this musical passage about Goddess Devi slaying the Buffalo-Demon in his clear-toned, authoritative voice. (Conversation 1)

Debby’s self-transformation into Devi in the story is of great significance though Mukherjee has deliberately underplayed it. The story of Devi Dee is a replay of the episode narrated in “Devi Mahatmya,” a famous poem sung to the glory of the Goddess. It recounts the story of the Goddess’s Victory over the buffalo demon Mahishasura. The Hindu mythology talks about three kinds of states. The ‘Sattva’ is pure state. The ‘Devas’ represent this pure state. The ‘Rajas’ is a mixture of pure and impure state, which is represented by the humans. The ‘Tamas’ is an impure state. The Demons represent this state. The impure state has to be destroyed only to protect. The myth of Devi’s victory over Mahishasura is used to enact this drama of protection through destruction. Mahishasura the buffalo-demon is the King of Asuras. In the battle between Gods and Asuras, the Asuras become victorious and Mahishasura becomes the King of Heaven in Indira’s place. Subsequently, the Gods’



great rays of light shoot out, unite into one light and take a feminine form. This is Devi, the potent goddess. Each of the Gods gives her his weapon. So, the Goddess is eight armed with a lasso, a trident, a fire tipped spear, a demon-splitting disc, bow and arrow, a death-dealing staff, a thunder-sparkling axe, a pitcher of water and necklace of blessed head. She leads her soldiers on a lion's back.

The Buffalo-Demon is the inheritor of brute strength and physical appearance of his buffalo mother and the deceit and rage of his demon father. The demon goes to death some of Devi's soldiers. Some are stomped. Some are lacerated with its hooves. He tears the sky with his horns and scoops out mounds of soil as mountains. He churns the calm waves of the ocean into fatal hurricanes. In other words, he unleashes bestial hate on earth. When he is about to declare himself as the supreme ruler over earth and heaven, Devi flings her lasso around his neck, pierces, strikes and slashes his demon flesh. She pins him to the ground only to sever his buffalo head. The conflict between Devi and the demon is the pralaya. 'Pra' means *special* and 'laya' means *end*. This end is called 'cosmic disillusion' because this is where the physical become psychic and matter becomes spirit.

Bharati Mukherjee captures this moment of revelation and cosmic (dis)illusion in final scene of confrontation when Devi Dee assume the goddess and kills Romeo Hawk, the monster with all her might. Having accomplished her mission, she merges with the ultimate reality.

### **Conclusion**

It is quite natural for Mukherjee who has been brought up in the Hindu, brahminical Indian tradition to fall back on Hindu mythology to encounter the eschatological reality. *Leave It to Me* exists at three levels-the level of fiction, mythology and science. At the level of fiction, Debby Devi, the protagonist kills her father Romeo Hawk when he unleashes a lot of violence. At the level of mythology, Devi Dee enacts the myth of Devi, killing Mahishasura. Mukherjee has used the Electra myth in the Triangular love relationship between Ham Cohan (lower), Jess Jess Du Pree (mother) and Devi Dee (daughter). At the level of scientific reality, the location of the confrontation is San Francisco Bay Area. It lies on the fault lines of the world, particularly San Andreas Fault. Seismic activity is common along the lines of the coast.

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