

# Forming And Shifting Identity: Psychological Dissection Of Devi Vishwakumar Of Never Have I Ever

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## **Abstract**

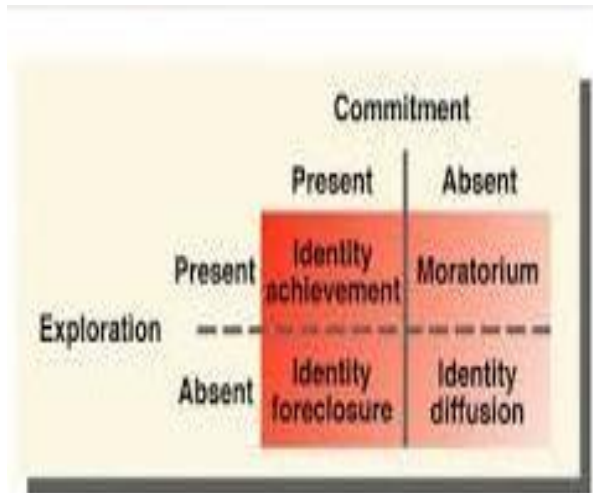
Never Have I Ever is a comedy drama television series based on the life and experiences of an Indian-American teenager Devi Vishwakumar. It revolves around different aspects of Devi's life that contribute in shaping her identity. She goes through different and complex identity statuses. James Marcia, a developmental psychologist, gave a psychological theory of identity formation which is based on the personal choices made by an individual during adolescence. He gave four identity statuses namely- Identity achievement, Identity diffusion, Identity moratorium and Identity foreclosure. This paper attempts to analyze the psyche of Devi and the complex process of identity formation that she undergoes. The main aim of the paper is to understand the universal nature of the complexities of the process of identity formation, wherein, every individual, during adolescence, while making decisions, struggles to reach identity achievement

**Key words-** Identity, Diffusion, Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, Psychology, Culture, Social structure, Adolescence.

## **Introduction**

The world today is full of turbulences for and individual as s/he struggles to survive in the ever changing cultural world. One struggles to form one's identity and during the identity formation, there are a lot of shifts. James Marcia extended the theory of Erik Erikson. The latter is a German-American psychologist, who gave eight stages of psychological development. Marcia gave four statuses out of which either all four can occur one after another or some of them can. Identity diffusion is the status in which the individual is not motivated to explore the possibilities as there are number of choices in which s/he gets confused and ends up choosing the one previously identified. Identity foreclosure is the status in which the individual does not explore the possibilities and chooses option which s/he inherited or is served to her/him in the plate. Identity moratorium is the third status in

which the individual explores the possibilities but is not able to choose from the choices. It may sound as a negative status of mind but looks to be positive when closely observed. The individual, by exploring all the possible options, gain a lot of knowledge about all the options. The fourth status is Identity Achievement. In this status, the individual explores all the possible alternatives very well and finally choose the best option and form a strong identity.



In the figure above, it is clearly depicted that if an individual has high will of exploration of the possibilities and the commitment, that status is the best out of four and that is identity achievement. If the motivation to explore is low but the commitment is high, that status is identity diffusion. If the motivation of exploration is high but the level of commitment is low, that status is identity moratorium. But if both the level of motivation to explore and the level of commitment are low, that is the worst status and that is identity diffusion where the individual is confused without exploring.

Devi Vishwakumar, the lead character of the web series *Never Have I Ever*, is an American girl born to Indian parents with the same Indian values and ethics. Her parents try a lot to keep their only daughter from getting influence by the American culture and lifestyle. But, as it is rightly said that the surroundings of an individual play a vital role in shaping the thought process and ultimately the identity of an individual, Devi also struggles between deciding her identity as Indian or American. The series begin where Devi Vishwakumar prays in front of the Indian Gods and asks them three wishes wherein all three showed her desperation to fit in the American culture at her high school. Not only Devi, her two best friends Fabiola and Eleanor also struggle to

be identified as one of the people of majority culture. In the desperation to be as one of those, Devi suggests that they will make boyfriends and as no boy looked at them, they choose the loser boys of the class with whom no one wants to sit. Apart from the culture stress, Devi had a stress of losing her father after which she got paralyzed for one long year. Devi also has sessions with a psychologist, who tries to help the latter to choose from the options she has.

Initially, Devi's mother, Mrs. Vishwakumar and a cousin Kamala, try to put pressure on Devi where she is supposed to behave in Indian way. On the occasion of Ganesh Puja, Mrs. Vishwakumar and Kamala ask Devi to dress in Indian style which is opposed by the latter as she says puja is "low-rent" and is ashamed of the Indian dress she is made to wear. But her praying to the Indian Gods with whole heart and wearing the dress and going to Ganesh puja is a part of Identity foreclosure as she does not explore the possible options and accepts what is served to her on plate by her mother and cousin. Later in the puja, she meets Harish, one of her friends from India who also gives air to this already going on pressure so that she accepts the Indian culture and an Indian identity. He gives her an example of his classmate who is a Native American and is very proud of his culture. Harish asks her a question that if he can be proud of his culture why they can't be proud of their Indian culture. This makes Devi wonder and she finally says "Well that's definitely not my identity. I love being Indian". Later that day Paxton (her crush) praises her dress saying that she looks cool in that dress, which again pushes forward the option that she inherited and again she accepts happily what is served to her in the plate by her family.

Identity moratorium, as mentioned earlier, is the status in which the individual explores all the possibilities and is not able to choose one option. This happens with Devi Vishwakumar as well. She finds herself in a situation where she is dating

two boys that are Paxton, the college hunk and Ben Gross, the caring and the sensitive one. She gets stuck in a situation where in a party, she accidentally invites both men. Before the party, she makes a chart on white board writing and comparing positive points of both the boys. Even after that, she is not able to decide which one she is going to date and hence that she will date both till the time she is caught. She is confused after she realizes that both of them will be coming to her house for the house party because she doesn't want to hurt anyone. Her emotions play a vital role as they come in the way of her achieving an American identity. Later in the plot, Paxton calls her "Hey Pal" in front of everyone, where he dates her in the private. This makes Devi wonder what is happening in her life. She starts exploring for the possible explanation to this question. She even talks to her dead dad in the night and she asks him why he always call her "perfect girl" when she is not.

Identity diffusion is when the level of exploration is low but the level of commitment is low and hence ends up choosing the option that they previously identify. Devi, without exploring the pros of her own culture, says, "When I get into Princeton, I am never coming back". She has decided or identified the American identity to be the cool one and the Indian identity to be the not so cool one. So, even when her friend Harish tries to convince her that she should be proud of her own culture, she, unwilling to listen and use her brain, chooses the predefined choice. She sarcastically remarks, "...I love being Indian" and then scoffs. Once, when talking to Paxton, she says,

Some old loser was telling me that I am too Indian. Some older people think I am not Indian English. And honestly, all I want to do is eat a doughnut. But I am stuck here..."

This is a brilliant example of identity diffusion where Devi needs to explore the options that are there in front of her but rather she chooses to do what she wants to and has decided to eat a doughnut rather than getting into the chaos of deciding the identity. There are other incidents also like she avoids accepting her emotions, runs away from spreading Dad's ashes as she does not want to accept her father's death. Even when her mother says that they are moving to India and they will be living there only, she chooses not to explore the way out or find a solution; instead she leaves the house and finds shelter at Ben's house. She says to Kamala, on being asked to come home, "Which home? The one here or the one I am being dragged to in India." After some time, Aneesa, a beautiful Pakistani girl comes and joins the school. Devi feels jealous of Aneesa as the latter immediately gains popularity among all the school students. Even Paxton turns and looks at her and Ben becomes her friend. Instead of finding out the best option by exploring the available ones, she chooses to tell everyone about Aneesa's eating disability.

Finally but slowly, Devi achieves Identity towards the end and is happy and satisfied with what she becomes in the end. The process of identity achievement runs slowly throughout the plot. After all the mental chaos, Devi Vishwakumar accepts her father's death which proved to be the biggest challenge for her as she was even paralyzed after the mental shock she got. She listens to the last voicemail that her father sent to her and now after she accepts his death, it no longer bothers her. Apart from that, the girl who never said sorry and accepted her emotional angle as she considered that emotions make an individual weak, accepts that she has been misbehaving with her psychologist and goes in odd hours just to say sorry to her. Even though she is not caught as a culprit to the spreading the rumor of Aneesa's eating disability, she confesses this in front of Aneesa and her two best

friends and doesn't feel bad about it even after the three girls leave the room and go away. She says, "It doesn't matter if you don't get caught. It's wrong."

She remembers what her father always used to tell her, "If you have done something wrong big, your apology should be bigger." She has always been misunderstanding the meaning of her father's advise until she decided to apologize to Aneesa for the wrong that the former did to the latter. Devi plans to become a giant insect and say sorry to Aneesa in front of the whole college but she messes it up further as those who didn't know about Aneesa's eating disorder, they also come to know by what the way Devi apologizes. Devi then considers her father's advise once more and finally realizes that the apology shouldn't be physically big, but should be big at heart. So for the first time she apologizes emotionally, which is her true identity, in front of everyone. She says,

When Aneesa came here, I felt threatened by her. I thought, "What the hell?" Another Indian girl who is prettier, cooler and has figured out her eyebrow shape. I mean who knows at this age the shape of their eyebrows?

Aneesa forgives her and they again become friends. After Mr. Kulkarni convinces Devi, the latter gets okay with the relationship of Ben and Aneesa, which she earlier detested because of the insecurities. She opens up in front of her psychologist which she never did before and finally starts getting answers to all her problems. She also figures out that she wants to date Paxton but not on the cost of her self-respect and for the first time says no to Paxton when she says that they will date privately. After some time, they go to a ball where Devi's friends get their respective partners but the former doesn't as Paxton did not want to publicize their relationship. She cries in the bathroom and decides to go back. When she goes out, Paxton shows up and dances with Devi

holding her hand. She finally has mental peace from all sides of her life.

Devi achieves an Indo-American identity where she mixes up both the cultures and leads a happy life. But the status was not reached overnight. She struggles throughout and goes through all the other three processes also. Moreover, this going through all other statuses was not a linear progression. Devi comes across these statuses in a non linear way but at the end achieves a happy and stable identity.

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