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Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel

Leave It to Me

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Abstract

Quest for identity or identity crisis has achieved propel in the Post Colonial literature. Post colonial literature can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. It attempts to restore the original culture, conformity to the culture presented by the settlers or the creation of a new culture which combines both the left and the adopted. Indian English fiction deals eventually with the predicament, rising due to multi-culturalism and intercultural interactions. When a man is uprooted, he mislays the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crises.

Keywords: Identity, Multi-culturalism, Intercultural interactions, Root, Psychosocial state

Quest for identity could be defined as a psychosocial state or condition of disorientation and role confusion as a result of conflicting internal and external experience and expectations. As a result, it produces acute anxiety resulting from conflicting pressures and uncertainty about one's role in society. Identity crisis is a moment in life when an individual commences a quest for answers about the temperament of his or her being and the search for an identity. For diasporans, the voyage of life turns out to be an exploration of an individual's sense of "self" and a quest for the liberation of the human spirit. The possibilities are various and diverse as these are individuals. Characters in diasporic literature, particularly those in Bharati Mukherjee's novels grant a key to disentangle the quest of the diasporans. Bharati Mukherjee has confessed that an issue very significant to her is ". . . the finding of a new identity . . . the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into and then replanting yourself in another culture" (Kumar 16). Among cluster of themes that Bharati Mukherjee weaves in her assorted canvas one which comes through again and again is the immigrants' quest of identity. Her diasporic immigrants come across the "anarchy of self" as they seek to bring together their old world paradigms of respective

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tradition, of humility, of collective values, and of the renunciation of material desire with their 'New World' pursuits of individualism and material success.

Leave It to Me exhibits the cross cultural transmutation of the female protagonist, Devi. She is the adopted daughter of Italian-Americans, but as she grows up, the distinctiveness of her physical traits apparently develops suspicions into her mind about her birth origins. The quest is to find her lost identity, to comprehend her psyche and to locate her bio-parents. Her expedition is of an American to investigate for her Asian roots. Devi is not penetrating for a new identity, but her journey somehow points out the journey within to find one's own identity in this cosmos. Having the spiritual tinge to her quest, Debbie reincarnates herself as Devi. Like the Hindu Goddess, Devi butchers the fiends in her universe and overlays a bloody path to achieve her goal.

According to Erik Erikson, a developmental psychologist, those encountering an identity crisis are often seen to have no notion who or what they are, where they belong or where they wish to go. They may depart from normal life, not taking action or acting bizarrely. They may even turn to negative activities, such as crime or drugs as a technique of dealing with identity crisis. Those who experience this problem, will exhibit a confusion of roles, encountering rootlessness, unbelongingness and ambiguity in their life.

So like Devi, when a person is not able to achieve desired identity, position or sameness with the shared community, he faces identity crisis resulting in fractured identity and depression. Devi Dee's splited-self comes to light when she realizes that she has different features of her sister Angela. Her junior-year growth spurt ends leaving her nearly bewildered.

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. But I wasn't tall beautiful or exotic enough to trust any of it, and so I made up my mind to find out if I was someone special or just another misfit. (Mukherjee, *Leave* 16)

In fact, Devi Dee's hunt for her bio-parents is activated by her inquisitiveness about "mugged identities" (Mukherjee, *Leave* 16). Such inquisitiveness is fostered continually by her companions like Wyatt Frankie, Ham Cohan and Fred Pointer. Due to this curiosity Devi Dee ends all her ties with the host culture and embarks on a search for her bio-parents. Under the ploy of taking revenge on her bio-parents, she navigates to the host culture. Eventually, she discovers her adopted land. She casts off her foster parents and ignores her partaking in a big life in the United States. She romanticises her past. She obtains excessive delight in her contact with people who have been allied with Asia.

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Francis A. Fong, Debby's first Asian lover, is the chief instigator behind her search for roots. She likes Frankie's fictitious narratives of his childhood spent in Asia. It is apparent that Frankie stimulates and nurtures a sturdy allure for Asia in the mind of Debby. Frankie himself 'a salad of Asian genes' is her initial counsellor in her quest for identity. He unbolts up an entire continent for Debby. Persuaded by Frankie's tales about Asia, Debby feels 'connected'. She desires to emulate Frankie's sculpt of an 'immigrant'. In his case, there is no 'crippling gratitude' and 'steerage' to the host culture. Although later on, Debby is deceived by Frankie and so she burns down the house that Frankie had given her and leaves Saratoga Springs.

Despite this regression in her attempt to get "connected", Debby prolongs her search for her bio-parents. She pays no attention to her foster-mother's appeals not to leave her and sets out for San Francisco. Though she has different roads open for her but she chooses to confront her 'deadbeat mom'. On the Donner Pass, Debby picks up the name Devi from a vanity car plate and baptizes herself Devi Dee.

Devi Dee realizes her fractured identity when strangers claim her as a fellow lost in China town. Devi Dee even envies both the Chinese waiter and the Indian student as 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 that she has come into possession of her 'real' inheritance.

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 Dee 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 Roy, 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 Mr. Varama, 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.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Leave It to Me* demonstrates the cultural plurality of the adopted land. Through her protagonist Mukherjee tries to disentangle the complex stratum of cross-cultural reality through a sequence of adventures which she undertakes during her adventurous journey. Her struggle indicates the impatient quest of a rootless person suffering from a depressing sense of isolation. At every step she revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. Bharati Mukherjee's characters like Jasmine in *Jasmine*, Rebecca, Bhagmati

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and Hannah in *The Holder of the World*, and Debby in *Leave It to Me*, persistently flout estrangement in the society they live in and get the answer by rebuffing cultural stereotypes.

Mukherjee establishes the path of her immigrants' identity in the course of crossing and re-crossing multiple borders of language, history, race, time and culture. She claims, "In this age of Diasporas one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration" (Mukherjee, *American* 7). Upsetting the limitations and despotism of nationalist boundaries, her works personify her sense of what, as in her case, it means to be a writer who was born and raised in India, been a citizen of Canada and the United States, and who has been shaped and transformed by the cultures of India and North America.

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