Bharati Mukherjee’s Leave It to Me: A Tale of Incongruous Relations

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee’s women protagonists are the women who carry some congenital flaw in their character, because of which they fail to maintain a healthy relationship with anyone. Rather they develop incongruence to all they come in contact with. The research paper aims to explicate the presence of incongruence in Bharati Mukherjee’s woman protagonist of the novel leave it to me. An analysis has been done of the incongruous relations of Devi - in the form of disparity with both, her adopted parents and her bio- parents along with all other people who come in contact with her either as her partner or friend. Further, it has been highlighted how the bond of relationship shatters and the congenital flaw accelerates the incongruity with all, and brings catastrophe. I have tried to show that it is high time that we should understand that mental diseases and incongruities do exist and can be cured just like any other disease.
Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Bio-parents, Congenital Flaw, Disparity, Incongruous Relations, catastrophe

Bharati Mukherjee was an Indian-American writer and professor who is known for her novels, short stories, and essays that explore the immigrant experience, identity, and multiculturalism. She was born on July 27, 1940, in Kolkata, India, and passed away on January 28, 2017.

Mukherjee's most famous novel is "Jasmine" (1989), which tells the story of an Indian woman who immigrates to the United States and reinvents herself multiple times. She also wrote "The Middleman and Other Stories" (1988), "Desirable Daughters" (2002), and "Miss New India" (2011), among others.

In 1988, Mukherjee won the National Book Critics Circle Award for "The Middleman and Other Stories." She was also awarded the National Humanities Medal in 1999 by President Bill Clinton for her contributions to American literature.

Leave It to Me" is a poignant and thought-provoking novel that delves into the complexities of identity and the immigrant experience. It is a must-read for those interested in exploring the themes of cultural displacement and the search for belonging.

Devi, the protagonist of Leave It to Me is an outcome of the beat generation legacy. In the words of Shalini Gupta:

A Kaleidoscopic wheel of a book, “The 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. (Kumar Nagendra: The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee-A Cultural Perspective, 237)
Devi is an incongruous combination of East and West, as she is a daughter of an American mother and Indian father, born in India and raised in America. Mukherjee got the idea for the novel from a big news story of an Asian Serial killer during her stay in Delhi, India and she took 20 years to enumerate her ideas on paper. She herself 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).

Devi, the protagonist, was born to a flower child in India and was abandoned by her parents, somehow, she is rescued by grey nuns after a typhoon so they name her Faustine. At the age of two, she is adopted by an Italian American family and lives in Schenectady with her foster parents Manfred and Serena Di Martino, an immigrant of New York. She does not find herself different from her adopted family, until her adolescence growth spurts lead her to go figure about the dichotomy between her and Angie, her sister. She inquires about her existence but she gets limited information from her adopted mother. Her feelings of being nobody has been described in the following lines from the novel:

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 Irish-Daughter meticulously copied out, taking up two full lines, when Father and Mother with long spaces after them are just ink flecks of nonexistence. 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? (LIM, 16).
After the revelation of the fact that she does not belong to her family by birth. Devi struggles for her existence. For the outside world, she is Devi Di Martino but she is panic about her real self and gets an embedded hatred for her biological parents and this little information does not quench her thirst to know more about herself, we get this description in the novel:

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. (LIM, 10).

The quest of searching her original parents is triggered by Wyatt, with whom she spends some of her early time after being caught in shoplifting. Wyatt is a young correction officer, and he is placed as in-charge of her. Wyatt is the first person who asks her about her adoption and ignites the spark to find her bio parents. She has physical relations with him and one day he leaves her with a forecast that she will become a beautiful and rich woman. As he speaks 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. (LIM, 14)

Another person who triggers her dichotomy with her family is Mr. Bullock, her English teacher who finds poetic flair in her and tries to shoot up her talent by providing conducive environment for her prospects. She, however, does not take interest rather she is surprised with her composition, Neither she reads poetry, nor the environment of her adopted family, allows that, but after finding the fact of her origin, her urge to know about her own-self increases; and the incongruity in relations steps in as she does not feel herself attached to her adopted family.

Though she herself feels that she is lucky enough to be adopted as Di Martinos’ daughter when she says, “I was adopted to a decent Italian American Family in the Hudson Valley. That’s the upside of adoption” (LIM 12). But after getting a trigger from Mr. Bullock she unwinds her inner-self in the following lines:

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 are just on loan to the Di Martinos. Treat them nice, pay your rent, but keep your bags packed.
Devi does not have any complaints or discrimination feelings in her adopted family but this is from nature that she gets a different body build and this is fanned by surroundings that she is forced to address her own-self. She gets many suggestions and support for her future prospects. Her sister suggests some prospects for her livelihood, which is quite clear from these lines:

But I didn’t thicken like Angie did, and by my senior year, I was the tallest one in the family, including Pappy, I stayed thin, clear-skinned, dark haired, amazed at the assertiveness of my body. The gym teacher encouraged me to think volleyball scholarships, and nagged at me to try out mail-order-catalogue modelling.

With the help of her inherited characteristics “sexy nun’s voice” she grabbed the job Francis A. Fog’s company- a multinational company, manufacturing fitness equipment. Frankie falls in love with her voice over the telephone and fixes a meeting with her in an apartment. On the very first day of their meeting they have physical relations and after spending three nights together he gifted the keys of the apartment to Devi for three months. Francis is also another important person who triggered her to find out her roots. She likes Frankie’s stories about Asia and is fascinated by his charm as we get the excerpt in the novel:

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 (LIM 25).

Frankie unfolds the Asian continent in the mind of Devi. She likes the stories of his childhood spent in Asia. Union with Frankie changes her perspective towards America and they both need each other in their own ways. Devi loves him as she finds him helpful in her mission – the search for her bio parents, while Fong wants her as a model for his movie. As Mukherjee speaks through Devi, “Frankie’s make-believe Asia of dogs and bats, heat, beggars, police sweeps, corruption, squalor, disease, transvestites, prostitutes… did stir up my desire for what might have been- must have been- a careless hippie mom’s Asia” (LIM, 28). She would have married him if he had not jilted her in front of his mother. Feeling embarrassed, she not only
leaves him for his betrayal but out of her vengeance, sets the home on fire; which was gifted to her by Fong.

Bharati reveals her character through her confession:

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 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 (LIM 25)

After leaving Frankie, the urge to know the exact details about her original self becomes irrepressible and with her persistent nagging and goading, she manages her foster mother to spill the guts that she is discarded by her biological mother and her father is accused of murders and serving a life sentence in prison. But her foster mother tries to call her back from her pointless mission of searching for her bio-parents. Devi ignores her unconditional love and care, especially her affectionate behaviour and desperate request to stay with her; she carries on the search for her bio-parents and sets out for San Francisco. This is quite clear from following conversation of Devi with her foster mother:

“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” (LIM 32)

Devi’s adopted mother discloses little facts, she knows about her original parents when Devi persists, but her knowledge about her being an adopted child, who was discarded by her parents makes Devi restless and pushes towards her every quest to know all about herself at any cost. Through the following lines she explicates her condition:
An orphan does not know how to ask, afraid of answers, and hopes instead for revelation. Ignorance is not bliss, but it keeps risky knowledge at bay. I never badgered Mama to tell me all she knew about my toddler days. She kept my origins simple: hippie backpacker from Fresno and Eurasian lover boy, both into smoking, dealing and stealing. She left my biodata minimal; some sort of police trouble my hippie birth mother had got herself into meant that the Grey nuns in Devigoan village had to take me in; one of the nuns had renamed me Faustino after a Typhoon, but Mama’s changed it officially to Devi after Devi Reynolds, her all-time favorite (LIM 41).

Devi’s impulse drives her towards Haight-Ashbury, where she gets acquainted with Tortilla Tim, Grbriel, Duvet Man, Beamer Bob, Whammy Pammy and Snorting Sam and within no time she learns the code of behaviour of California. Now she becomes a part of that community and this shows her actual self just like her bio parents. Though she was born and raised in Schenectady by her adoptive Italian American parents, who cared and loved her throughout childhood, adolescent, and teenage years, she tosses them aside by erasing a thin line between sanity and insanity; stalking her bio parents’ life pattern, even though she knows one can change the hippie culture and live a normal life, she adopts their culture and carries the load of incongruous relations with whom she comes in contact with. While living in her Corolla, which is parked under a tree, she gets an encounter with Ham’s film company’s assistant for vacating space for their convoy of trailers, she showed the following different behaviour which is quite unfitting to her foster parents upbringing:

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?”(LIM, 45)
When Devi sets out in search of her bio parents and gets acquainted with Ham, she agrees to become his concubine as she has to dig out her bio-parents’ information from him, since he belongs to that period. But when she spends time with her, she develops affection for him and she behaves in the same manner as she used to do with Francis, her first natural lover. She sleeps with him, goes for a matinee and once she forgets that she is there with Ham and not with Francis. When she realises who her bio-mother is, she gets the answer of her insanity and wanton spirit. During one of her meetings with Jess she gets the clues that Jess can be her Bio-Mom as it has been depicted in the novel:

I heard her say just no describing how erotic it was! I was a poetry mad kid, I thought I was going to be the Emily or Fresno, can you imagine that? Poetry was Meaning, he made you happy?”

Jess tuned in to my wavelength, He made me wanton.”

Another example of her insane behaviour we get, when she was with Fred and does not pay for Pepsi, which she ordered:

The waiter came with Pepsi in a glass.

“I have changed my mind,” I said

“You can’t change your mind now,” the waiter said “Too late .You ordered a Pepsi. I brought you a Pepsi. Drink or no drink it, that’s your problem.”

I started to walk out of the waiter’s arm range (LIM 60).

Devi becomes insane after the revelation of Romeo Hawk- a sex guru and a serial killer and knowing the fact that Romeo is his Bio–Dad and he is responsible for all killings, happening in that area, she catches the same vibe, her genetic trait of violence and kills him and thus there are three murders when she calls police-her Bio-Mom, her Bio-Dad and her lover. As it has been delineated by Mukherjee in the following lines:
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 to draw from the tiny bottle that it tumbles him. TAPE ROLLING. 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.

Mukherjee reveals about Devi’s character in her interview with Ron Hogan:

Devi came to me as the opposite of a character I’d written earlier, Jasmine from the novel Jasmine. Draft by draft, I came to understand Devi better, and the most important idea that wrote itself in the second or third draft was that she prizes clarity over everything else. I never saw my character Devi’s tale as optimistic. Here’s a street smart, savvy, manipulative young woman, engaged about the fact that she was thrown out like a garbage sack on the hippie trail, who’s part of a larger design in which some higher power uses her to restore some kind of balance and purge evil out of our California. I never saw her as a mean person, more as a person capable of redemption after she’s gone through some of the violence within herself.

Since the inception of the character Mukherjee wants to show some kind of incongruity in her Protagonist as she represents her with the force of nature. Because of her upbringing with love and care also does not quench her thirst to know her original self. She has been encouraged to become a poetess but she rejects the offer. She has got a sexy nun’s voice so she manages a good job, because of her exotic self she manages wealth but her inherited characteristics enable her to take vengeance in the form of burning Frankie’s house first, then killing her Bio-Dad. Her revelation of setting Francis makes this clear that she suffers from some genital flaw and gets inner peace after getting her vengeance:
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.

In mapping out the character of Devi Mukherjee has amalgamated Electra mythology with Indian Mythology. In depicting a complicated triangle of relationships in the form of Romeo Hawk, D Martino and Ham, she uses this and reveals herself in her Reading Guide to this Novel:

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. (LIM 129)

She also suffers from involuntary recurrent memory, a psychological phenomenon in which an individual has a sudden, usually powerful, re-experiencing of a past experience or elements of a past experience. 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!....

Devi's genetic flaw is a significant aspect of her character and plays a major role in the novel's exploration of the themes of identity, belonging, and cultural displacement. It is revealed that her biological mother, carries some flaw in her character. Devi inherits this gene from her mother and faces the possibility of developing the same flaw later in life.
The presence of this genetic flaw serves to complicate Devi's search for identity and belonging. It highlights the biological connection she shares with her Indian family, but also introduces the possibility of a tragic fate. As Devi comes to terms with this reality, she is forced to confront the limitations of her own mortality and the impact it will have on her relationships and sense of self.

Overall, the presence of this genetic flaw underscores the complexities of Devi's identity and serves as a poignant commentary on the impact of biological factors on one's sense of self and place in the world. It adds an extra layer of depth and complexity to the novel's exploration of the themes of identity, belonging, and cultural displacement. Devi's inability to lead a comfortable life despite being adopted by the DeMartino family is a key aspect of the novel. Here's how we can explain this:

Despite being raised in a wealthy and privileged environment, Devi struggles to find a sense of belonging and identity in her adoptive family. She is plagued by a sense of restlessness and a feeling of being disconnected from her surroundings. She is also haunted by her biological roots and her desire to uncover the truth about her past. As a result, Devi's inability to lead a comfortable life is a product of her own internal struggles and the deep-seated psychological trauma she experiences as a result of her search for identity. Despite the love and support she receives from her adoptive parents, she is unable to shake the feeling of being an outsider and a misfit in her own family.

We find Devi suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), which is a mental health condition characterized by unstable emotions, impulsive behavior, a distorted self-image, and unstable relationships. To find the traits of BPD in Devi, we can look for the following symptoms:

Fear of abandonment: People with BPD often have an intense fear of being abandoned or rejected. Throughout the story, Devi expresses fear of losing her friends and romantic partners. She is also quick to end relationships if she feels that the other person is losing interest in her.

Unstable relationships: People with BPD often have unstable relationships characterized by intense emotions and frequent conflict. Devi's relationships with her friends and romantic partners are often short-lived and
volatile. She is quick to turn on people if they don't meet her expectations or if she feels they are betraying her.

Impulsivity: People with BPD often engage in impulsive behaviors such as substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and reckless driving. Throughout the story, Devi engages in impulsive behavior such as changing her appearance, going on spontaneous road trips, and lying to her friends.

Emotion dysregulation: People with BPD often experience intense and rapidly changing emotions that they struggle to control. Devi experiences mood swings, intense anger, and feelings of emptiness throughout the story.

Distorted self-image: People with BPD often have a distorted self-image and struggle with self-esteem. Devi has a poor sense of self-identity and tries to reinvent herself multiple times throughout the story.

By examining Devi's behavior and emotions throughout the story, we can identify traits of BPD that are present in her character.

We have some instances from the novel that suggest Devi may be suffering from borderline personality disorder (BPD):

Fear of abandonment: Devi experiences a fear of abandonment throughout the novel. For example, when her friend, Robin, begins dating someone new, Devi becomes anxious and paranoid, worrying that her boyfriend will leave her behind. She also struggles to maintain long-term relationships, often ending them abruptly or being abandoned by her partners.

Unstable relationships: Devi's relationships are characterized by intense emotions and conflict. She struggles to trust others and is quick to accuse them of betrayal or abandonment. For example, she becomes suspicious of someone and believing that he is trying to separate her she put his house on fire.

Impulsivity: Devi engages in impulsive behavior throughout the novel, such as changing her name and appearance frequently, lying to her friends, and going on spontaneous road trips. These actions suggest a lack of impulse control, which is a hallmark symptom of BPD.
Emotion dysregulation: Devi experiences intense emotions that she struggles to control, such as anger, anxiety, and emptiness. For example, she becomes enraged when she suspects that her friend's new boyfriend is trying to separate her from Robin. She also experiences feelings of emptiness and boredom, which lead her to engage in impulsive behavior.

Distorted self-image: Devi has a poor sense of self-identity and struggles with self-esteem. She frequently changes her name and appearance to fit in with different social groups. She also has a history of substance abuse and engages in risky behavior, suggesting that she may not value her own safety or well-being.

Overall, these instances suggest that Devi may be suffering from borderline personality disorder and by examining Devi's behavior in the context of BPD symptoms, we can gain a better understanding of her character and the challenges she faces in establishing lasting relationship bond with anyone, with whom she comes in contact with. Devi's relations with all the people around her gets incongruous in the novel. In addition to speculating her character as suggesting from BPD, there are some other noteworthy elements contributing towards her incongruous relations with all:

Devi's desire to achieve success and independence also sets her apart from those around her. She is determined to pursue her goals and dreams, even if it means sacrificing personal relationships. This determination can come across as selfish or uncaring, leading to strained relationships with those around her.

Devi's troubled family history and personal struggles also contribute to her difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. She has experienced trauma and loss in her life, and this can make it challenging to connect with others on a deep level.

Overall, Devi's complex character and circumstances with her imbedded flaw make it difficult for her to form lasting, meaningful relationships with the people around her, leading to many of her relationships souring throughout the novel.

We can very well conclude that the literature of any place acts as the mirror of society and when we read the novel we get the glimpse of that society and the people living there. As Bharati Mukherjee herself has portrayed explicitly how the protagonist and others of same same society reacting under the same
situation, hence, it becomes clear that flaws, disorders and other mental problems do exist and their knowledge only can lead these people towards the cure; which one get through trained people with empathy and some therapy. With the help and support from well-wishers can a person suffering from any mental disorder can also lead a normal happy life.

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