



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave It to Me*: A Study in Human Complexities and Conflicts

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's women protagonists are the women who carry some congenital flaw in their characters, because of which they fail to maintain a healthy relationship with anyone. Instead, they grow incongruent with everything they encounter. The present paper delves into the profound exploration of how the protagonist's interactions with various characters, marked by discordant connections, contribute to her

eventual doom. Through a close analysis of Mukherjee's nuanced character development and narrative choices, this study unveils the ways in which the protagonist's journey is intertwined with the complexities of her relationships, ultimately leading to a tragic and foreboding outcome. The study explores identity crises, cultural displacement, and societal expectations, illuminating how the collision of opposing viewpoints and antagonistic associations eventually determines the protagonist's tragic trajectory. Drawing upon textual evidences and literary analysis, the present paper illuminates the profound impact of complex relations on the protagonist's fate, highlighting the author's skillful portrayal of human vulnerability and the potent consequences of ill-fated connections.

Keywords: Catastrophe, Complexities, Conflicting, Congenital Flaw, Disparity, Human Vulnerability, Incongruous Relations etc.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) was a renowned Indian-American author whose literary works eloquently bridged the cultural divide between her homeland and her adopted country. Through her compelling narratives, Mukherjee explored themes of identity crises, immigration, and the evolving self. Her unique perspective as an immigrant and her rich storytelling ability have left an indelible mark on contemporary literature, inviting readers to delve into the complexities of cultural assimilation and the transformative power of the immigrant experience.

The intricacies of human relationships often serve as a compelling lens through which authors explore the depths of human nature and the inexorable march toward fate. In *Leave It to Me*, the exploration takes center stage as the protagonist navigates a tumultuous journey rife with complex relationships. Mukherjee skillfully weaves a narrative that delves into the profound impact of these relationships on the protagonist's destiny, culminating in a tragic and foreboding outcome. The tapestry of interwoven connections and discordant associations mirrors the intricate threads of life itself, revealing how the protagonist's interactions contribute to her inevitable downfall. Reviewing the novel Shalini Gupta 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’” (Gupta, XX).

The novel unfolds as a captivating tale of identity crises, cultural displacement, and the struggle against societal norms. The protagonist's experiences reverberate with the pulse of the modern world, echoing the challenges faced by many individuals as they grapple with their place in an ever-changing landscape. Mukherjee's narrative expertise lies in her ability to craft characters whose lives are enmeshed in a web of relationships. Through a meticulous analysis of character development, thematic exploration, and narrative choices, an attempt has been made to illuminate the ways in which Mukherjee's masterful storytelling crafts a narrative wherein the protagonists' conflicting relationships serve as harbingers of her tragic demise. As we delve into the depths of the novel, we unravel a narrative tapestry that offers poignant insights into the complex and often bittersweet nature of human connections and the shadows they cast upon one's destiny. It can be aptly put as:

The story, like a picaresque novel, unfolds across the US, a prose version of the road movies of women, often predators, pushing frontiers to come to terms with themselves. And like many of Mukherjee's earlier works, the novel is looking at the many diasporas which meet, mingle and then perhaps diverge in the US. Interesting territory to explore, for the author seems to have used an abandoned, adopted child as a metaphor for the immigrant. Had she tried less hard, reined in some over-the-top prose, this could have been a good novel. (*indiatoday.in*)

Devi, the protagonist of the novel is an outcome of the beat generation legacy. Shalini Gupta observes:

A Kaleidoscopic wheel of a book, *Leave It to Me* reveals the scars of the beat generation, whose legacy to its survivors is as dangerous as shifting continental plates. Mukherjee shuttles between time and space zones to create a dichotomy “as wise as the San Andreas fault.” The novel’s sex and violence rip from the grandstands to centre-stage and the maelstrom engulfs all. (Gupta, XX)

Being the offspring of an American mother and an Indian father, and having been raised in America's arms despite being born on Indian soil, Devi represents a remarkable synthesis of Eastern and

Western influences. The genesis of the novel germinated in Mukherjee's mind while residing in Delhi, India, triggered by a high-profile news story about an Asian Serial killer. It took her two decades to meticulously transcribe her conceptualizations onto paper. Mukherjee admits in a conversation:

About twenty years ago, while I was spending a year in Delhi, India, the Delhi police made big news by arresting an Asian serial killer and three of his white, hippie, women accomplices. The man was said to have befriended, then robbed and killed—in very befriended ways—tourists from Europe, the United States, and Canada. The accomplices were vulnerable young backpackers who had succumbed to the serial killer's physical attractiveness and charisma. (*LIM*, 129)

The central character, Devi, enters the world as an Indian flower child through her journey, only to be abandoned by her original parents. However, fate intercedes as grey nuns come to her rescue amidst the turmoil of a typhoon, christening her Faustine. When she is just two years old, an Italian-American family provides her with a safe haven. The contours of Devi's identity harmoniously blend with her adoptive family's until the inevitable crescendo of adolescence propels her into a quest to unravel the intricate layers of her existence. It is during these transformative years, marked by rapid growth and introspection that the contrasts between her and Angie, her sister, begin to take shape. Driven by an unquenchable curiosity about her origins, Devi embarks on a journey of self-discovery, seeking answers to her existence. However, Devi's adopted mother's revelations only give a fleeting look into her background, leaving her with no guidance as she makes her way through the confusing passageways of her identity. Her yearning is for a more complete understanding of herself as she says, “The downside is knowing that the other two I owe my short life to were lousy people who'd considered me lousier still and who'd left me to be sniffed at by wild dogs, like a carcass in the mangy shade” (10).

Devi's odyssey in search of her birth parents is set into motion by an unexpected catalyst: Wyatt. He becomes the first person to delicately probe into the realms of her adoption, unwittingly igniting the dormant ember of curiosity within her. His predictions about Devi's development into a beautiful, wealthy woman reverberate throughout the story, sowing the seeds of aspiration in her. As he says in the novel, “You know

Devi, I can tell you're going to be tall and beautiful very soon, and someday you're going to be rich and powerful" (14).

The dichotomy within the protagonist's family relationships is further exacerbated by the presence of Mr. Bullock, her English teacher. Mr. Bullock recognizes poetic flair in her and endeavors to nurture her talent, creating a conducive environment for her creative prospects. However, due to her internal emotional turmoil, she is unable to engage fully with her talent. The inconsistency between her innate abilities and her inner emotional struggles is evident as she surprises herself with her own compositions. Her inability to connect with poetry mirrors her difficulty in connecting with her adopted family. The revelation of her true origin intensifies her urge to delve into self-discovery, magnifying the detachment she feels from her adoptive family. Her appreciation for being adopted into Di Martinos' household is apparent when she expresses gratitude, acknowledging the positive aspects of her adoption. She remarks, "I was adopted into a decent Italian-American Family in the Hudson Valley. That's the upside of adoption" (12). However, when she speaks, this attitude is still intertwined with her emotional instability: "Frankie Fong was my first mature lover, the first one I need to do it with, my first older but shorter man, my first non-Italian, non-classmate but that does not explain mesmerism" (25).

Through the voice of Devi, Mukherjee's words resonated, painting a vivid picture of Frankie's enchanting yet fanciful portrayal of Asia, replete with dogs, bats, sweltering heat, beggars, police sweeps, corruption, squalor, and disease. Devi felt a yearning for the Asia that may have been, an Asia perhaps carelessly inhabited by a free-spirited hippy mother, amid this vibrant images. Devi's devotion to Frankie was so profound that she would have readily married him, were it not for the heart-wrenching moment he jilted her in front of his mother. The searing embarrassment from this betrayal became a catalyst, propelling Devi to sever ties with him. Fueled by a thirst for vengeance, she ignited the very home that had been a gift from Fong, engulfing her past in flames. Mukherjee writes:

If it had all gone right on those hot last weeks of August, if frank had been genuinely impulsive and asked me to marry him I would have, Even if he had just kept me around as his upstate concubine (delicious word) I've had adjusted to his gifts of jade brooches and coral

bracelets (“trinkets of value,” he called them, “sew them into your suitcase”). And when the good feelings ran out I’d have left him so he wouldn’t have to leave me. I am not a jealous person. Whatever I did to Frankie or to others, jealousy was never my motive. What I did was torch Frankie’s precious home in Saratoga Springs. (25)

Devi was consumed by an unquenchable need to learn the intimate details of her real origins after parting ways with Frankie. However, even as Devi's foster mother opened her heart and shared this painful revelation, she desperately implored Devi to reconsider her relentless pursuit of her bio-parents. She tried to steer Devi away from what she saw as a futile mission, fueled by a desire to protect her from further heartache. In an ironic twist, Devi appeared to be at odds with the unconditional love and care that her foster mother had showered upon her. Despite the affectionate demeanour and heartfelt pleas from her well-wisher, Devi seemed to disregard these gestures. She remained resolute in her decision to continue her search for her elusive bio-parents, a decision that led her on a path toward San Francisco.

The incompatibility between Devi and her adopted mother becomes starkly evident in a poignant conversation they share. Devi's unwavering determination, juxtaposed against her foster mother's tender concern, highlights the complex and conflicting emotions as it is clear from the following conversation:

“Why waste your money?” Mama sighed when I called her the next afternoon and told her that I’d just signed on as a client with finders/keepers, a family-reuniting service in Albany.

“We are yours family. Aren’t we your family, Devi.” (32)

Devi behaves in a startlingly inappropriate way that contradicts the values of her adoptive parents. This experience highlights her departure from the solid ground that her loving upbringing gave, highlighting the erratic nature of her choices and behaviour. The stark juxtaposition of Devi's past and present, as witnessed in this interaction, serves as a testament to the complexity of her borderline personality disorder and the profound impact it exerts on her behaviour and choices:

The woman fixed a friendly eye on me. Hi, need help in moving your car?"

"Who do you think you are?" I said

"Locations PA, "she said. We do have city's permission, you know."

I held my hand out. "Devi," I announced. "Also known as Goddess."

The woman gave my fingers an air-shake. "We need you to cooperate."

"Why?"(45)

Devi's interaction with Fred serves as a startling example of her deteriorating sanity because it reveals the chaos in her mind. She displays her irregular behaviour by refusing to pay for the Pepsi she had initially ordered. Devi's decision rapidly changes as the waiter brings the drink, showing a discrepancy between her intentions and her behavior. The conversation that follows illustrates her erratic state:

The waiter arrived, carrying a glass of Pepsi. "I've had a change of heart," I declared. "It's too late to change now," the waiter retorted. "You asked for a Pepsi, and that's what I brought you. Whether you choose to drink it or not is your concern." I began to walk away, distancing myself from the waiter's reach. (60)

Devi's descent into madness deepens following the revelation of Romeo Hawk's identity, a man who embodies both a sex guru and a serial killer. The jarring truth that Romeo is her biological father, responsible for a string of heinous murders in the area, resonates deeply within her. She senses a chilling resonance, an unsettling genetic connection to his violent tendencies. In an unprecedented act of violence, she takes her inheritance of aggression to a harrowing extreme, ending Romeo's life. This single act culminates in a trio of deaths: her biological mother, her biological father, and her lover. Mukherjee masterfully captures this tumultuous moment, illustrating Devi's descent into chaos with vivid prose:

Just as the sea echoes its tumultuous nature, so does the Earth tremble with it. I embrace my heritage, striking a blow to my Bio-Dad as he leans back to sip from a diminutive bottle, sending him tumbling. The camera rolls, capturing every moment. The cleaver becomes an extension of my arm, soaring and plunging in a macabre rhythm. "Monster!" My voice

reverberates as I cradle Ham's tormented visage to my chest. The screams persist as I dial 911.

(125)

Devi's internal turmoil and her final act of violence come to the fore, underscoring the depth of her psychological distress and the tragic culmination of her borderline personality disorder. In the wake of these drastic actions, it becomes apparent that the protagonist is grappling with profound internal turmoil, hinting at a concealed genital anomaly. This revelation, though disquieting, is her conduit to an unexpected inner tranquility, an elusive peace that only vengeance could usher in. The juxtaposition of her paradoxical nature, her desires, and her actions paint a complex portrait of a character inextricably bound to the forces that both drive and haunt her. The following excerpt illustrates this:

A spectacular extravaganza of light, sound, heat, I was an auteur too. Frankie had no right to be angry. He had a duty to take pride in my accomplishment.....inner peace. That is what I gained that smoking summer night as a wide, gracious porch smouldered and Frankie wept. Nirvana is finding the tiger balls within you, I ambled to the used Corolla Pappy and Mama bought me for graduation and I made my sputter gateway while the fire fighters were still hacking away at Frankie's dream house with their axes. (34)

Mukherjee's strategic integration of the Electra mythology and the rich tapestry of Indian lore offer readers a lens through which to view Devi's complexities. As the narrative unfolds, this amalgamation serves as both a mirror and a lens, reflecting universal themes while refracting them through the prism of cultural nuances. In weaving together these mythic strands and intricate character dynamics, Mukherjee achieves a symphonic resonance, inviting readers to delve beyond the surface and engage with the multi-layered symphony of emotions, intentions, and histories that define her work. She says, "In my novel, I found myself working with three separate such triangles, because Devi has a biological father, an adoptive father, and, in Ham, a lover who she wishes had married her mother and so had become her natural father" (129).

A deeper layer emerges as we contemplate the possibility that Devi's experiences align with the traits of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Fear of abandonment, unstable relationships, impulsivity,

emotion deregulation, and a distorted self-image – all these elements intertwine to create a volatile internal landscape. Through the lens of BPD, Devi's actions and emotions are illuminated, revealing the intricate psychological forces that complicate her relationships and sense of self. Her inability to build deep emotional bonds and a strong sense of identity are examples of these inconsistencies, which cause her to experience emotional upheaval all the time. She also suffers from involuntary recurrent memory, a psychological condition in which a person unexpectedly and strongly recalls events from the past. Mukherjee describes this flaw in Devi, when Devi is living with Ham but forgets and behaves as if she is living with Frankie. “Bodacious body wear for audacious amateurs” I caught myself before I’d said, “And Frankie now your turn!...” (97).

Devi is portrayed in the novel as having internal complexities and conflicts that contribute to her borderline personality disorder. These traits lead her to reject the stability of a loving adopted family, opting for a life of turmoil and vengeance against her biological parents. The novel explores the intricate interplay between Devi's psychological struggles, her unresolved past, and her attempts to regain control over her emotions and identity. The critical analysis of the novel, *Leave It to Me* and its portrayal of the protagonist Devi's psychological struggles provide insights into several important areas.

By examining Devi's character and her borderline tendencies, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with borderline personality disorder which contributes to the broader field of psychology and mental health, aiding researchers and clinicians in better understanding the disorder's causes, symptoms, and potential treatment approaches. It highlights how authors use characters and narratives to explore and depict psychological concepts, providing a rich source of material for literary analysis and interpretation. Additionally, it promotes empathy and compassion for people suffering from borderline personality disorder or other mental health conditions by enabling them to better comprehend Devi's problems and motives. This empathy can extend to real-life situations, encouraging a more empathetic and supportive approach toward individuals facing psychological challenges.

The analysis increases understanding of borderline personality disorder and how it affects people's lives. It may help de-stigmatize mental health issues and encourage candid discussions about psychological health. The study can also give therapists and other mental health specialists insight into the emotions and

cognition patterns of people with borderline tendencies. This could prompt personal reflection and self-awareness, encouraging individuals to seek help if needed or to gain a deeper understanding of their own emotions and behaviours. Analyzing Devi's decisions and their consequences can offer valuable life lessons about the impact of unresolved emotional issues, revenge, and the search for identity. These insights can be applied to real-life situations, assisting people in making better decisions and navigating difficult situations. By delving into the complexities of fictional characters, we can gain a better understanding of human behaviour, emotions, and the intricacies of the human psyche.

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