CHAPTER - 6

LEAVE IT TO ME
Until the mid-'80s, fiction in English-language by diasporic women of South Asian origin was prized by publishers and readers in the West more for its perceived ethnographic content than for its artistry. The writers themselves almost always upper-middle-class, urban, well-educated women, were pigeonholed as revealers of secrets of closed, exotic cultures. The best known among them is the Indian-born American novelist Bharati Mukherjee.

In an interview with Runar Vignisson, Bharati Mukherjee says:

*So in a sense what I did was, in order to make privacy for myself, make a little emotional, physical space for myself, I had to read. I had to drop inside books as away of escaping crowds. As a result I became a very bookish child; I read and read and read all day. And I learnt to read and write and go into first great school, in fact, when I was three years old. So that it’s a very accelerated “education literacy”. I used to read European novels, these passive books by Russian authors like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, in Bengali translation as a very small-child under bed, behind chairs, and so on, find a little dark corner for*
myself where I could read. The country being described in the books, the people being described in the books, they sometimes seemed more real to me than real people around me. So that there I was, visualizing and translating into upper middle class Bengali terms the Russian families that I was reading about. I knew from when I was very young, long before I was ten, that I was going to be a writer [1].

Mukherjee combines the journalist’s grasp of contemporary culture with the magic realist’s appetite for myth. The novel *Leave It To Me* is a hybrid of history and gossip, of high and low culture. In this fiction, she takes the themes she has previously explored. Destroying the concept of ethnicity altogether she creates, a new complex, transnational definition of self...Devi will know who she is, no matter what or whom she has to destroy.

But the discovery does not prove to be easy in a region where ethnic boundaries slide over each other like snakes in a basket and many people have discarded the names they were born with. The novel becomes a mediation on the Indian concept of Karma and the Greek idea of Destiny.

The novels and short stories of Bharati Mukherjee occupy a unique place among the works of American ethnic writers of this century. Whereas most of the minority writers of the US have sought to define the separate cultural identities of their people—their origins, roots, ancestry, ways, outlook, values, beliefs, etc.—Bharati Mukherjee has made no such narrow selection of people or theme for presentation, and has, on every possible opportunity, expressed strong displeasure over characterization of her as an Indian-American or south-Asian American writer. In fact, her characters form no clear, cohesive group. They belong to multiple nationalities with roots spreading far and wide across countries and continents. A large population creeps, odd balls, eccentrics, weirdoes, paranoids, schizophrenics, maniacs, etc. appear in the pages of her novels indirectly suggesting that no pressing social, cultural and political agenda is being laid down or advanced here. Whatever their obsession and fear, these characters are not worked up by any real or imaginary sense of racial discrimination or prejudice. They feel no urgent need to assert their identity in terms of national and cultural group. Like travelers—many of these characters have done quite a bit of traveling—they happily interact with one another, with absolutely no trace of resentment towards the other, though two of them may be from two opposite ends of the world. These citizens of the world share without quarrel, what
space there is in parking lots, sidewalks, and stoops of church, and peacefully stand in queue in front of soup kitchens. What one finds in these pages is a sense of globalization of the literary scene, reflecting the economic integration and globalization of the world of the recent years and the accompanying transformation of travel into big industry. In her world beyond ethnicity, Bharati Mukherjee can be unmistakably seen as a writer of a transnational age. The materials of her fiction are as complex and confusing as, for example this age’s way of producing and distributing goods—with capital, raw materials, labour, and markets from more countries than one.

Bharati Mukherjee like other Asian American women writers has made important contributions to the multi-ethnic literary quilt of the United States. As a writer who has moved from geographical and cultural space to another, from India to the American continent (first Canada, then the USA), her writings speak of the inevitable changes in such transitions. There is a re-visioning of ideas and concepts, which belong to two different worlds separated by the vast oceanic distances. There is also questioning of biases and prejudices, a destruction of social, cultural and national stereotypes.

*Leave It To Me* has all her trade mark preoccupations: exiles, emigres and outsiders tirelessly reinventing themselves, as they shed old lives, old
lovers, oldselves; and an America relink from violence and non-stop change, a country in which freedom has translated into rootlessness, possibility into dislocation. This fiction has a heroine who’s addicted to change, a supporting caste of eccentrics and a wildly maniac plot. Shalini Gupta reviewing the novel in The Hindu writes:

In her latest novel, “Leave It To Me,” about hitting the hippie-trail in post-hippie America, Mukherjee views life from the outside. Behind plastic, unauthenticated facades, the reality crumbles into a Karma-Cola as tacky as “cosmic glue.” [2].

It is a book in which her favourite themes have wrapped into didactic obsessions and her stylistic idiosyncrasies have slipped perilously close to mannerisms. There are still glimpses here and there, of her Seinfeldian eye for the odd and Beattiesque ear for the clever, but they are overwhelmed, in the end, by erratic writing and the pompous absurdity of her story.

Like so many earlier Mukherjee character, the narrator of Leave It To Me is a woman with multiple lives-a self-proclaimed chameleon who talks vaguely of fulfilling her fate. Bharati Mukherjee opened the novel with two page prologue, where she sets the story in Devigaon in the state of Rajastan

in India. Devi means goddess in Sanskrit and the goddess she refers to in the context of the village is Durga, a byword for righteous rage and anger. The prologue narrates the story of goddess Durga and her furious battle with and final destruction of the buffalo demon Mahisha, who was causing endless pain and trouble to gods and humans. In Devigaon, time is set in future and myth and reality intertwine.

The story shifts to a small town of Schenectady, New York with the opening of the first Chapter. The shifting is so rapid that the reader would be perplexed to find out how they got there. Schenectady, New York is again a kind of stopover. The next location is Berkley, California. Though much of the action takes place here, the novel is marked by ceaseless movement back and forth over the entire globe. This is the story of a child born to a hippie from California on a love-and-peace flower trip to India, and a “guru” who has the dubious distinction of leaving behind a trail of used and abused woman, illegitimate children, rapes and murders across the Indian subcontinent. An unwanted female child is dropped like a hot brick at the nearest orphanage, where she is called Faustine (after the typhoon), later adapted by an Italian American family and christened Debby DiMartino. Despite the love and affection of a foster family, Debby grows up with the awareness of being different, the feeling that she is an unwanted obstacle in
a world that hurtles on towards its mysterious destinations. When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything, is the conclusion she comes to as she sets out in search of her past, her origins, and the unknown bio-parents who had callously abandoned her. From this point on, the narrative progresses with jerks and jolts in a picaresque fashion, bringing together a variety of characters who may or may not help the protagonist in her search for her biomother.

There are many characters in the novel and they interconnect the different parts of the world and give action its speed and motion. The main character among them is Debby DiMartino, the transnational protagonist. Born in India and left on a desert to die, she was found by Sister Madeleine, one of the Grey Sisters, Missionaries of Charity. In a sworn testimony by Sister Madeleine, she had the name Baby Clear Water Iris-daughter. Christian Faustine by the missionaries, she was adapted at the age of two by an Italian American couple Manfred and Sereno DiMartino of Schenectady, New York. Debby is a fun-loving, twenty three year old American girl. She has grown up in the American term knowing very little about her biological parents. She explains her situation as follows:
An orphan doesn't know how to ask, afraid of answers, and hopes instead for revelation. Ignorance isn'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 smoking, dealing and stealing. She left my bio-data minimal: some sort of police troubled my hippie birth mother had got herself into meant that the Grey Nuns in Devigaon village had to take me in; one of the Nuns had renamed me Faustine after a Typhoon, but Mama’d changed it officially to Debby after Debby Reynolds her all time favourite [3].

The heroine, Debby DiMartino, an adapted child is precautious and poetic. Thirsting for knowledge of who she is, Debby gambles from one affair to another, making her way across America to California where, partly in jest and wholly in earnest. She reinvents herself as Devi Dee. She has no clear memory of her birthplace. All that she could remember is the whiteness of its sun, the harshness of its hills, the raspy moan of its desert winds and she sees all this like the pattern of veins on the insights of her eyelids. As it always happens in such circumstances, she feels compelled to

address herself to the origins of her birth, first by Watt, a young correctional officer placed in charge of her after she was caught shop lifting, and next by Mr. Bullock, her English composition teacher. She has, however, nothing but fate and her imagination to guide her there.

The urge to know her past becomes irresistible after she is abandoned by her Asian employer and lover Francis Albert Fong (Frankie), the owner of a multi national company manufacturing fitness equipment following a summer of passionate love making. After persistent nagging, she finds out from her mother that she was discarded by her Fresno biological mother and later bartered away by the woman to the DiMartino’s for a return ticket to San Francisco, California. She also learns that her father is serving a life sentence in an Indian prison. She sets Frankie’s apartment in fire in revenge because she did not want someone to replace her position in that apartment. The events are highly complicated, bizarre, highly suspense with lots of surprise and shock. Debby later renames herself as Devi after the Indian goddess comes to meet Jess Du Pree, who is supposed to be her biological mother. Devi is astonished to note that the mother who had discarded her is one of the many lovers of the very man who was her lover or ironic to say that Debby had fallen in love with the same man named Hamilton Cohan in San Francisco.
Debby had set in motion determined to trace her mother, Romeo Hawk, her father, who is a serial killer arriving in San Francisco after escaping from prison in India and having a credit of at least three murders in his trials. Debby’s father turns to the city to take revenge upon the woman who had got him imprisoned years ago. Debby watches her father drag his lover who was in her lover’s clutches and disposes her later slashing the throat of her lover Hamilton Cohan. Debby slaughters her father Romeo Hawk enraged by the brutal murder of Hamilton Cohan. Later she contacts the police department and calls 911 to report the crime, as she calls 911, earthquake hits the Bay. The final cat is carried out by Goddess Durga in her capacity to do violence. Debby/Devi is nonetheless is in realistic portrait of an inhabitant of her modern day global village.

The plot of *Leave It To Me* centers on the protagonist Debby DiMartino’s quest for knowledge of her roots. From the brief account of Debby’s story above, it should be clear that the roots she is interested in digging out are, however, no way connected to the need for a larger sense of national and cultural solidarity generally sought after by characters in ethnic writings. If Debby DiMartino is a lie, a person on loan to the DiMartino’s, a person without weight or substance, who must be tossed out, she feels no joy or comfort when she turns to her past life. She has nothing but bitterness
towards her biological parents. She feels that her biological parents were lousy people who had considered her lousier and who had left her to be sniffed at by wild dogs, like a carcass in the mangy shape. She thinks of herself as just a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail. On the face of it, Debby’s search is motivated by a natural, instinctual desire to uncover facts related to her birth, however unpleasant they are. It is also motivated by a host of other abstract aims and purposes. In one of her ruminations, she confesses that unclaimable part of herself is what intrigues her, the part that came 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 that she wants to remember. But there is another part she tries to keep secret, the part that sinks to the moons and dances with the stars. To her statement that her adoption must have been dictated by fate, Wyatt had reacted thus: “Schenectady was fate?....I am saying you have got a chance, don’t blow it. You might have never made it of that orphanage. Someone must have seen something” [4]. Referring to Wyatt, she declares “but he left me with the most important prediction of my life, something that got me through high school and college, and even helps today. I was just a small, dark thing, and

he said, 'you know, Debby, I can tell you’re going to be rich and powerful'” [5]. Therefore, she yearned to find out whether she was someone’s special or another misfit. In her due course of her investigation into her past, she has many questions to her self. She searched for the answers to some of the problems such as, when a child is abandoned by her mother on a desert to die, how does it survive? Is it fate that decides who will live and who will die? Or does some special, personal endowment help the child overcome odds and become successful in life? These questions are given poignancy through Debby’s visits to the animal shelter in the novel and the comparison of her personal condition with that of the lost or abandoned animals waiting for adoption, particularly with those that are failing to find homes. There she saw ultimates sitting side by side-love and death, kindness and killing. Besides these explicit objectives and goals, thoughts of revenge against the mother now and then seem to cross Debby’s mind. In any case, Debby does not dream of any happy family reunion, or a house made of dawn. When she meets her biological parents towards the end of the novel, she says that, the man and the woman who had given her life were as strange to her as honeymooners from Mars. The quest terminates in sordid and brutal killings.

[5] Ibid., p.14
Bharati Mukherjee through Debby’s portraits cleverly complicates the strong traditional view that the core of an individual nature is constructed through biological inheritance. Simply to say an individual identity mainly depends on ancestors or inherited ethnicity. But she suggests that national and cultural identity is also a matter of nurture rather than solely nature. Yet, in Debby’s words there is something to nature over nurture, and to the tyranny of jeans. She has really nothing to keep her on the straight and narrow except star bursts of longing. By her upbringing, Debby is a DiMartino, an American. Beneath this identity given to her by her nurture, lies her true nature, the part of the self that she must discover what it is, the endowment of character which helped her survive certain death. It may seem that Debby is rejecting a false American identity and embracing a true Asian or Asian American identity. What she actually does, however, is to try to discover the whole world lying beyond Baby Clear Water Iris-Daughter, Faustine, Debby, Devi and ethnicity, beyond the impressions of white-hot sky and burnt black leaves, the elusive self at the very source of her feelings of love and hate and being.

There is, however, no characterization of an essentialist kind in Bharati Mukherjee’s portrait of Debby. It is anybody’s guess who or what Debby essentially is and all those orphanage children are that are placed in
Europe, America and Canada. Whatever Debby essentially is, she is best described as a transnational without raising any controversy. The novel makes it amply clear that is how she should be regarded. She is one among the many transnationals and one among the people with great deal of travel experience in search of her identity in the novel.

From the private detective she hires in San Francisco, Debby receives the following information about her bio-parents, and international flights:

In Bangkok, the lovers quarreled. They made up in Bali, to break up again in Surabaja. In Katmandu he added a Romanian to his harem. In Colombo, a Swiss. In Kabul, he spent a day in jail for cursing a policeman. In all these cities, and Chiang Mai, Srinagar, and Taipei, he strangled, he conned, he made love to woman he liked and to woman he scorned, and who knows, may be left my half siblings behind. In Singapore the lovers quarreled one final time. The woman went to Singapore police and ratted on the man. She accused him of having strangled give or take seventeen men and woman. The cops locked her up on drug-peddling charges, and passed her stories on to Interpol....Interpol...tracked her lover through Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, to a hill station in India [6].

Romeo Hawk, Debby’s biological father, is the son of Yves Haque of Saigon, originally Yves Haq of Peshawar and a Eurasian. The son Americanizes his name to Hawk. Debby’s mother is from Fresno, California.

The person who makes Debby aware of the “monstrous cravings of other Debby’s hiding inside” and of “life beyond the straight lines” [7] is Francis A. Fong with whom she falls in love. She is attracted to him mainly because of his transnational background. His father, Aloysius Fong was the Don Ho of a dozen south-Asian China-towns. Baby, his mom, was the father’s fourth wife whom he’d lifted “from the chorus line of a Chinese opera in Manila” [8]. Frankie is the owner-cum-CEO of Fong Ho products, a multinational fitness equipment company that manufactures Elastonomics, an exercise device. The basis of the global operations of his company is summed up as follows: “dreams of the Fong Empire he would build by catering to American wants with Asian needs. Chinese need Rhinoceros Horns and Tiger bones and prostitutes for potency. Americans want potency too, but they have call it love, and they’ll settle for Elastonomics to bring them both” [9]. He had made New York his home though he still continues to travel from city to city and country to country.

[8] Ibid., p.25.
[9] Ibid., p.34.
Frankie intended to hang on to the fortune he'd made, and not lead the mainland or any fool socialist system steal it from him. With Hong Kong about to go down the tubes, he said he'd decided to shift his assets, rebuild an empire and relocate his vast family somewhere within it. Five nations courted the Fongs' pool of liquid assets. Passports were offered in exchange for new investments. He'd done his home work; he'd scouted London, Vancouver and Toronto, Wellington and Auckland, Sydney and Perth; and chosen cheap and serene New York City [10].

In Debby's description, Frankie is Chinese with a silky British accent and master piece theater voice and vocabulary, born in Hong Kong or may be in Manila or Surabaya (catching him in a inconsistency meant he'd fallen in love with one of his wilder inventions). Every time he told his life story, he gave himself the luxury of a different hometown. Debby is attracted to his made up child hoods. She heard him talk with fascination of his memories of growing up on permanent tours of China-in-exile and life-from-a-suitcase in hotel rooms.

As a boy, he'd been everywhere Chinese had settled-Calcutta, Bangkok, Saigon, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta and Sydney. With Frankie,

[10] Ibid., p.29.
Debby traveled crazy worlds without ever leaving Saratoga and he made her feel Asian childhood sound, great, fun. Suddenly she feels that life is interesting. Frankie Hong wanted Debby to be a model, to sell his FH products and he wanted her to travel along with him as his personal assistant to Honolulu for a FHP board of directors meeting and Debby was fine with it. Later when she learns that he was not interested in marrying her, she acts like a proverbial woman spurned.

Significantly, what the Asia Frankie brings to Debby isn’t one of spirituality and mysticism of the bygone years. In Frankie’s Asia “the streets were always hot, loud, smoky, full of cheats and drugs and whores; the night clubs were always places of viciousness and degradation carnality” [11]. Debby is thankful to all these stories because for the first time she felt connected. In another context, she confesses these make-believe stories of dogs and bats, heat, beggars, police sweeps, corruption, squalor, disease, transvestites, prostitutes, crows wheeling low over flat roofs, bony stray cattle ambling down muddy side walks, did stir up her desire for what might have been or must have been-a careless hippie mom’s Asia [12].

[12] Ibid., p.28.
After living in the Corolla for some time on Haight Street in San Francisco, Devi moves in to a roaming house Beulah Street off Cole. Here’s Devi’s census report of her neighborhood. Her floor had an astrologer who read futures off a software called Disaster, a retired Belgian chocolatier and a Somali medical student who supported his wife and two kids, a bunch of sisters. A political refugee from a place, which he called Vanuatu and a Siberian photographer with a name that was all consonants. Linda a psychic neighbor, who was born in a displaced-person’s camp in Germany, spoke her first word in Argentina, married a Japanese doctor in Brazil and divorced him in Chile, then found fulfillment as psychic in the Haight. She narrates an interesting story of a client of hers, which has also a bearing on the theme of transnationalism:

Just a normal kid... Pacific Heights. Nice parents, nice siblings, decent grades. In his previous life he was an Indian from India. The kid threw bombs, shot up cops, gave the British Raj a tough time. Such a hard time that the British shipped him off to a convict Island and hanged him. Last winter the family finally took a trip to this island. The Andamans? Heard of it? It’s a tourist trap now. Lots of fat Germans with fancy cameras checking out the empty prisons... This kid from pacific heights found the spot on the wall of his old jail cell when he had
scratched his name with his fingernails. The kid leads his folks straight to the wall and reads off his name as though Indian's his mother tongue! [13].

Devi confining herself to instances of one verifiable life summarizes that all her neighbours had come home to the Beulah roaming house from somewhere else, Vanuatu, Vietnam, Belgium, India and Schenectday.

In her work place and elsewhere, Debby meets and hears about more transnationals. She works with Beth Hendon, the bartender as well as boss, who had been a runaway model in Paris, Milan, Buenos Aires, crashed in Miami, done the Betty Ford Centre turn around more than once and was currently trying out life as a small business woman. Ham tells her of two of his wives who knew their way around Katmandu a lot better than Oakland and of Dahlia Metz, a third designer's wife. "She had discovered her talent in a prison in Afghanistan way back when everyone who was anyone put in time in Turkish or Afghan prisons" [14]. People she met also assume that she came to California from somewhere more fascinating. "All of a sudden Brazilians lead off speaking to me in Portuguese, Zydecos in Creole, Mexicans in Spanish. The whole world had gone into my making….the

[14] Ibid., p.105.
whole world was mine to claim....if I squeezed my eyelids harder, kept squeezing, I was sure I’d start speaking the language I’d shared with Sister Madeleine” [15]. By way of clarification, it may be mentioned that Sister Madeleine of Levis, Cuba, spoke Hindi.

The Indian part of the mythical dimension of the story is made fairly explicit in the novel, but not the Grecian part. Every episode and character in the novel speaks of Bharati Mukherjee’s lively interest in the idea of globalization and transnationalism. Fascinated by these ideas, she is able to bear upon all the resources of her art – her great wit, humour and mythical imagination. In the middle of multinationals, multi-colours, races, cultures and languages, the protagonist builds her life. While constructing her life, she is totally lost. She searches her past to have the birth identity. While doing so she is in the mess of identity crisis.