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“Global Soul”: A Study Based on Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave It to Me*

Sneha Elcy Jacob

Asst. Professor,
Department of English,
St.Thomas College, Ranni, Pathanamthitta
Kerala, India.

&

Dr. Asha Susan Jacob

Associate Professor and H.O.D.
Department of English
St Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Pathanamthi
Kerala, India.

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Abstract:

The world is increasingly becoming crossbred and mongrel each day, characterised by fusion of customs and traditions, mass migrations and multicultural mixing. This phenomenon, as Pico Iyer states in his travel book *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2001), has created “Global Souls” whose number is increasing every day. “Global Souls” are products of mixed cultures, distinguished by fluid identities and displaced roots. Conventional indices like nationality, language, ethnicity, and religion fail to determine the identity of the “Global Soul.” They are, in fact, citizens of the International Empire who have embraced a global world order. Pico Iyer claims he is a “Global Soul” in every sense of the word. He has lived through three cultures and spends most of his time in Japan. It is a land that bears no connection with him by way of birth, education, job, or ancestry. This paper seeks to make a case that contemporary literature too portrays characters that resemble “Global Souls.” Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Leave it to Me* presents an assemblage of “Global Souls.” Devi, the protagonist of the novel is a multi-ethnic waif, whose roots are spread through as many as three continents like Europe, America, and Asia and hence a “Global Soul.” There are other “Global Souls” also in the novel like Frankie Fong, Linda, and many more.

Keywords: Global Soul, migrations, multicultural, identity, hybridity.

People from all social strata are increasingly experiencing geographical displacements and relocations in the contemporary world. There were large scale migrations in the previous century and they continue in the present century too. As a result, there have emerged people of multiple identities. This growing tendency of multiculturalism and shifting identities are reflected in contemporary literature too. Pico Iyer’s book *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2001) introduces the term “Global Soul” to designate such people who are by-

products of numerous uprootings and dislocations. The representative literary work chosen for manifesting this phenomenon of the emergence of global citizens is Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave it to Me* (1998). Though Mukherjee’s novel precedes Iyer’s, it is a reflection of the changes occurring in the contemporary world.

Iyer’s travel book *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* is a collection of seven essays that register his responses to the effects of the globalisation in the world. Decolonisation movements, transnational migrations, and the homogenising forces of globalisation in the twentieth century have triggered dissolving of boundaries and cultural intermixing to a great extent. Consequently, the world is increasingly becoming multicultural and hybrid, inhabited by people who have experienced multiple displacements and cultural intermingling. Under these circumstances Iyer begins “to wonder whether a new kind of being might not be coming to light - a citizen of this International Empire - made up of fusions (and confusions) we had not seen before: a ‘Global Soul’” (18). He defines “Global Soul” as a “person who had grown up in many cultures all at once - and so lived in the cracks between them-or might be one who, though rooted in background, lived and worked on a globe that propelled him from tropic to snowstorm in three hours. She might have a name that gave away nothing about her nationality . . . and she might have porous sense of self that changed with her location” (18).

Iyer’s book *The Global Soul* begins with a vivid description of how his house was once burned down by fire. Having lost all his possessions and precious notes that he had taken down during his journeys, he had to start a new life. Not much later than this catastrophe, he met with a natural disaster. His hometown in the Californian suburbs was struck by a landslide and strong wind. He was stranded on the road not far from his house, on his way to deliver a lecture in a meeting organised by Women’s club in LA. The person who gives him refuge is a Mexican, an illegal migrant in America, who lives in his neighbourhood. Interestingly, both of them have not seen or met each other before this incident. Neighbours, having not seen or visited each other for years, is a unique feature of the postmodern era. Both Iyer and his neighbour are immigrants in the U.S. The only difference is in the legitimacy of their migration. Iyer, born to educated and affluent parents had been a frequent flyer since his childhood. Hence, Iyer’s transnational migrations is one that is “postmodern and fueled by technology,” and that of his neighbour is unlawful and hence a “tribal” one (*Global Soul*, 10). It has ensued from his impoverished circumstances back home.

Thus, migrations--both imposed and intended--are commonplace in the contemporary world. Transnational movements have become the norm of the day. As a result cities are turning out to be pluralistic, multi-ethnic and cross-cultural to an increasing extent. Iyer calls such places “polycentric anagrams” that accommodate diverse features of different places (11). “Global Souls” who are hybrid and interdenominational are increasingly inhabiting the contemporary

world consequent to the prodigious global relocations. Standard indicators of one's identity are nationality, religion, language, and so on. But a “Global Soul” may not have definite or well defined answers to questions of nationality, religion, and language. Iyer maintains that, for “Global Souls,” the responses to interrogations pertaining to predetermined affiliations and allegiances, will be different from those of the traditional beings. They may even feel the necessity of new definitions for their mixed identities.

“Global Souls,” whose number is increasing day by day, live with “a sense of half-belonging everywhere” with their sense of home evading rapidly (*Global Soul*, 92). Thus, people have begun to have a sense of fluid identity to a great extent. In other words, a sense of belonging to everywhere and not fixed to any place is growing increasingly in the minds of the people. The answer to the question “where do you come from?” can be numerous. It can be the place of birth, of job, of schooling, of sojourn, or the place you spend most of the time in your life. Cosmopolitan cities are now being increasingly inhabited by multicultural identities who choose to live in a country not of their birth, but where they would feel most comfortable. In such circumstances, their face and complexion would never match anyone in the country where they spend most of their time.

In *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2001), Iyer is trying to track the world's transition from the “local” to the “global.” Pico Iyer admits that he is a “Global Soul” in every sense. Born to Indian parents employed abroad, Iyer shuttled between his parents' home in California and his boarding school in England during his younger days. Thus, he lived through three cultures. Yet he finds it difficult to associate himself with any one of the cultures he grew up and lived with. He is privileged to have parents who never put any restraints on his global lifestyle. His is a hybrid identity, born of the comingling of different cultures. He does not know the language of the land where people have similarities with him in complexion and appearance. On the contrary, in the land where he speaks the language of the natives, he is treated as an alien. No other place on earth is as foreign to him as England, where he was schooled, or as America, where he spent his holidays and later pursued a career, or as India, the land of his ancestors. Neither his birthplace nor his workplace could impart a sense of belongingness in him. Even the land of his ancestors is foreign to him. He lives in a place which he chooses to be his home, far away from the places of his birth or work. Conventional indices that claim his ethnicity, nationality, language, or religion do not draw him any closer to nation he chooses to live most of the time. Actually, people like Iyer, with multiple identities were a rarity while he was growing up, but now it has become a common affair, with more and more people assuming or possessing manifold identities, none of which they feel affiliated with. Hence Iyer says that when he “was growing up, I was nearly always the only mongrel in my classroom or neighbourhood, now, when I look around, there are more and more people in a similar state, the children of blurred boundaries and global mobility” (24).

Iyer mostly lives in rural Japan along with his Japanese wife and her two children, with all of whom he is linguistically and culturally alienated from. Despite being an alien in rural Japan, he is surrounded by amenities from all around the world. Having lived through several cultures and having espoused a global world order, Iyer observes that words like “exile and homelessness and travel, are old ones that speak to something intrinsic to the state of being human. But it is a modern story, too, of a person with an American alien card and an Indian face and an English accent, on his way to Japan, meeting a neighbour who lives down the street in a universe that has never touched his own” (10).

Interestingly, Iyer finds his detached and unaffiliated individuality advantageous in every respect. That he belongs to everywhere and not to a fixed place is a blessing and virtue in Iyer’s opinion. This is because he “could choose between (his) selves at will” (*Global Soul*, 21). He does not feel he is a foreigner anywhere in the world. Having lived through different cultures, he has assumed a hybrid identity. He does not consider it a disadvantage. Instead, he takes it as a privilege to consider himself a citizen of the world. It imparts in him a sense of autonomy and individualism. Thus Iyer “exult(s) in the fact that I can see everywhere with a flexible eye” (24). Therefore his independent and sovereign identity is neither oppressive nor devastating. Instead, it is liberating and emancipating. Iyer continues: “With any of my potential homes, in fact, I could claim or deny attachment when I chose, and where the traditional being knew that his home, his past, and his community were all givens, often to an oppressive degree, someone like me . . . could select even the most fundamental details of our lives” (21).

As more and more people with fluid identities emerge, there also emerge a style of writing that transcends national boundaries and fixed divisions. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave it to Me* (1998) is one such novel that portrays a gallery of cross-cultural characters like Devi, the protagonist; Frankie Fong, her one-time boss and lover; Linda, Devi’s neighbour; and many more. Mukherjee’s works are mostly themed on the issues of migration, alienation, and expatriation. The concept of shifting identities resulting from multiple displacements pervades much of Mukherjee’s works. She herself is a multicultural being owing to the cross-cultural displacements imposed upon her by migrations and marriage. *Leave it to Me*, her masterpiece, voices her yearning for identity, something she lost hold of consequent of the varied displacements she experienced in life.

Leave it to Me is the story of a multicultural foundling in search of her bio-parents. The novel in the beginning introduces her as Debby DiMartino. She is born to an American hippie mother and a Eurasian father who callously abandon her, after which she is taken care of in an orphanage run by Gray Nuns. The nuns name her Faustine. Later she is adopted as the second daughter of Manfred and Serena DiMartino, an Italian-American couple who live in New York. The name given by her foster parents, Debby DiMartino, bears no lineage to her real parenthood. Her name is “Baby Clear Water Iris-Daughter” according to her adoption papers.

Debby's foster parents are affectionate people and she grows up to be a beautiful young girl. Until Debby meets Wyatt, a social work graduate, under whose care she is put for counselling and training, after being caught for pilfering, she attributes her origins to fate. Wyatt induces in her a sense of inquiry into her adoption details. As years advance, yearning for her real identity deepens until she is almost obsessed by it. As an adult who has achieved emotional maturity, she longs for her roots. She begins to feel that her present identity is fake and intends to shake it off. The uniqueness of her individuality as a foundling soon got literary expression in Mr. Bullock's class. Mr. Bullock, her English teacher in junior high class, thus turns out to be instrumental in bringing out her repressed feelings. Tired of painting her feigned ancestry at DiMartino's household, she gives poetic expression to her plight as a dog, which is lonely in a pound, barking out: "Take me, love me, shelter me" (*Leave*, 17). The inner urge to search for her lost identity grows to such an extent that finally that she sets out to find her biological parents. That her roots are spread through America, Europe, and Asia unsettles her and feels that she has a life beyond the confines of DiMartino's household. The hunt for her roots takes her to San Francisco where she adopts the name of Devi Dee. There, she initially lives in her car and befriends many people who inhabit the streets. As the story progresses she encounters many people and some of them help her in finding her biological mother who carries at least six different passports.

Devi's orphanhood is sometimes a source of anxiety and curiosity for her. Yet it is quite rewarding too, because it imparts the freedom to choose any identity of her own choice. Like Pico Iyer, it is liberating to Devi that she does not necessarily have to stick to one background or ancestry. She thinks she is lucky to be an orphan. She can assume any identity of her own choice from the many choices offered by her birth, adoption, and so on. Though she is sometimes jealous of the people whom she meets who know who they are, and what they have inherited, she considers her predicament more desirable. So she says: "I can imagine myself into any life; I can wrench myself away from a thousand backgrounds" (*Leave*, 28). As long as she is under the guardianship of DiMartinos, her identity is a fixed one, though fake. Once she breaks lose her ties with the foster family, she becomes a "Global Soul." Thereafter she begins to feel a sense of immense freedom and strength that finds expression in her words: "When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything: that's the Devi Dee philosophy" (*Leave*, 67). Her lineage, spread across three continents, makes her a truly global child. Like Iyer, who celebrates his global identity, Devi too revels in the freedom rendered through her multicultural displacements. She thinks she is lucky to be a product of several entities.

Devi, the protagonist, is not the only Global Soul in the novel. Frankie Fong, her boss-turned-lover and bed-mate too is a Global Soul. Son of a wandering singer Aloysius Frank, Frankie Fong led a nomadic life during much of his childhood. He enjoyed his nomadic childhood and "Every time he told his life story, he gave himself the luxury of a different

hometown” (*Leave*, 24). As a child Frankie had travelled to many Asian nations and could find pleasure in it. He had also lived in places like London, Vancouver, Toronto, Wellington, Auckland, Sydney, Perth, and New York. Hotels had been his household because of his father’s itinerant life style.

Linda, one of Devi’s neighbours in California, is also a person whose geographical associations are spread in as many as five places. She was “born in a displaced-persons camp in Germany, spoke her first word (*cuidado!*) in Argentina, married a Japanese doctor in Brazil and divorced him in Chile, then found fulfilment as a psychic in the Haight” (*Leave*, 118). It is, nevertheless, uncommon that several identities go into the making of one’s individuality. But such a trend has set in and Mukherjee is sensitive to the growing tendencies of the world. Her acknowledgement of the rise of the “Global Souls” in the world is echoed in Linda’s words: “I’m not saying that you aren’t special, Devi. . . . But so’s everyone. Take anyone in the building, take anyone in the universe” (*Leave*, 117). Thus the novel *Leave it to Me* abounds in multicultural beings.

Contemporary world is moving towards a global world order owing to increased transnational movements. Previous century witnessed the largest number of migrations in the history of the world. As a result the world has become crossbred and hybrid to a great extent. World metropolises have responded to this phenomenon by providing facilities and amenities of different parts of the world to cater to the needs of the citizens of the International Empire. Thus they feel at home everywhere, but at the same time do not feel rooted anywhere. Such “Global Souls” are products of multicultural upbringing who live above the divisions and differences with respect to nationality, religion, language or ethnicity. Contemporary literature too reflects this growing trend of the emergence of hybrid beings in the modern world. Globalism has transformed the world and the lifestyle of the people as well. Many of the contemporary writers of the world have a legacy of multiple displacements and dislocations like Bharati Mukherjee. The literary output of such writers are certainly manifestations of their experiences. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave it to Me* is one such literary work. And, interestingly, the readers will also be increasingly of the same creed with respect to mixed nationalities. Thus a whole new way of writing has emerged in the world that reflects the new lifestyle of the “Global Souls”.

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