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Assimilation, Acceptance and Metamorphosis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave it to me*

Rahul Yadav

Research Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages

M.D.U. Rohtak

The present paper deals with assimilation, acceptance and Metamorphosis of female protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave it to me*. In this fiction the protagonist, Debby/Devi in search of her true identity she assimilated herself in various circumstances and accepted all challenges of life. She undergoes metamorphical changes by moulding her name according to various situation, also her attitude, and personality. To search her exist in new environment she uses tools of assimilation, acceptance and metamorphosis.

Bharati Mukherjee occupies the familiar privileged position of a well-bred post-colonialist — one who has been born brought up and educated in a Third World country and has achieved literary repute in the American academia. Her entire corpus is replete with uneasy troubled stories about expatriates, their alienation and loss of identity. Though none of the novels is actually autobiographical, the novelist's expatriate experiences in Canada and then the immigrant experience in United States have coloured the perception of her characters. Identity for Mukherjee, was something totally different before going to the West. Identity in India, was associated with a number of things like ancestral soil and genealogy. After moving to the West, Mukherjee realised that she had new things in store for her. She struggled for assimilation and acceptance on foreign land. To earn and acquire new identity, she exploited her complete potential. She was first an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally an immigrant in the United States. All her experiences, she shared with the help of her writings. As Farah Nuruddin states in her article, "Why I Write", that "I write because a theme has chosen me... and I write to recover my missing half" (John 44).

Man is a "being in the world," and the meaning of objective reality is given by man's involvement with his world. Thus, human experience should properly be the centre of concern for philosophy of human life. What we are and what we do is a reflection of our experience of the world and ourselves. Our consciousness of ourselves as sensate beings, memories of our past and visions of our future given identity, continuity, and purpose to our lives. We know, "reality" out there only through the inside "reality" of personal and subjective experience which give it meaning and substance.

According to Existentialists, existence precedes essence. For them, man first exists and then he looks at the world, thinks of it and acts in it as an individual. His contemplations and his actions are possible only because of his existence: existence, thus, is the first principal from which all else flows, it is clear that there is nothing like 'human nature' or essence. He is like a blank sheet, a tabula rasa. He never comes in the world as finished product, as ready-made, as well-defined, rather he defines himself in course of his life in the world. We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world —and defines himself afterwards. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre 28).

Expatriation is a complex state of the being, characterized by a wistful longing for the past. Other things also finds its way in, such as the pain of exile, homelessness, memories of the ancestral home, the clash between the dual selves, the alien atmosphere, and the refusal to accept the new identity forced on by the new environment. According to Christine Gomez in her article, "The On-Going Quest of Bharati Mukherjee," states:

The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as a refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country. (John 46)

Assimilation and acceptance in the new culture appear impossible if the past is not forgotten. The Protagonist caught between culture and this filling of rootlessness or in-betweenness poses before her the problem of trying to maintain a balance between the dual affiliation. The process of survival of the person between the "home of origin" and the "world of adoption" is the voyage undertaken in the whole process from "alienation" to final "assimilation" According to Existentialists, man is free and has choice also he can grow and develop but outer environment has its specific role and influences human being. 'Being' can be 'Becoming' after encounter with external factors.

As Rudyard kipling says:
 But there is neither East nor West,
 Border, now Breed, nor Birth
 When two strong men stand face to face,
 Though they come from the end of the earth

He says, "never the twain shall meet," it is a general truth and it does not preclude the possibility of meaningful meeting. He is aware of the fact that meaningful meetings need "strong men" (Sarangi 283). Strong men transcend the tyrannical discipline of a dull society and create their own values. They commit themselves to a cause in their effort to change society and are able to overcome life's complexities while weak men make vain efforts to escape from them. In short, man must change mere existence into essence by asserting his freedom and developing his own character. The protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's novels have potential to exist with free will and choice. They have capacity for developing awareness and self-consciousness. At the same time, the outer world also influences ones freedom and existence and the concepts of 'participation', 'presence', and 'encounter' are essential for a person to exist in the outer world.

Change is the phenomenon of life. The world has faced tremendous changes since the time of evolution of living beings on earth. This change can also call metamorphosis. The metamorphosis reading of literature enables one to understand the changes that have been undertaken by someone in life style or in the forms & themes of literature. When there is movement in both space & time, human beings experiences radical changes in their lifestyles. Usually this theme is common in the writings of the immigrant when he/she move from the home country to another for various reasons. In *Leave it to me*, the protagonist undergoes metamorphosis in relation to her name as well as attitude according to adverse circumstances coming to her meanwhile her voyage of life.

Humans have an inherent capacity to grow and develop; they can change, make choices and determine their own destinies. Consequently, the clinician cannot treat a human being as an object to be studied and manipulated, but instead must enter with him in an authentic encounter in which they share their existence one with the others. Existence in new world requires transformation for which one should forget older values and accept new

values. Jyoti in *Jasmine*, Hannah Easton in *The Holder of the World*, and Debby in *Leave it to Me* assimilate themselves in new culture, on new-land, only after leaving older world and its nostalgia.

The novels *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World*, and *Leave it to Me* show the journey of protagonists from an expatriate to an immigrant. Assimilation and acceptance of new culture with the help of metamorphosis is shown by writer through these novels. Through her protagonists Mukherjee tries to unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural reality through a series of adventures which they undertake during their adventurous journeys. The present study is an attempt to explore ones existence in the above light of personal experience, freedom. Protagonist's will to power to assimilate, accept the new culture and undergoes required metamorphosis to exist herself in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *leave it to Me*.

Leave it to Me, Mukherjee's protagonist Debby is a hybrid Anglo-Indian orphan, abandoned in India, and adopted by an Italian American immigrant family. Debby, born Baby clear water Iris-Daughter, travels from Schenectady, New York, to the San Francisco Bay Area in search of her biological parents. The quest stimulates and terminates in violent murders. Like *Jasmine* and *Hannah*, Debby's identity is not confined to biology; rather, her character enforces the heterogeneity of being American that is possible when the person has full potential to exploit ones free will and choice and also has enough strength to face adverse circumstances and exist oneself. As S. Krishnamoorthy Aithal declares, "[W]hatever Debby essentially is, she is best described as a transnational". Liberated Debby who makes a lifetime-for-every-name look like a possibility for any exuberant immigrant. The prologue of *Leave it to Me* furnishes the story of "Devi, the eight armed, flame-bright, lion-riding dispenser of divine Justice," in order to plant the seeds of the protagonist's later transformation from Debby Di Martino to Devi (Holzer 172.) Debby Di Martino, the abandoned daughter of a hippie tourist and a serial killer, metamorphosis into Devi in order to mete out violent justice in the world.

Mukherjee follows the development of her voice from the initial narrative omniscience of her early novels to the subsequent narrative intimacy, realized confidently in *Leave it to Me*, in a 1997 interview: "[A]s I've lost that wisdom, that distance, and become closer to my material or followed my feelings, and just my own life, to be expressed... the choice of point of view has become first person." Fakrul Alam attributes this evolution of voice to Mukherjee's dedication to "celebrating immigrant voices instead of treating the life of exiles and expatriates with condescension" (Holzer 171).

In *Leave it to me* (1997), the protagonist Debby is an Eurasian orphan who is adopted by an upstate New York family of Italian origin. Born in India and raised as an adopted child, Devi Dee travels through America to find her bio mom. By the time she arrives in San Francisco and interacts with a band of aging ex-hippies and a psychotic Vietnam veteran, her identity crisis looms large. It leads her to track down her bio-parents in Laxmipur, Devigaon, India and the orphanage where she was raised — the Gray Sisters — "Soeuss Grises" — sore Grease — in Mount Abu. She learns from Fred, her hired detective, that her mother was the hippie follower of a sex-age guru, and father the founder of the ashram, serial killer Romeo Hawk Haque. The offspring of this unlikely liaison, Devi Dee — presumed missing or dead — is saved by nuns and shipped abroad to America, where she is raised as the adopted child of the Di Martino family. Twenty three years later, having graduated from SUNY Albany, she sets out to seek her bio-mom in off-beat California. This novel makes the predicament of the protagonist crystal-clear (Shashipriya 236).

In *Leave it to Me*, Debby, as an orphan has to find out not only who exactly her biological parents were, and what part, if any, have contributed to her personality. In terms of race, being part white, part Pakistani, part Vietnamese, she feels at first that she can't claim any ethnic group as her own the way that her Italian American sister can. She leaves her comfortable home and her Italian American foster parents and heads for California in search of her genetic parents. She travels to San Francisco and then to India to find information about them. As she embarks on her search, she changes her name to Devi without knowing the Hindu origin of the name.

The twenty three year old protagonist, though leading a happy life, is tempted to find out her real parents. Manfred and Serena Di Martino are the hardworking and religious couple who give her security as parents. As Debby Di Martino she feels that she has no recognition in society. The idea is instigated in her by Wyatt, a 22 year old graduate student at Syracuse studying master's in social work when he takes her as his project. Debby grows up with the awareness of being different, the feeling that she is unwanted obstacle in a world that hurtles on towards its mysterious destinations. Probably her daring nature instigates her to take up the mission of finding her bio-parents. The nuns of the orphanage named her Faustine and her adopted parents call her Debby. Instead of dates and statistics at her age she had nightmares and fantasies — "in place of memory, impressions of white-hot sky and burnt-black leaves, she had only bursts of longing" (16). She feels herself an outsider. She is plagued by urges to violence, frightening over-reactions and dark mood-swings precipitated by both the actions of other and her unstable identity. With the Di Martinos she felt her life was unstable — "Treat them nice, pay your rent but keep your bags packed" (17).

Francis A. Fong a chinese immigrant, brings hope in Devi to know more of the country where her bio-mom and dad had been. His description of Asian countries stirred up her desire and she thought that it must have been her careless hippie mom's Asia. Devi feels she has power over Fong and that is what he wanted, aspired to and could never have. He wishes to make a flash movie to co-starring her as an orphan. He confides his dreams of the Fong Empire he would build by catering to American wants with Asian needs. She feels the truth of life in America. People took life in a different manner, "Americans convert needs into wants, Asian, wants into needs" (35). The charm of Frankie Fong was the charm of foreignness of a continent but she did not claim, and it threatened her. It ended up the opposite and she thinks she was bored with crossed signals and conflicting impulses. She burns the house provided to her by Frankie before vacating the place and this act of her shows her violent behaviour.

Debby signs as a client with finders/keepers, a family reuniting service in Albany. Her adopted parents feel sorry for what is done by her but she is adamant in her search. To her it is not love that is enough in the face of need — "It would never be. Need teased out the part of me that the Orphanage had whited out pin my best interest. It's about me and them" (50). The love shown by the Martinos was very soothing to Debby. When questioned of the reason by her mama she replies, "It's not because I miss them Mama: It's about medical history and psychic legacies" (52). She knew that "if the world has finite supply of bad days and nice days, I owed it to myself to grab as many nice ones as I could go for bliss, dump pain, pity and rage on somebody else. Pursue happiness; that's the American way" (61). She wants to exploit her full potential and establish her existence on the new land. She aspires to locate her rooms somewhere.

Mukherjee expresses the immigrant sensibility through Devi. She claims to be no more an expatriate but makes an attempt to assimilate, acclimatize herself in the country to

which she is no more a newcomer. Even in San Francisco when people mistake her identity, Debby tuned to Devi, envies them as they had an identity of themselves and she was in search of it. She was not a geek, a freak, or a weirdo. She thinks, "For now why not be Devi, the Tenderloin powder, all allure and strength and zero innocence, running away from shame running to revenge?" (66-67). She tried her best to assimilate and accept the new environment. She also adopts required transformations to exist herself. She gains a lot of knowledge about the city moving around with the help of her own observations and experiences. 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.

Devi lives in the new city quite daringly to reach her goal. She faces all the ill treatments of the hippie world and doesn't mind any sort of changes that happen to her. The arrival of a film company run by Hamilton Cohan, for their shooting brings help to Devi. Hamilton seemed to be a man with more needs than wants. He liked to deal in human vanities, did favours, admired and rescued people. He helps her in finding out her mother, Fred Pointer, the expensive investigator. Trust, coincidence and aim for revenge were the principles she followed and adjusted herself to the new environment —. "The bay area was good to me I intended to be good for it" (99). Fred tells Devi about sex guru serial killer and his harem of white hippies. The killer was supposed to have illegal relations with many of the hippies. Enthusiasm makes Devi find out more details because she thinks, "What choice does an orphan have? Ignorance is no choice"(107). But many unnatural things, killings and threatening happen in San Francisco. So Devi thinks convergence is coincidence, and, "A daughter bumps into her runaway mother, what co-incidents could be more natural?" (110). His reports told that fifty years before in India a sahib and some memsahib's had lived in a village called Devigaon and his living mates enjoyed dancing, drinking and sacrificing. Once those people had sacrificed a mem and a baby and that was to be Devi who is saved by the nuns. The Gray sisters had arranged for adoption.

Fred Pointer's pointing the way to her parents proves that Jess Du Pru and Romeo Hawk seem to be her parents officially. Romeo Hawk claims his daughter but Jess Du Pree denies her relationship to Devi till the novel's end. But Devi's search for her existence reveals remarkable similarities between herself and her bio-parents. The novel is violent as the prologue and it leaves Devi disturbed and confused in the end. Mukherjee shows vengeance in her protagonists to find a solution for their search of identity. The characters, through destruction they re-create themselves. With the help of metamorphoses they tried to adapt in new environment. Similarly in *Leave it to Me*, Baby Clear Water Iris-Daughter becomes, in turn, Faustine, Debby and Devi in order to mete out violent justice in the world. To show her existence in new adopted world.

In S. Krishnamurthy Aithal contends that "in her world beyond ethnicity, Bharati Mukherjee can be unmistakably seen as a writer of a transnational age. "Although the novel has been criticized for the implausibility of its plot, Aithal insists that Devi/Debby is nonetheless a realistic portrait of an inhabitant of our modern day global village". (Holzer 175).

As Bharati Mukherjee moves to the next phase of immigrant, the impressions of her own life, her assimilation, acceptance and transformations can be seen through her writings. In the blurb at the back of the Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Leave it to Me* Publishers Weekly says "stunning... an astute, ironic, and merciless insight into an aberrant version of the American dream". Also The Boston Globe comments on *Leave it to Me* that "Mukherjee is

fearless... daring and witty ... take the wild ride with Debby Di Martino from Albany to San Francisco, from lost child to masked avenger". (Back) The protagonist moulds/transforms herself according to situation to get her existence in this world.

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