



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

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ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

**DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE**

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### **Re- creating one self through violence in Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave It To Me***

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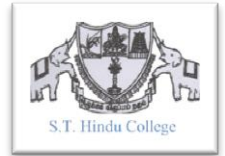
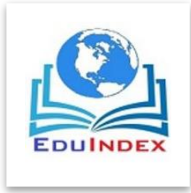
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In Bharati Mukherjee's fictions like *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Leave It To Me* the protagonists struggle for real identity. The female protagonists begin their struggle as a Punjabi widow, British East India Company Man's wife Hannah Easton, an adopted Eurasian from New York Devi Dee do not want to be satisfied with what they are. The protagonists neither remain steadfast to the past nor they are away from it. It is found that the past will have a strong hold on the future of the protagonists. With multiethnic background the novels are also categorised as a woman's struggle in search of identity. When Jasmine raises against patriarchal society to build her identity, Hannah translates herself creating a uniqueness. Devi Dee, unable to withstand the pull of the past, not satisfied with the happy present re-examines her past. Mukherjee provides various forms of empowerment and eventual liberation to her heroines in dispersed situations. In a context of dissolving boundaries Devi Dee's quest for identity is unique and great.



Mukherjee had the idea of *Leave It To Me* when the Delhi Police arrested the Asian serial killer and his white hippie accomplices. With his capacity to befriend young women hippies from west ie., United States, Europe and Canada, he exploited them and killed them brutally. Mukherjee thought about the consequences of the hippie life and predicaments of their children. She took twenty years to put the incident into a novel. When her house was burgled in 1994, along with the draft of the novel, she was traumatised.

The novel *Leave It To Me* portrays the life of Debby Dee, the protagonist, an Eurasian orphan adopted by an upstate New York family from Italy. Debby was born in India and is adopted by Di Martino family. At twenty three she comes to know that she is an adopted child of Di- Martino she travels through America in search of her biological parents, interacting with a band of aging former hippies and Vietnam veteran suffering from psychosis. Her search leads to a village Laxmipur, Devigaon in India, deserted by her parents, she was raised by the Gray sisters. Fred pointer, the hired detective of Devi Dee informs her that her mother is a hippie and her father is founder of the ashram and her father is the founder of the ashram and a serial killer Romeo Hawk Haque.

In the quarrel between Romeo Hawk and her mother, the child has been assumed to be dead, but saved by the nuns, helped in the adoption of the child to an Italian family living in New York. Since an exile's agony is the obsession of Bharati Mukherjee, she excels in the narration of the predicaments of the protagonist.

Mukherjee's alienated individual's immigration is neither a willing one nor a forced one. The world of immigration and its enigma has been thrust upon her. Devi Dee could have been happy with her life as an adopted daughter



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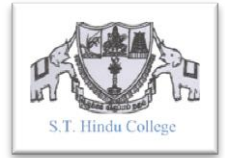
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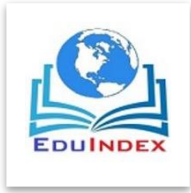
of Di-Martino. But Shubha Mukherjee in her article “The Search of the Past in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave It To Me*” views

Life Moves, on situations change, destinations diverge and the person moves on with the flow; but deep within, the heart speaks of a different location, a sense of loss, the dormant nostalgia. The pull is so severe on both sides that recognition becomes a complicated challenge and endurance becomes a compromising adjustment. But neither the heart not the mind is ready for any kind of conciliation and amendment, collaboration and endorsement. The worried and confused self goes astray unable to decide the legitimacy of the past and the authenticity of the future. (26)

At the age of thirteen, Devi Dee shoplifts and during her punishment-weekly sessions, she meets Wyatt who hints about her adoption. Wyatt predicts “you know Debby, I can tell you re going to be tall and beautiful very soon, and some day you’re going to be rich and powerful’ (14). Debby Dee is disturbed about ‘mugged identities’ (16). She feels, from the novel

I was a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an exotic girl in a very American town. I’d always had this throaty whisper of a voice, couldn’t raise it above a satiny purr, in a family of choir singers and a town of chirpy sopranos.(16)

When the Martinos try to pacify her, she refuses to be pacified “How could I explain to a Schenectady Di-Martino that destiny’s the bully you can’t out punch or outsmart” (16). Without birth Certificate but only a creased affidavit, without father’s name and mother’s name Debby feels she is an non-existence. To know about her parents Debby Dee is ready to accomplish any action



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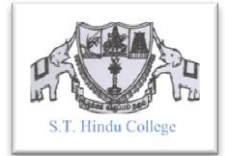
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expected of Wyatt. But she is confident she could do harm if her mission is not completed. From the novel

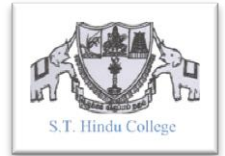
She'll do anything as a for love, or what seems like love.  
She'll interpret anything as a little sign, she';;  
believe anything he says, she'll do anything to prove  
herself worthy of his notice. And then the time will come  
when she begins to feel her own power.(13)

Knowing Debby is capable of any violent action, Wyatt leaves her abruptly. A product of Multi-racial genes, she feels

Debby Di-Martino is a lie. Whoever my parent  
intended for me to be never existed. That unclaimable  
part of myself is what intrigues me, the part that  
come to life in a desert village and had the name  
Baby Clear Water Iris – Daughter until it was  
christened in a catholic orphanage. That's the part  
I want to remember (10).

Debby's longing for her land of origin, her mental voyage from America to India is not only a search for her bio-parents but an exploration of race and culture, the idea of dislocation and assimilation. She is unbothered about her bio-mom's hippie origin for many years and her adopted parents kept it a secret, showering love and affection on her. Yet the pull from within is great that Debby is troubled by her orphan indented and indulges in her search for roots. From the novel

An orphan doesn't know how to ask, afraid of answers,  
and hopes instead for revelation. Ignorance is n't bliss  
But it keeps risky knowledge at bay. I never badgered  
Mama to tell me all she knew about my toddler days.  
Mama must have liked it that way too. She kept  
my origins simple, hippie backpacker from



Fresno and Eurasian lover boy, both into smocking, dealing and stealing. She left my bio data minimal: some sort of police trouble my hippie birth mother had got herself into meant that the Gray Nuns in Devigaon Village had had to take me in; one of the nuns had renamed me Faustino after a typhoon, but Mama'd changed it officially to Debby after Debbie Reynolds, her All-time favourite.

Francis A Fong, a Chinese immigrant brings hope in Debby to know more about south Asian Countries especially India. Through him she wants to know about her parents. Francis A Fong is attracted by her voice and her voluptuous beauty. Though Debby knows that Francis cooks up his childhood days. He kindles her desire to search her parents and roots. Francis himself is a 'salad of Asian genes' He has told Debby he has visited Calcutta, Bangkok, Saigon, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta, Sydney , Francis' description of Asian towns, dogs, bats make her feel envious of his sure past. From the novel

To a cornered rat, hunger and greed, ambition and wish fulfilment, are synonyms.

Frankie needed to remember, and I needed to discover (26)

Though she wants to follow the model of Francis policy as an' immigrant', there is no "crippling gratitude" and "steerage" (29) for the host land. She feels

I can imagine myself into any life. I can wrench myself away from a thousand backgrounds. I can assess damage, then just walk away. Nothing shocked me in Frankie's tales, nothing seemed absurd or false. (28)

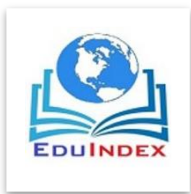
The whole Francis family have settled in California because of the political situation in Hong Kong. He plans to make a flash movie giving Debby a role as



an orphan and expresses his wish to built Fong Empire. When he comes to know that Debby is also an Asian, he is convinced he could establish his business as well as making movies. Frankie said, “I *Knew* there was something exotic about you (33). He is happy that he could fulfil his dreams with Debby. He complements that her eyes are expressive. “It’s the way you walk. Like women in Burma balancing jugs on their heads...”(33). Debby understands Frankie needs an non-American actress like her. Through him she wants to track her bio-parents. She finds out

I had power over him. I was what he wanted, what he aspired to, and could never have.  
I didn’t give a damn about what women in Burma wore for hats. “I”, adopted” My voice sounded firmer, bolder, the second time. Not- *I was adopted* but *I am adopted* meaning I want you to know that we’ve both invented ourselves, you couldn’t have found another woman as much like you as I am if you’d taken out personals.(34)

When Debby wants to marry Frankie, he prefers a Chinese woman suggested by his mother when Frankie’s mother suggestively presented her with a toilet kit Debby is astounded, runs to the Animal Shelter where deserted animals have been sheltered. Debby wants to adopt an multi – racial dog, a Japanese-German-French hybrid not chosen for adoption by anyone. She identifies herself with the dog.”It was bred like me, with crossed signals and conflicting impulses” (47). She burns the house provided by Frankie bringing out her violent behaviour. “In the hot harsh light of clarity I saw for myself the difference between justice and vengeance” (53). She is sure “He couldn’t afford to invite too much investigation, not with the undocumented Chinese aliens in his basement....”(53)



Despite her adopted parents' plea to drop her search for bio-parents, Debby signs with Finders /Keepers, a family reuniting service. She picks up the name Devi from a vanity car plate and christens herself Devi Dee on the Donner Pass. One thinks "Goodbye Debby Di-Martino. Long live Devi Dee" (65). She feels "Reborn, admitted, launched into clean, conquerable gravity free space. Even the air felt young, innocent, healthy" (63).

Devi arm-wrestled Debby. I was quicker, stronger as Devi: my intuitions were sharper, my, impulsiveness rowdier. As Devi, I came into possession of my mystery genes. (64)

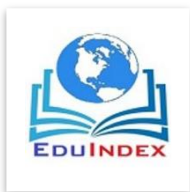
Devi is envious of her adopted sister Angie, Nicole who has gave sure past and assured future.

Nicole's a true Di Martino. She can afford to be hooked on Daniele Steele and fairy tales, because she has a family, because she has a family history that's corroborated by uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins like Angie. (64)

In China town, Debby / Devi envies even the Chinese waiter and the Indian students

The guys were geeks, but they knew who they were, They knew what they'd inherited. They couldn't pass themselves off as anything else. No evasions, No speculations, no let's –pretends. They didn't see themselves as special or freakish. (66)

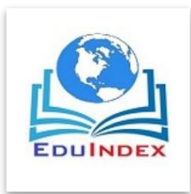
Her identity is ambiguous and "when you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything" (67) is her philosophy Haight-Ashbury becomes her home where years ago her biological parents spent their sensual lives. She becomes friendly



with street people like Stoop Man. Duvet Man Vanuatu Man Tortilla Tim, Loco Larry Gabriel, Beamer Bob, Snorting Sam, Whammy Pammy Devi understands “Nothing in appearance or behaviour need cost a drop of dignity. I didn’t look jobless and didn’t feel homeless No sour odor of dim futurity”(69). From the article “*Leave It To Me: A Persistence of Immigration*” by T.R. Shashipriya

She acquaints herself to tapping businessman for fives and tens, picking up pennies and dimes, paying attention to the bases of parking meters, then lifting wallets from too tight jeans, snatching purses off coffee house tables etc. thus she gains a lot of knowledge about the city moving around. She starts following the Hare Krishnas, Buddhists Baptists, and black Muslims who entwined love and profit, charity and sex faith and ecology, space and time and combinations she had not stumbled upon. She encounters various colourful ex-hippie personalities who, having given up the flower trail, had settled down to middle age respectability. Yet some people still lived on with their our casual living codes. (240)

Devi stays in Haight-Ashbury and meets Ham Cohan the film director. While Devi refuses to move her car from the shooting location, Ham agrees to give her a role in his film. She uses her gift of gab, coaxing as well as threatening Ham tries to get helped by him. She mentions about her connection with Francis Fong which impresses Ham Cohan providing her with the details of the detective Fred Pointer. Ham Cohan was also a hippie who lived with flower women like Laura Ann, Melanie, Loni, Jess, Cindi, the Holbrook twins. He had been living with Devi’s mother Jess Du Pree. Since Cohan is scary of Devi, he says “No force in nature stronger than a child trying to find her mother” (88). Fred pointer accepts to look for Devi’s parents. To know more about her mother and the hippie life style she lives with street dwellers.

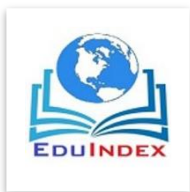


All my neighbours had come home to the Beulah rooming house from somewhere else. Vanuatu man was n't the only war-maimed. Every thing was flow, a spontaneous web without compartments. Somalia, Vanuatu, Vietnam, Belgium, India-Schenectady. Forty years ago it was a big one family house, probably Italian, We shared toilets and kitchens. What counted was attitude. *Faithandhope* I made that my daily mantra. Trust coincidence aim for revenge. *Faithandhope*.

Wherever she could use violence, she used to get necessary information. She is disappointed when Fred's information from India is incomplete. She kicks the waiter who prevented her from going, threatened them to complain to INS. From Fred's reports, she gets details about her bio-parents. "What choice does an orphan have Ignorance is no choice" (107). Ham introduces her to Jess Du Pree, the owner of Media escort agency Leave It to Me. Devi Dee concludes that people like Fred Pointer, Ham Cohan, Jess DuPree, Loco Larry are people of their age - The Vietnam war, hippie life. She feels that justice should be done on their part. About Ham, Devi opines

He, Jess and Fred had marched for peace, for civil rights, for women, gays, migrants, had gone to jail, signed petitions, run for city councils, run radical campaigns. And now they also drove big cars, lived large lives, flew business class, ate at the best restaurants, drank the best wines took massages, ski trips, private cruises. They climbed together, deep sea dove and white water rafted together. It was their community –hedonist thing. Food, revolution sex, art, ecology, drugs, music, books, writers, films. Epicures, sensualists. They cozied with movie stars, politicians, best-selling writers under *fatwa*, but it wasn't a big deal to them. (166)

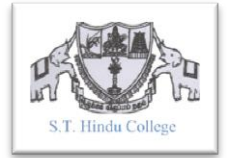
Devi understands that hippie like Ham Cohan, Jess DuPree, Beth Hendon, Sandy, Fred Pointer were epicureans unbothered about the consequences of their lawless life. Ham Cohan, without knowing that Jess DuPree is Devi's bio-



mom, narrates her life in Asian countries, how Jess lived with Romeo Hawk, her suicide attempt of leaping from the Bay Bridge, the arrest by the Delhi Police, Jess' escape and her return to US, her present life running an author-escort agency called "Leave It to Me". Devi comes to know that Larry has been working as Napalm shooter in the villages of Vietnam killing innocent civilians, children and old people. All these yester-year hippies lead a very happy life in the present. She steals a gun from Larry's house. Seeing both Hendon and Larry walking hand in hand, she kills both Hendon's accomplice Sandy who lived with Ham Cohan changing her life style and hair style wished by him. Fred points us killed mysteriously. Through each one of the characters she comes to get information about her mother. To quote the article "*Leave It to Me*". A Persistence of Immigrate by T.R. Shashipriya

The writer thus brings in several characters that help Devi in many ways to find her parents. She repeats the theme used in the novel Jasmine where we find the individuals dilemma in the American multiethnic society. But here the context is new. The Vietnamese war had made people very cruel. Devi also feels there is a world of difference between justice and vengeance and she sees with clarity that what she is seeking for, is justice. So she starts killing people like Stark Swann, Beth and Larry as she thinks "What the women who give of their blissful selves of their own accord and for as long as you want them to, the real women, do" (163). Fred meets an accidental death. This teaches Devi something new about Berkeley. It was a kind of fraternity, the only place in America where it could be taken for granted that everyone had a relation with everyone. It was a time of dark possibility discovery and forgiveness (242).

Devi is deeply hurt and could not forgive people who consider her pain as something dispensable, "Just a garbage sack through out on the hippie trail" (13). She thinks



Vietnam wasn't a war : it was a divide. On one side, the self-involved idealists, on the other, we the napalm scarred kids. In between, a country that elected leaders, who got boys like Larry to pull the triggers. (167)

Romeo Hawk's arrival to US as Ma Varuna takes a twin in the novel. Finding out that Romeo is her bio father Devi herself gives the details of Jess DuPree and Hamilton to him. Having been tracked by the Interpol through Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India, Romeo is sentenced with nine consecutive life sentences for killing nine white women hippies. Devi's sacking by her mother Jess DuPree, her refusal to identify the child resulting in the adoption to Di Mortines by Gray Sisters made to her show Jess' hide out to Romeo. She is happy to see the killings of Ham and Jess at the hands of Romeo. But she is not ready to forgive Romeo also, she kills Romeo and is carried away by the waves.

T.R. Shashipriya opines

In the postcolonial diasporic context violence is the other face of power and it gains an understanding. The women protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee adopt violence to fight against the evil they face and move further courageously.... Devi burns the house given by Francis A. Fong and kills the friends of Jess DuPree to create fear in her.... through destruction they re-create themselves. (244)

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