Chapter VI

Devi: The Dispenser of Justice
Bharati Mukherjee’s fifth novel *Leave It to Me* was published by Chatto and Windus in 1990. The novel tells the gripping story of the protagonist’s search for identity. It narrates an abandoned child’s relentless search for her parents. The story told in vibrant prose is “an American novel by an American writer for, by and large, an American readership.” The novel is described as wild, wacky, and ultimately terrifying. It has been called the Electra story re-imagined for our times and reads like a modern Californian sequel to “Apocalypse Now”.

Unlike the protagonists of Mukherjee’s earlier novels, the protagonist of *Leave It to Me* is not an Indian. She is rather a mixture of different races. As in her other novels, one of the themes of this novel is ‘search for identity’ but of a different kind. Here it is the search for original parentage whereas in her other novels it is establishing one’s identity in an alien land. The protagonist of this novel, Devi, is a strong-willed person who avenges her wrongs.

The novel is divided into three parts and has a Prologue and an Epilogue. The Prologue symbolically presents one of the themes of the novel. In Devigaon near Delhi, Hari Singh tells the children of the village the story of Goddess Devi who kills the demon Mahishasura. The
protagonist of the novel, Debby Di Martino, calls herself 'Devi' later on in the novel without knowing the significance of the name. Her father, when she finds him, tells her, "Devi is not a name to find and choose. It has to find you". A demonic serial killer, Romeo Hawk does not realize how accurate he is. He does not realize he is the Mahishasura that Devi kills.

Part One of the novel deals with the first phase of the protagonist's life – her early years, her life with a Chinese man and her disillusionment with him. The story is told in retrospection. The protagonist Devi Dee alias Debby Di Martino sits in a boat, after killing her father, with the severed head of her lover in her lap. She muses on her past and says she has done what her mothers had done, her mother who had given birth to her, and the mother she was beginning to claim, Goddess Devi.

Another theme of the novel is Devi’s search for identity. Her search ends in disaster leaving a trail of murders. The bitterness and anguish of a discarded child surface throughout the novel as Devi reminisces. She calls herself “recyclable trash”. She begins her story with the words, “For all official purposes I am, or was Debby Di Martino, a fun-loving twenty-three-year-old American girl.”(10) Thereafter the story follows chronology. When a child, Debby was adopted into a decent Italian-American family in Hudson Valley. She says it is the upside of the adoption. “The downside is knowing that the other two I owe my short life to were lousy people who
had considered me lousier still and who'd left me to be sniffed at by wild dogs like a carcass in mangy shade.”(10)

It was Wyatt, a lanky youth studying for his Master's degree, who first made her think about her birth and her bio-parents. When a stubby thirteen-year old, Debby was caught for stealing in a Radio shack and was placed in a group of troubled girls counselled by Wyatt. He was the first to ask her about her adoption and the first one to praise her. He said she might never have made it out of the orphanage, if some one had not seen something in her. He advised her not to blow her chance away. Debby took it as a hint of his love for her. She was a passionate thirteen-year old and Wyatt was the first person to whom she revealed her passion. The two of them took long trips into the country, took canoe trips and spent time in motels. After signing off her parole, Wyatt dropped out of school and left, saying she was a bad influence on him. But before he left, he made a very important prediction, that one day she would be tall and beautiful, rich and powerful. After Wyatt left, Debby felt she was lucky to be an orphan. She told herself, “From the families I'd been given, I’d scavenge the traits I needed and dump the rest. If a person is given lives to live instead of just one life... especially lives she hasn’t even touched, she’ll be far better off for it.”(14)

The anguish hidden deep inside her, the anguish that she was abandoned by her parents, burst out through a poem Debby wrote for an
assignment. She says, “I raged in rhyming couplets against whole peoples who brawled inside me. The poem shocked me. It throbbed with pains I had no right to feel.”(14) The teacher, Mr. Bullock, felt it was deep and forced her to read it aloud in the class. Till that poem appeared, Debby did not know there was such anguish inside her. When she was in junior high school, she looked enough like her sister Angie to pass for a real Di Martino. But there was a sudden growth spurt. She was a tall and beautiful girl in a plain family, “an exotic girl in a very American town.”(16) In a family of choir singers, her voice was a throaty whisper. She made up her mind to find out if she was some one special or just a misfit.

Devi feels that Mr. Bullock who asked them to write the poem was an agent of destiny. She had set out to write a poem on the Oak tree her grandpa had planted and ended up thinking that he was not her grandpa after all. When the assignment was over, Debby felt cheated of places she did not know and of parents she did not miss. She says, “I blamed the poem for robbing me of what I’d never owned. It was as if a psychic with a 900 number had said to me through the poem, You’re just on loan to the Di Martinos. Treat them nice, pay your rent, but keep your bags packed.”(17) The poem makes her understand about mugged identities. She feels there was something to nature over nurture and to the tyranny of genes. She experiences a deep identity crisis and thinks bitterly:
Who are you when you don't have a birth certificate, only a poorly typed, creased affidavit sworn out by a nun who signs herself Sister Madeleine, Gray Sisters of Charity? And that name? No mother's name, no father's name, just Baby Clear Water Iris Daughter meticulously copied out ... When Father and Mother with long spaces after them are just ink flecks of non-existence? What are you when you have nightmares and fantasies instead of dates and statistics? And, in place of memory, impressions of white-hot sky and burnt-black leaves? Nothing to keep on the straight and narrow except start bursts of longing? (16)

Francis Fong offers her a chance to break out. He was the boss of a multinational fitness equipment company in which Debby found employment. She impresses him with her telemarketing skills and her cheekiness. He meets her and takes her to dinner and then to bed on the first date. And three days later he hands her keys to her first apartment. Before he entered the fitness equipment business, Francis Fong was star/director/producer of dozens of Hong-Kong kick-boxing extravaganzas. As he remembers his past, Frankie, as Debby calls him, makes "an Asian childhood sound great fun, something I wanted to claim, something I'd been robbed of. But by whom? By the California Hippie who'd fucked a Eurasian thug so I could be born in that place, over there, where nightmare
and poem merge? By the Gray Nuns who placed me oceans away from my orphan origins? By Pappy and Mama who believe love wipes misery clean?"(26) Through Frankie, Debby gets acquainted with Asia. When he talks about hotels with colonial names, Debby wonders whether the same hotels had been the haunts of her backpacking mother and of her mystery father. Amused by Debby’s thirst for more stories, Frankie launches into a word game and Debby ends it up with words “Schenectady school girls studying suspicious signs of ... meditating on misted over moons and menacing mango trees and missing mothers.”(28) The words express Debby’s unhappiness. Frankie’s description of Asia stirs up her desire for what might have been – a careless hippie mother’s Asia. She says, “this is one more side effect of adoption. I can imagine myself into any life. I can wrench myself away from a thousand backgrounds. I can assess damage, then just walk away.”(28)

The interest Frankie displays in her, makes Debby believe that he loves her. But his mother’s arrival knocks her out of her delusions. He introduces Debby to his mother as a plain Saratoga Secretary. Along with his mother comes a very attractive young Asian woman, Ovidia, presumably his wife. At the dinner to which he invites Debby to meet his mother, he ignores Debby completely. When his mother offers her the Singapore Air lines freebie toilet kit as a gift, it is the last straw for Debby. She turns and runs out. When she returns to her apartment, she finds a few
gladiola stalks and a note from Frankie thanking her for the superb times they had. He says he would be leaving town for business and she can have the apartment till the end of the month. Debby determines to forget Frankie: “I had to nuke Frankie from my memory. No such person as Frankie, never had been a Frankie, no super cool, super rich Asian lover who opened up a whole continent for me.”(45) She feels thankful to his mother for making her realize this.

The experience with Frankie drives Debby to set out in search of her parents. She signs up as a client with Finders/Keepers, a family re-uniting service in Albany. When her adoptive mother sadly asks – aren't we your family? Debbie replies, “I need to know... About crossed signals and conflicting impulses. They say there's a time every adopted kid suddenly has to know.”(49) She learns from her mother that her bio-parents, hippie back packer from Fresno and her Eurasian lover boy were into smoking, dealing and stealing. Her mother had some sort of police trouble. The Gray Nuns in Devigaon village took the child in and named her 'Faustine' after a typhoon. After adoption her name was officially changed into Debby Di Martino. Debby feels the police record of her parents would give her a good start for learning about them. Her bio-mother was an American citizen and had agreed to sign the adoption papers on condition that they pay her airfare back to the States. Debby decides to look for her mother in San Francisco.
Before starting out to trace her mother, Debby sets fire to the palatial house of Francis Fong. "I made sure the bad times I'd pledged did indeed roll Francis Albert Fong's way."(53) After torching the house, Debby stands across the street and watches it go up in flames along with the other lookers on. Frank might file an inflated insurance claim but the costs she extracted, "loss of past and loss of pride – were unreimbursable and permanent."(53)

Debby's search for her parents makes up the second part of the novel. She sets out towards California in her car that her 'Pappy and Mama' had bought for her graduation. On her way she calls San Francisco information for Finders/Keepers and is informed that there is nothing under that name. Once in California, Debby Di Martino transforms herself into Devi Dee. At the Fruit Inspection barrier, the Inspector stops her and waves her on after throwing her garbage pack in the dustbin. "Reborn, admitted, launched into clean, conquerable gravity-free space"(63), Debby feels, as Devi, she is stronger and quicker: "Devi arm-wrenched Debby. I was quicker, stronger as Devi; my intuitions were sharper, my impulsiveness rowdier. As Devi, I came into possession of my mystery genes. Thank you Clear water ... And thank you, Baby Fong, and what the heck, Frankie too for forcing me to deal with my not being a real Di Martino."(64)

Debby thinks that she did not fit into Hudson Valley of the Di Martinos any more comfortably than into the Asia of hippie mothers. She
believed in Wyatt's prediction that some day she would be rich and powerful, tall, pretty and free. "The Golden State offered freaky costumed freedom, and more; it offered immunity from past and future sins. Goodbye, Debby Di Martino. Long live Devi Dee." (65)

In California, many people mistake her for an Asian. In a Chinese restaurant, she is taken for a Chinese. In a McDonalds, an Indian student asks her whether she wants to catch a new Amitav film. She is once again reminded of her uncertain identity. She remarks, "Deep down I envied the Chinese waiter and the Indian student. The guys were geeks, but they knew who they were. They knew what they inherited. They couldn't pass themselves as anything else. No evasions, no speculations, no let's pretends. They didn't see themselves as special or freakish" (67).

Debby, now Devi, makes her car her boarding house and begins to scour the streets. She resorts to stealing, snatching purses and wallets and picking pockets. She picks up the Haight to settle down for a while. She converts her car into a home and board came from neighborhood soup kitchens. Brought up as a Catholic, Devi mingles with the Hare Krishnas, Buddhists, Baptists and Muslims. She feels that she was free at last: "I felt free; I was free. It just happened over night; One day I was afraid and on the outside, the next day I was a kind of outlaw, on the side of the other outlaws. Maybe I was programmed that way; it seemed totally natural to identify with dropouts ... I didn't look jobless and didn't feel homeless. No
sour odor of dim futurity." (69) She begins to scout the city for her mother and makes friends with her neighbours. Gabe, who reminds Devi of Wyatt, tells her to look for Buzzards Inc. in the yellow pages. She does not find Buzzards but finds Vulcan Inc. instead. When she calls, an impatient voice refuses to listen to her.

Ham Cohan's entrance begins a new phase in Debby's life. A film producer, Ham comes with his troop to shoot in that area. Devi, asked to move her car, picks up an argument with his P.A. Ham is called in and when he finds Devi is acquainted with Fong's films, he says, "So you're a Fong fan. This has to be Karma..." (79) He gives her hand a reverent shake and invites her for lunch. Debby learns from him that Frank was arrested for murder and arson after his house burned down. A guilty Devi tells herself she didn't have to believe there was any fatality.

When Devi tells Ham about her mother, he becomes nostalgic and remembers the days of his youth. Devi feels that she needs Ham's help in the search for her mother. She needed to understand him and his Berkeley times in order to understand her bio-mother. So she allows him to seduce her, then tells him she needs a job and a detective. The next day Ham rings her up and gives her a list of private detectives. Devi calls the Vulcan number and introduces herself as Ham's friend. The man who had refused to talk to her earlier responds this time and says he is Fred Pointer. He gives her an early evening date after a week.
Ham finds her a job in record time -- a job of cocktail waitressing at a Jazz club. She moves into a second floor rental in a dilapidated building. The other tenants of the building came from different countries - a Belgian Chocolatier, a Somali medical student with family, a Serbian photographer, a Vietnam War veteran whom people called Loco Larry. She feels she was inching closer to the times, maybe even to the block of her flower-child bio-mom. Devi did not know that she had already moved closer to her mother than she imagined. Her mother was an ex-lover of Ham, and Ham had talked to her on phone while looking for a job for Devi and she asked whether Devi was an Indian name.

Devi tells Fred Pointer everything about herself. Her mind travels back in time as she relives the experience of a baby, back in India. She says,

I kept talking. I couldn’t stop talking. It became as easy as breathing. I described the smell of lye in an out house, the furry touch of spiders crawling over my legs, the pooling of sap-white blood of roaches I swatted dead. I tasted stony grit in orphanage gruel, I felt panic as fingers closed around my throat. I hadn’t remembered any of it, not until that moment. We kept walking, away from the Haight.(102/103)
Fred Pointer “dug fast and dug deep” into Devi’s past. He rings her up and tells her what he found was not pleasant. They meet at an all night diner where she bumps into her father but does not know it at the time – a Eurasian seen sitting at the counter and chatting with the waiter. Fred exchanged Faxes with one Rajeev Raj in Bombay. He tells Devi about her possible father even as the man, ironically, sits right there. Fred tells her that she was very special as two continents had gone into her making. Rajeev said there was juicy stuff in all the newspapers about a sex-guru-serial killer and his harem of white hippies. Fred says Rajeev was very expensive, but Devi asks him to go ahead with the work. “What choice does an orphan have? Ignorance is no choice” (106) she feels.

Devi runs into her mother accidentally. After a matinee show, Ham and Devi dash into Dahlia’s boutique. Dahlia too was an ex-wife of Ham. As they were having a look at the dresses, Jess barges in with the words, “Let me guess, Ham! A long-lost daughter come to collect her support money?” (113) It is quite ironical that Devi turns out to be her daughter. Ham introduces her to Devi as Jess Dupree of the Media Escorting Agency ‘Leave It to Me.’ Later he tells Devi that he and Jess were lovers in Berkeley. They had co-protested Vietnam War and co-habited in a commune. Later, they had moved over to Napa and co-worshipped Baba Lalji’s feet. He however had lost track of Jess after her abortion. Devi, unaware that Jess is her mother, feels thankful that her bio-mom didn’t
have an abortion. She asks Ham to arrange a meeting with Jess. "It’ll bring me one step closer to your Berkeley times” she says. (116).

In his next meeting with Devi, Fred gives her the information which Rajeev Raj in Bombay had unearthed. Fred tells her that her father was one of the most notorious serial murderers in modern history and was rotting in an Indian prison. In Devigaon, Hari the old watchman, had witnessed him kill a memsahib and a baby. One of his early victims was his baby daughter. “In other words, ‘You’. Hari saw you die. You died, Devi, and turned into a ghost. You are still haunting poor old Hari’s village.”(121)

Fred gives her the spicy story of her parents. The serial killer, with his lover and his harem, wandered through the Asian countries. The lovers often quarrelled and made up again. In all the cities they wandered through, the killer left dead bodies: “he strangled, he conned, he made love to women he liked, and to women he scorned and, who knows, maybe left my half-siblings behind.”(123) In Singapore they quarrelled one final time and the woman went to the police and reported on the man. She accused him of strangulating at least seventeen men and women. But, “she said nothing about the killings in Devigaon, she said nothing about me at all…”(123), says Devi bitterly. It reveals an abandoned daughter’s bitterness at her mother’s heartlessness. The Interpol arrested her and tracked the killer to a hill station and arrested him. He was convicted of killing nine and sentenced to nine consecutive life sentences. Rajeev Raj had visited him in
jail. Devi thinks, "Rajeev Raj had met Bio-dad; I envy him that. I don't have any idea what he looks like and what he sounds like. Smooth as butter, I'll bet. I got my good looks from him, and my fantastic good luck. So I chant Frankie's Asia mantra, Hot, smoky, full of liars and cheats and murderers. But all I can picture is a pair of hands. The hands swat at flies, scorpions, spiders, roaches. The cell floor is thick with bug corpses."(124)

Fred gives Devi information about her parents in instalments, as and when it reaches him from Rajeev Raj. After being informed by Hari about the double murder, the Gray Nuns had gone to the spot and found the child alive, but near death. After she recovered, the Nuns had taken the child to her mother in prison. When Rajeev said the prisoner must have been over-joyed, the sister replied, "The damned construe the Good Lord's interventions as curses. The woman thanked us for the cigarettes."(125) A bitter Devi hands Rajeev's report back to Fred and stalks away: "I feel sad for the baby girl the Gray Nuns'd brought to visit the prisoner. I felt sad for all the dumped and discarded."(126)

When Ham takes Devi to a club to meet Jess, she sees Fred also there. She notices him wincing as Jess leads Ham on to the dancing floor. As Fred becomes more and more gloomy, Devi thinks, "Remake of the Frankie/Ovidia/Debby Triangle, starring middle-aged whitebread. Debby'd burned Frankie's house down, and possibly killed a rival. Devi was more mature, but you wouldn't dis her and get away with it."(132) Fred leads
Devi out of the club and Devi says, “Looks like we’ve both been abandoned, doesn’t it?” On the way Fred tells her that Jess had tried to leap off the bridge twice. The news troubles her. She dreams of Jess Dupree’s leap at night. Loco Larry living below her room hears her pacing and comes up to enquire: “You at war with yourself, babe?” He offers sleeping pills and takes her to his room. After returning to her room, Devi muses:

Ham and Larry. Larry and Ham. I spent a lot of time with each of them, because I wanted to … They were the true exotics, coming of age as they’d done in contrary times. Larry’d napalmed villages; Ham’d impressarioed love-ins. And Bio-Mom? She’d embroiled herself and me in messy mysteries…

Should I envy the mother who had put her bad karma behind her in an Indian prison, dumped her bastard child on Hindi speaking nuns and moved on? She’d done what’d felt good, what’s felt right at the time, and consequences be damned? (140-141)

When they meet next, Fred gives Devi news of her father’s death in prison. As Fred’s face reflects true despair, Devi consoles him, “He was my father, Fred, I’m not mourning him. He didn’t earn the right to be mourned” (145), and thinks, “Bio-dad had no leins on my heart. The
strangler's palms caressed my throat, fingers tightened and twisted. Dry coughs escaped.” (145)

Fred continues to look gloomy and springs a surprise on her that her mother could be Jess Dupree doing million plus business as C.E.O. of a hot author-escorting agency. When he showed Jess a copy of a court-room transcript Rajeev sent, she said, “Sweet dick, go fuck the Golden Gate, will you?” (146) Fred tells Devi – “You’re just an up state girl who got it over her head. And you are dragging us all into it…” (146) The revelation is like a nightmare for Devi: “In the nightmare I could ease only with Loco Larry’s barbiturates, Jess’ ghost stole my lithe, living body, then coaxed it to dive off the bridge and drown itself. In life, I was the ghost; I’d already haunted a whole village.” (146) Devi quits her job of waitressing at the club before her shift is over so that she “could focus on getting Jess.” (146)

She works on Ham and gets herself hired by Jess for her Agency. “Hi Mom! I’m the infant you mislaid.” (148), she wants to say. Jess’ office is cluttered with shawls, brass gods, mirrored elephants, copper urns, and so on. Jess reacts defensively to Devi’s scrutiny. She tells Devi she had gone to Asia with a pierced nose. She launches into ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of Media Escorting. Devi examines her every movement, every reaction closely. She wants to say, “Hey, you’re a widow! Daddy’s dead, no fear he’ll pop up and ruin your life. We know what men who’ve shared the
same woman are like but what are women who’ve shared the same man like?”(152)

Jess tells her story to Devi. She presents it as her invitation to concubinely bonding. But Devi hears it as a cautionary tale against mindless passion. After leaving Baba Lalji’s ashram, Jess went to Asia. She went through all the stages of a hippie life. Her wanderings took her to an Indian village, Lakshmipur, where she met Romeo Hawk. She was resting under a tree reciting Emily Dickinson’s poetry, when he rose like an apparition: “This snake god or snake devil, whatever it was, just rose right out of the cracks in the dry soil and rocked her in his arms.”(154) Jess says there is no describing that erotic moment and Devi thinks she had just heard her beginning. She muses:

I saw what Jess’d felt. My father – her god, my devil – rocked her in his arms. I concentrated on those non-human arms. On their litheness. On their strength and meanness. On the starlight luster of his killer hands. Prince of darkness. Prince Materializing out of darkness. He didn’t have to touch her. I was wantonness waiting to happen.(155)

Devi hears Jess’ words as a plea that it wasn’t her fault – he was a natural force. As she listens to a writer read out of his novel, Devi bitterly thinks her mother scripted her own life and Devi’s on a romance novel off
a rack. She hates the writer for not telling the whole tale, "the part about what happens after the dust clears and the child is strangulated..." (162)

Fred Pointer dies under suspicious circumstances. His badly charred body is found under a Cyprus tree. The coroner's report said his blood showed the presence of an unidentified vegetal poison. Ham holds a 'wake' for Fred in his boathouse 'Last Chance'. After the 'wake', a select few friends are taken to the houseboat in Sausalito. There Devi happens to watch Ham and Jess make love in the lavatory. When she cannot take it, she rushes off to Loco Larry. Larry behaves in a weird manner and suggests they do some serious gardening. He daubs his face with black paint and takes out his truck. When he suggests that they might go to the weekend hide out of a 'rich bastard', Devi takes him to Beth Hendon's summer resort. When they are engaged in digging on a rise, Beth suddenly turns up along with another 'ex' of Ham. Larry shoots both the women down and runs to collect his trophies - a thumb and a toe off Beth. Devi falls to the ground and begins to throw up. But when Larry crouches down with his head between the legs of Beth, Devi shoots him dead. Crazy Larry was obviously reliving a battle scene and pays with his life. Devi thinks, "You flee in the face of middle-aged lust in Sausalito, and before the night's over you end up in Lafayette, accessory to murder." (172)

Devi grieves with Ham and his friends in public but celebrates in private because the dead women were of the same age as Jess. "Two stand
I was closing in. Courtesy of a mad man, I felt closer than I had to my bio-parents.” (174)

In a bulky envelope addressed to Jess, which Devi receives in Jess’ absence, she finds xeroxed copies of the transcripts of a murder trial – a murder in which her father and mother were involved. Devi discovers that her mother committed follies in the Asian continent “and now a lover or blackmailer was hounding her.” (182) She feels that her mother was a perfect daughter of her times and had cracked under pressure. She wants to learn more about her mother and searches her office. She discovers a bundle of letters addressed to Ham, returned by him when he married another lady. She finds a photograph of a young mother and her just born. It is strange that Jess abandons the daughter but preserves her photo.

When Devi calls her, Jess snaps at her “you turn up and three friends are dead” (184). She begs Devi to call off her tormentor and moans that the sins of her youth have come back to haunt her. She asks Devi to take over the authors for the rest of the week and Devi thinks: “The boss begging her employee to work over time, while she hits on the employee’s lover... Why should I mind? We go back a long way, Jess and I, in the rejection business. I’ve bench-pressed disappointment...” (186)

In Jess’ office, Devi receives the tormentor’s messages. The voice says that he was in the vicinity. Devi feels that the voice, strangely,
sounded like Frankie’s. As Devi thinks that her father is dead, she does not suspect that the tormentor is her father. He makes his appearance in the guise of Ma Varuna, a writer whom Devi was expecting. When she hears his ‘Bacall-deep voice’ behind her, Devi, breathing in the spicy sandalwood cologne “succumbed like Jess? – to the beauty and spell of a god or devil.”(203) Ma Varuna, dressed in a gauzy silk tunic, satin pants, a rich velvet cape and silver-heeled dancing shoes, was more an apparition than a touring author. He/She tells Devi that she (Devi) does not have a right to such a name. Devi retorts that America is a free country and one can choose any name one likes.

Ma Varuna/Romeo Hawk disposes off her first interviewer by giving him a brew he had prepared with dry leaves. The interviewer goes down heavily crushing the spider monkey that Romeo/Ma Varuna had brought with him in the process. Then Romeo punctures a hole on the dead man’s forehead with his shoe’s heel. A shocked Devi asks why? Ma Varuna says he is doing the fool a favour, the body is a temporary home. The soul can’t exit without a proper exit hole. And Devi thinks, “If Ma Varuna is right, if Devi is a name you can’t earn or be given, it is a branding iron that blisters cool, smooth, flesh with a hot metallic howl, I was branded Devi the moment that Ma Varuna’s slipper bored deep through a dead man’s anaemic skin and let out an unprepared soul.”(211)
Romeo commits a sin in the presence of his daughter and she becomes the avenging goddess, Devi, in metaphorical terms.

As Devi puzzles over why Ma Varuna should have killed Jack Rice (the interviewer), Romeo steps out of his clothes and reveals himself. He dresses himself in a stylish suit and orders Devi to drive him to her boss’ foxhole. He tells Devi he is her father and says he has brought a gift for her, the only gift that she would ever want. He dangles before her a vinyl carry on. Devi remembers he was the Eurasian she had seen in the all night dinner. In the carry on she finds five passports issued to five separate names, all carrying a photo of Jess. “Jess too, was a ghost. She had inhabited five other bodies than the one I knew....”, Devi thinks. (212)

She drives her father to the houseboat of Ham. She says, “I didn’t drive Romeo Hawk to Jess and Ham’s floating love nest because of the 9 mm he pointed at my head. I drove him because he was the scatterer of seeds from which I had sprouted...”(216) Romeo refers to his hands as his waste disposal units and says they take care of the expendable and the nosy people. Devi asks if they had taken care of Fred Pointer too. Fred shouldn’t have died, she says. Romeo replies, “It was his time, dear. And that bitch deserves serious attention from me. All those years in prison in India, how many deaths is that worth?”(217) A sick Devi does not care any more about the details of her birth. Stuck with an armed and crazy parent, she
follows the advice of Fred – “Go with the flow, keep your identity – your only asset – liquid. Breathe deep, relax.”(216-217)

Romeo, in a chatty mood, tells his story to his daughter. His grandfather Ib Haq was from Peshawar and had made his way out of it to peddle cigarettes and chewing gum in Indo-China cities. His father Yves had upgraded the surname to Haque and ran a pedi-cab company in Saigon. “Haque’s son, yours truly, Americanizes his name to H-a-w-k, and procures for GIS to-die-for dreams…”(219) He says the only peace of mind Jess has had for twenty years was thinking that he would never get out of jail, which was stupidity. He pulls out a document from his pocket and reads out of it. Jess had pleaded in the court that she wasn’t an accessory after murder. “He cast a spell over me with that body, that smile… I saw him kill Astrid … I saw him kill her and I did nothing,” she said. (220) Devi thinks her mother wore her guilt the way other women wore hats, scarves and ear rings.

Jess is shocked at the appearance of Romeo. She shrieks and kicks him. He only grins and bends her over the rails so far back that Devi feels the pain and shouts at him to let her go. Romeo sarcastically wishes Jess a Happy Valentine’s Day. Devi had forgotten it was Valentine’s Day. Nobody had sent her flowers, not even a card. She begins to hate Jess: “I hated Jess. She wasn’t worthy of obsessive desire and claim or die pursuits…”(223) Suddenly the long forgotten past experience surfaces in 198
Devi’s mind: “Some thing was happening to me. A little girl in a shapeless gray smock was being marched up the cracked cement steps of a small town courthouse... Movie lines merged with memories. You shouldn’t have, you was my mother.”(223) An anguished Devi rushes at her parents, screaming, clawing, punching and jabbing at them. “Why?” I begged. “They brought me to see you. The Gray Nuns. It was a long, nasty ride. The bus was packed. Why didn’t you want to see me again?”(223) Jess spits in her face and says she was never pregnant, she wasn’t that dumb. Romeo pushes Devi aside. He whips out handcuffs and puts them on Jess, and snatching Devi’s handbag for the car keys, drags Jess out. Devi says, “Mom cursed Dad all the way to my car. I couldn’t have stopped them even if I’d wanted to. Dad had the 9 mm, the cuffs, the strangler’s hands. Maybe Mom’s time had come.”(225)

Ham returns and is surprised to see Devi. She tells him that her author turned out to be a close friend of Jess and they had both gone out. She asks him, “If you’re part ethnic Chinese, part French-Vietnamese, definitely part Pakistani and part you never figured out what, what does that make you?”(229) She adds “And if you add half-Californian to it all?” Ham says “Trouble?” Devi corrects him, “Force of Nature.”(229)

Ham finds Devi in a mood of love making and plays along. Devi says:
A quickie on a banquette in a houseboat may be no competition for acid-high-sex with god-demon-snake man, but for one nano-second that night my brain could sleep. The immediate past and the about-to-happen both receded. It was my oldest past that suddenly surged forward.

I was on a country bus, tasting dust and diesel... I am crying because the woman is crying. I can hear long, low sobs again, smell vomit again, press my face deep into Mommy's lap again. Daddy shouts, shut her up or I'll do it my self. Mommy giggles. I want for us both to get back in the car again. I want for us to drive home. I don't want to listen for the grass to absorb a body's clumsy fall. This is not the first time I've buried my head in Mommy's lap so, I shan't have to see or hear or know. Callused hands grip my throat. The world wraps itself in blackness.

Better that I had been the fetus Jess aborted.

(231)

The inference is, Devi was strangulated in a bus. This contradicts the story of Hari that he witnessed the serial killer murdering the child. Any how Devi, as a child had witnessed many murders her father had committed. Devi, feeling miserable, asks Ham why he had not married Jess, tells him he should have married her, "You'd have spared me my
violence propensities," she says (231). A puzzled Ham asks her what his old life with Jess had to do with her (Devi).

Romeo returns and tells Devi he had a very satisfactory talk with Jess. He tells Ham that Jess was in the car. Ham, now anxious, closes in on Romeo asking who the hell he was. Romeo thrusts him away. Ham strikes at him with a drink bottle. Romeo strangulates him and then chops off his head. A shocked Devi crawls away from him and begins to throw up and presses her face to the rug. It is as if her childhood nightmare has returned. Romeo nudges her with his foot and offers her a drink. She finds him drinking from a miniature wine bottle. Suddenly the ship begins to shake and Romeo stumbles:

Violent propensities, the sea has them, the Earth rocks with them, I claim my inheritance, kneeling Bio-dad so hard as he tilts his head back from the tiny bottle, that it tumbles him... The cleaver fuses to my arm. It soars and plunges, soars and plunges. ‘Monster’, I scream, I keep screaming as I cradle Ham’s tormented face to my bosom. I am screaming as I dial 911. (225)

The scene reminds the reader of the last scene of *Wife*, though there is a lot of difference between the two. Dimple in *Wife* sleep-walks through the scene and imagines she will get away with murder. But Devi fully
knows the consequences of her act. Earlier she got away with the murder of Larry. But now, she no longer cares. She calls the police and says it is a domestic dispute. She waits for a long while for the waist chains, handcuffs, leg shackles and prays for her misery to be over. Just then, the waves rock the boat and heave it off its moorings and into the molten sea:

The houseboat skimmed a molten gold sea carrying its cargo of dead and living towards a horizon on flames. I heard mermaids sing and police sirens screech, but not for me, not that night the Big One hit, with fires rimming the Bay like some night time eruption with the night sky pink, reflecting off the fog, the sparks flying down like fiery rain, sky hissing into sea.

(239-240)

The turbulent sea reflects the state of mind of Devi. As the boat is carried away, Devi, ‘Force of Nature’ as she calls herself, after doling out justice merges with Nature. She wreaks her vengeance.

The story of the novel, as all Mukherjee’s novels are, is woven around the female protagonist. It is Devi’s story, the story of her turbulent life; it is the story of the bitterness and anguish of an abandoned child and her desire to find her parents at any cost. “What choice has an orphan,” she asks. As in *Jasmine*, the protagonist changes her identity mid way. Jasmine has many selves whereas Debby has two – Debby and Devi. Chance has a
role to play in her change of identity, as she picks the name ‘Devi’ off a passing vehicle and becomes a new self. As Devi, she comes into possession of her mystery genes.

But even before she assumes the name, she was Devi, the avenger of wrongs. She is not the one who takes things lying down, who accepts things passively as her fate. She punishes Francis Fong for dumping her, for playing with women and for discarding them as rubbish. By setting fire to his palace, she destroys him literally. Loco Larry, though her friend, is punished likewise when he kills Beth and her friend. And finally it is the turn of her father himself, Romeo Hawk, demon-incarnate. After he kills Jess and then Ham right in front of her eyes, Devi feels revolted. Suddenly endowed with power and energy, she transforms herself into the avenging Goddess and kills him with the same weapon that he had used to kill Ham.

Another theme entwined with the theme of the avenging goddess is the anguish of an abandoned child. The protagonist Devi is at first strangulated by her own father and then in a half-dead condition abandoned by her mother. She is rejected by her mother thrice over; in the prison when the Gray Nuns bring the child to her; in the courtroom when she denies ever being pregnant. Then the grown up Devi is spit in the face when she accosts her mother with the question, why did you refuse to see me? Jess once again says she was never pregnant.
Devi has mixed feelings for her mother. When she comes to know that Jess is her mother, she does not rush to her declaring that she is her daughter. There are no sentimental scenes between them and between Devi and her father either. There is no cloying sentimentality in the novel. What is found is stark reality. What Devi feels for her mother more than anything else is hatred. Once she knows who her mother is, she dumps her job so that she could focus on getting her mother. When her mother’s two friends are killed by Larry, she celebrates it in private. “Two stand-ins for Mother down. I was closing in,” (174) she says. When Ham is snatched away by her mother, Devi feels she is abandoned yet again, this time by Ham. She feels jealous of her mother. She says, “I’d have settled for one splinter-small ice-cold lead on whatever Romeo’d meant by absolute love. I hated Jess. She wasn’t worthy of obsessive desire and claim or die pursuits. He made me wanton, Jess had lied to herself. She wasn’t wanton, had never been and would never be, she was just another Central Valley hippie aging into Marin Matron.”(223) Her bitterness increases as she watches her parents. When Ham arrives on the scene after her father drags her mother out and enquires – what’s up? She wanted to tell him, “What’s up? Oh, nothing much, Ham, what’s up? I’ll tell you, starting with, Your friend and squeeze, Jess, Jeanne, Iris Daughter or whoever, helped Romeo Hawk or Haque or Hawk kill a total of seventeen men and women, nearly choke to death a no-name baby of no fixed address, bump off Fred... You want
more?"(226) But she does not utter these words. Devi, a no-name baby of no fixed address, conceals her anguish from Ham. She is orphaned over and over again, first by her parents, then by Francis Fong, and then by Ham. Her anguish and bitterness surface throughout the novel.

Both the parents of Devi are portrayed as heartless, inhuman creatures. Neither Romeo nor Jess has any qualms about killing people or being an accessory. They do it with nonchalance. Romeo is a typical serial killer. People are expendable to him. He does not need any reason to bump off people. He kills Jack Rice, the journalist who comes to interview Ma Varuna, for no apparent reason. He kills Fred to draw the attention of Jess: "that bitch deserves serious attention from me."(217) Jess does not express any regret at being an accessory after the number of murders that Romeo commits. She does not take the blame on herself but blames Romeo. She does not display any kind of affection or love to her child, not even when she is accosted by her grown up daughter. It is rather inhuman. Devi’s hatred therefore is understandable.

Both Francis Fong and Ham Cohan play crucial roles in the two important phases of Devi’s life. Francis Fong at a crucial point in Devi’s life offers her a new style of living so that she begins to experience real life. He opens the doors of the hither to unknown Asian continent for her by his anecdotes of his childhood. Before the ‘Frankie epoch’, Debby believed, as all the Di Martinos did, that the country had gone to the dogs.
and the cities were taken over by drug addicts, rapists and muggers. “Frankie’s changed all that. For Frankie, the New World was as green and crisp as a freshly counterfeited hundred dollar bill. In the After Frankie months I became a news junkie, a cornered rat with options. And suddenly life became interesting. Suddenly I was sniffing out possibilities where the world saw only problems.”(32) Francis Fong offers the dream world to Debby and abruptly snatches it away from her. Debby turning into Devi destroys him as a revenge. The ditching by Fong drives Debby to search for her real identity. Thus Francis Fong serves as a catalyst in Debby’s search for identity.

Devi seems to have found her true love in Ham Cohan. He provides her access to a different kind of life, to his Berkeley times, to Fred and finally to Jess. Devi says life with Ham meant “no waiting, no-hang-ups, zipping right along... clubs were free; movies were seen months before release. He was lonely. The loneliest is the person with the largest entourage.”(116) A much married man, Ham maintained good relations with all his ex-wives and ex-lovers. This enables Devi to get in touch with Jess and then find a job with her. This fact also facilitates Jess’ re-entry into Ham’s life, causing him to dump Devi which leaves her more embittered.

The novel can also be read as a study of the effects of the Vietnam War on American youth. The Haight that Devi picks up to settle down is
symbolic of power generation. The times of her mother’s youth come out vividly, as Ham and Jess recollect their youth. Devi says, “What they said of the Haight, I mean the historical epoch, the mood I’d missed, I mean my bio-mom’s times and wants and needs and not the place was still true. Do your own thing, do it proudly, and no one will bother you. Feel free and you shall be free... The Haight’s lesson was: Nothing in appearance or behavior need cost a drop of dignity...”(69)

When Devi paints her mother as a “flake who’d back-packed across three continents, chasing herbs and new gurus.”(87), Ham gets nostalgic. He says half the girls in Berkeley were on those trips, the girls of his youth. The times were unique and her mother was the product of her times. Devi realizes she needs the people Ham knew, the visions and delusions he had survived in order to find her mother. She comes to know the kind of times in which they lived. A lot of the girls of the time, back-packed hippies, had gone to Asia and wandered over the continent. Most of them did not return to the States. As Fred tells Devi, the reasons were, white slave traffic, Saudi Sheiks, jaundice, cholera, and so on.

The ‘Jess and Ham’ story that Ham tells Devi is the story of the youth of their times “— They’d co-protested McNamara’s Vietnam... co-lobbed rotting fruit at a motorcade that should have been escorting President Nguyerslime and for a while they’d co-habited in a commune...” (114).
When Jess tells her story to Devi, Devi wonders, "how do you protest war by doing dope in an alien continent. That didn’t make sense."(153) But she observes that it made sense to Jess and to any one of her age, of Ham's age and Fred's age, to all those who survived the war and confessed what the war had done to them. The war, they said, freed them to be themselves "to curse and fuck and burn and loot, to kill or die, to feel superior while having fun. The war didn’t change you, that was Jess’ point... The war levelled the playing field for girls like her."(153)

Observing Jess, Ham, Fred and Larry and listening to their stories, Devi learns the consequences of the war, what the war had done to them and to children like her. She understands why Jess had done what she did. She remarks that Jess, like the other girls of her youth, must have started out romantic. Devi contemplates over the lives of Jess' contemporaries:

(Jess) must have started out romantic, must have floated into the sixties in a haze of sex, drugs and the sanctity of rebellion. Then the war had snuck upon her as it had on Larry and Ham, an apocalypse segregating hawks from doves, cynics from idealists, setting up areas where women couldn’t follow. Vietnam had plucked a slow, shy kid from a central valley farm and provided him paranoia and cheap arms. Peace had coarsened a draft resister to deal maker on the mini-budget Bay Area film
circuit. We know how our men had reacted. Vietnam had been their central experience ... they’d coped or they’d been gutted. War had blessed them with terrible clarity...

But what about us, Vietnam’s War-bastards and democracy’s love children? We’re still coping with what they did, what they saw, what they salvaged, what they mangled and dumped on that Saigon rooftop that maniacal afternoon.

(140,141)

The war screwed up girls like Jess and the sufferers were kids like Devi. Devi remarks that 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 the boys like Larry to pull the triggers.”(167) Devi intelligently analyses the psychologies of Jess, Ham and other war affected people. But it does not diminish her bitterness at being rejected and dumped again and again.

The novel *Leave It to Me*, with its dual theme of a discarded child’s search for her parents and Devi dispensing justice, adds yet another theme, the consequences of Vietnam war. The first person narrative enables the writer to bring forth vividly the hidden anguish and bitterness of the protagonist and helps to carry these across to the reader. How does a young modern American girl brought up by a decent Italian American family react when she discovers she is the daughter of two heartless people – a
demonic serial killer and an American Hippie with a devil-may-care attitude? One finds the answer in the novel.

While Hannah of Mukherjee’s previous novel is an adventure and an intense lover, Devi of *Leave It to Me* is an avenging Goddess. While Hannah eloquently argues against the war, Devi intelligently analyses the evil consequences of the war and is a victim and embittered person as well. Both are abandoned by their mothers in their childhood. While Hannah understands her mother’s position and forgives her and searches for her towards the end of the novel, Devi’s search for her mother begins early on and ends in hatred as she feels her mother’s act is unredeemable.
References
