

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture47

Lecture 47: Multiculturalism and Biculturalism in Never Have I Ever


Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, we are discussing cinema and diaspora. This is in continuation from our previous lecture. So, first, we have to understand what multiculturalism is.

According to Jimmy Carter, I quote, 'We become not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic.' 'Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams,' unquote. The above statement was made by the 39th President of the United States of America at a meeting held in the Department of Education. So, Carter is talking about the concept of a mosaic,

Multiculturalism

"We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams."
- Jimmy Carter (*Speech, Pittsburgh, Pa., 27 Oct. 1976*)

- The above statement is made by the 39th president of the United States of America at a meeting held in the Department of Education. It depicts the multicultural approach of the US.
- Cambridge Dictionary defines the term multiculturalism as "the belief that different cultures within a society should all be given importance." Multiculturalism usually **refers to the policies by central state and local authorities to manage and govern people from different nationalities, cultures and ethnicities.**




right, which is a departure from the previous concept of multiculturalism that had the image of a melting pot at its heart. At the heart of the earlier concept of multiculturalism, there was the image of the melting pot. From there on, Jimmy Carter talks about the mosaic, right? The mosaic depicts the multicultural approach that the US has subsequently embraced.

Cambridge Dictionary defines the term multiculturalism as, to quote from the dictionary, 'the belief that different cultures within a society should all be given importance,' unquote. So, multiculturalism usually refers to the policies by central state and local authorities to manage and govern people from different nationalities, cultures, and ethnicities. According to Ali Rattansi, the term multiculturalism came into public discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s when nations such as Canada and Australia showed their support for multicultural values as a fabric of their nations. So, just as a way of extending this discussion, we would see that multicultural feminism is also an offshoot of this concept of multiculturalism. It is against the Black Panther movement, the civil wars that we see, that the movements of the women of color are

on the rise; women of color vouch for their separate experiences, separate stories of oppression, which cannot be conflated with the experiences of the educated white middle-class women. So, we suddenly have a visibility for difference, for an alternative experience, an alternative identity. This is where multiculturalism and, simultaneously, multicultural feminism are coming from. In the 1960s and 1970s, we see them really flourishing with the stories from different corners across the globe, where not all stories can be narrated by the omniscient white narrator, right.

- According to Ali Rattansi, the term 'multiculturalism' **came into public discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s** when nations, such as Canada and Australia showed their support for multicultural values as a fabric of their nations (2011).
- It is described by Karina Korostelina (2009) as a concept that adheres to the view of a nation as multicultural, where **equal rights are provided to all ethnic groups**, with a considerable amount of **autonomy and self-governance**.
- Multiculturalism, according to Marek Bodziany (2008), in a broader sense refers both to the "national phenomenon and social experiences"; involves a rule of democratic coexistence of individuals as well as groups of "specific national identity, different traditions and values."




So, multiculturalism is described by Karina Korostelina in 2009 as a concept which adheres to the view of a nation as multicultural. Why and how? Because there are equal rights for everyone. Equal rights are provided to all ethnic groups regardless of their skin color, their race, their history, and there is a considerable amount of autonomy and self-governance. So, multiculturalism, according to Marek Bodziany in 2008, Bodziany talks about multiculturalism.

So, in 2008, Marek Bodziany talks about multiculturalism. In a broader sense, multiculturalism refers both to the national phenomenon and social experiences, and it involves a rule of democratic coexistence of individuals as well as groups of specific national identity, different traditions and values. So, we take into account the difference among people and we understand that through the lens of multiculturalism, we understand that no culture, no tradition, no values are, you know, less than the other. They are just different from one another.

And so the rule of democratic coexistence should prevail in a multicultural milieu. That is the central idea of a multicultural society. It should be autonomous to an extent. It should be, it should, you know, harbor and cherish democratic coexistence.

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Individuality should be valued, right, and differences should be respected. Now, coming to the policy of multiculturalism, official multicultural policy aims at creating structures and mechanisms, which facilitate certain ethnic activities and publications through newspapers, magazines, journals and books, all of which, all of these documentations basically encouraging the symbolization of a nation as hybrid as well as tolerant with respect to diversity. A nation that does not suffer from xenophobia. So, multicultural policy suggests that the symbolic integration of immigrants and ethnic groups in the imagined community of a multicultural nation would be less problematic than


As compared to any nation that is constructed, that is built upon an official identity based on an exclusionary image of a single ethnic group or a single community. So, when that happens, when the latter happens, when a nation is defined in terms of a single ethnic group, a religious group, or an ideology—when a national identity is officially based on a particular community's values or a particular ethnic group's values—it results in celebrating certain monolithic ideas, certain sections of the population's identity. Or enjoy

dominance; there is a hegemonic relationship between one part of society and another. One part of society enjoys certain additional benefits or advantages as compared to the other. This is something that a multicultural society wants to eradicate and, instead, propagate and promote.

Equality and egalitarianism. That is at the heart of multiculturalism. So, there is no monopoly of one group or one section of people in a nation. Now, the policy of multiculturalism is based on a paradigm applicable to a post-colonial hybrid society made up of numerous ethnic groups and. In which totalization... so the policy of multiculturalism is based on a paradigm applicable to a post-colonial hybrid society made up of numerous ethnic groups, in which totalization and homogenization are seen as detrimental to social harmony, and such totalization, such monopoly, is inadequate for the constitution of an inclusive society.

Policy of Multiculturalism

- **Official multicultural policy** aims to create structures and mechanisms, facilitating certain ethnic activities and publications through newspapers, magazines, journals and books, which explicitly encourages the symbolization of the nation as hybrid and tolerant with respect to diversity.
- It suggests that the symbolic integration of immigrants and ethnic groups in the "imagined community" of a multicultural nation would be less problematic compared to a nation-state that has constructed an official identity based on an exclusionary image of a single ethnic group or community.



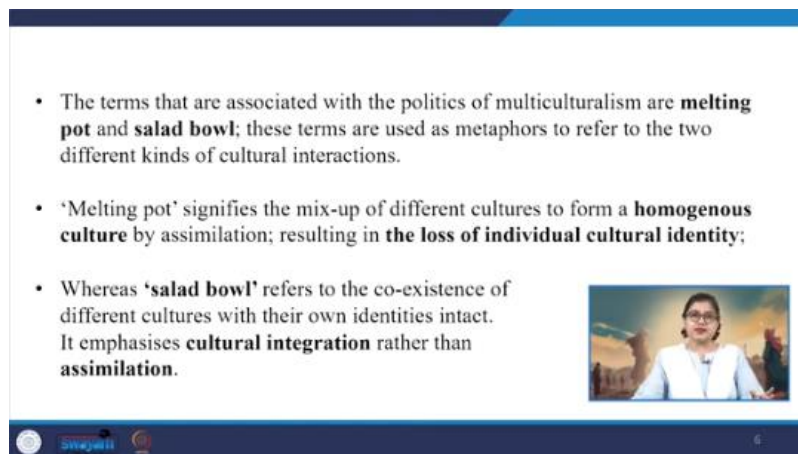
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Egalitarian national consciousness, right. Many scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized the gap that persists between the official policy of multiculturalism and the political and socio-economic reality at the ground level. So, for example, in his book *The Vertical Mosaic*, which came out in 1965, John Porter analyzes a close relationship between economic stratification and ethnic boundaries. So, to put it plainly, even in a multicultural society, one sees that the actual experience tells us that the whites. The white people, the Euro-American people, have greater access to social and economic resources as compared to the visible migrants, the visible minorities, as compared to the visible minorities.


The Euro-American population has greater access to social and economic resources compared to visible minorities, who are people of color. So, David Bell, So, David Bell, on the other hand, argues that tolerance for diversity in a country like Canada has not

always included all ethnic groups and races. So, even though we talk of equality, equity, and tolerance through the policy of multiculturalism, even such a policy is sometimes unable to integrate all ethnic groups and races under its umbrella. The terms associated with the policies of multiculturalism are 'melting pot.'

That has been the traditional and first symbol, suggesting how multiculturalism will function among different social groups and different sets of people. So, 'melting pot' was the first term that defined the politics and policies of multiculturalism, and later it was replaced by the images of 'mosaic' and 'salad bowl.' These terms are all used as metaphors to refer to the two different kinds of cultural interactions. Now, the first image of the 'melting pot' signifies a mix-up of different cultures, and they all, you know, melt down to form a homogeneous culture through assimilation.



- The terms that are associated with the politics of multiculturalism are **melting pot** and **salad bowl**; these terms are used as metaphors to refer to the two different kinds of cultural interactions.
- 'Melting pot' signifies the mix-up of different cultures to form a **homogenous culture** by assimilation; resulting in **the loss of individual cultural identity**;
- Whereas '**salad bowl**' refers to the co-existence of different cultures with their own identities intact. It emphasises **cultural integration** rather than **assimilation**.



When we talk of assimilation of different cultures into one American culture—one essential American culture—we are talking about bulldozing the past, bulldozing history, effacing and erasing the different kinds of histories that visible minorities and migrants bring with them. So, this results in the loss of individual cultural identity. This is what the 'melting pot' is. Everyone's individual cultural identity melts to become a homogeneous American culture.

On the other hand, more updated, a more recent imagination is that of the salad bowl. A salad bowl where we have different kinds of fruits and vegetables. They are not melting or all mixed up. They all retain their own colour and essence and flavour. It refers to the coexistence of different cultures with their own identities intact,


and it emphasizes, so Salad Bowl emphasizes cultural integration rather than assimilation. Now, coming to biculturalism. Unlike multiculturalism, biculturalism is an

individual's affiliation to two different cultures. Children with parents who are from different cultural backgrounds often show bicultural traits and characteristics. So, these bicultural traits or characteristics are explicit in immigrant children who are born in a different nation from their parents origin.

They often use hyphenated identities to show their multiple affiliations or their affiliations to two diverse cultural roots. For example, Asian American, African American, British Indian and so forth. So, now based on this discussion of biculturalism, we see that biculturalism is one of the major themes that has been discussed in an American comedy drama television series from the recent times titled *Never Have I Ever*. So, *Never Have I Ever*, which is an American comedy drama television series, portrays this biculturalism very well.

Biculturalism

- Unlike multiculturalism, biculturalism is an individual's affiliation to two different cultures. Children with parents having different cultural backgrounds often show bicultural characteristics. It is explicit in immigrant children who are born in a different nation from their parents' origin. They often use hyphenated identities to show affiliation to two diverse cultural roots – eg. Asian-American, African-American, British-Indian.
- Biculturalism is one of the major themes of *Never Have I Ever*, an American comedy-drama television series. Devi is starred by Maitreyi Ramakrishnan. The show's lead, **Devi's life is a struggle between two cultures**. She is a first-generation Indian American in her family of immigrant parents.
- Inside her home, she is following Indian culture and norms, but outside she has to match with the American customs and lifestyle.



The protagonist Devi is played by actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan. The show's lead is Devi, right? And the show is all about Devi's struggle between two cultures. She is a first-generation Indian American in her family of immigrant parents. Inside her home, she follows Indian cultural norms.


But outside, she has to constantly cope with and match American customs, lifestyle, and values. So, we also need to look at Netflix's service in recent times. Branding itself as a global internet TV network, Netflix is currently the major global subscription video-on-demand service. It has become a pro-multiculturalist OTT platform, and it produces content that mostly depicts and promotes multiculturalism and biculturalism.

Netflix has already featured many Asian American-centric movies, programs, and TV shows to portray the diversity-rich American culture. And it includes shows such as *The Big Sick*, produced in 2017; *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*, made in 2018; *Crazy*

Rich Asians, made in 2018; The Half of It, made in 2020; and finally, Tiger Tail, made in 2020. The case study of the first season of the Netflix show *Never Have I Ever*, which aired in 2020, makes it very easy for us to understand some key terms involved in diaspora studies. So, *Never Have I Ever* explains some of these key terms associated with diaspora studies.

Never Have I Ever

- Branding itself as a “global internet TV network”, Netflix is presently the **major global subscription video-on-demand service**. It has become a pro-multiculturalist OTT platform, as it produces contents that depict and promote multiculturalism.
- It has featured many Asian-American-centric movies, programs and TV shows to portray the diversity-rich American culture, including *The Big Sick* (2017), *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *The Half of It* (2020), *Tigertail* (2020).
- The case study of the first season of the Netflix show *Never Have I Ever* – aired in 2020 – makes it easier to understand some key terms involved with Diaspora studies. This show is produced and written by Mindy Kaling, an Indian-American comedian, actress, screenwriter and producer, and Lang Fisher.



This show is produced and written by Mindy Kaling, an Indian-American comedian, actress, screenwriter, and producer, along with Lang Fisher. Inspired by and loosely based on Mindy Kaling's own life—Kaling's upbringing as an Indian-American teen with immigrant parents—this episode, This teen drama-comedy is a coming-of-age narrative. It involves, or rather entails, all the crises and issues that a teenager faces, particularly vis-à-vis her bicultural identity. So, this is a coming-of-age teen drama, and at the center of it is the protagonist, Devi.

This teenage girl struggles to navigate her bicultural identity in a multicultural society with people from various racial and ethnic groups. Thus, *Never Have I Ever* is significant in understanding the struggle for identity in the Brown Atlantic diaspora. It is a microcosm of multicultural American society, featuring characters from diverse ethnic cultures and diasporas, including Jewish, African, East Asian (referring to China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan), and the South Asian diaspora. When we speak of multicultural American society, we refer to the interface of these different ethnic cultures and diasporas—the experiences of Jewish people, Africans, East Asians, and South Asians.

All the characters in *Never Have I Ever* bring something from their own individual cultures. They are, in fact, burdening American culture with their own baggage. They

seek to impose meaning on American culture. They are not transparent mediums. They are not empty signs upon which American meaning or signification can be imposed.

Each character brings with them their own baggage, their own history, their own perception, and this actually leads to the creation of a salad bowl. So, here we have Devi's environment showing the multicultural and multi-ethnic society of the U.S., Right. The different snapshots from the film where we see a number of, you know, teenagers, basically both boys and girls who come from different cultural, ethnic and historical backgrounds, different social backgrounds.


So the first picture we see Devi is with her best friends. Eleanor, who is a Chinese American and Fabiola, who is a queer black woman, and both these friends of Devi represent the diversity of America in terms of race, ethnicity and sexuality. So her friend circle itself inscribes the layeredness that multiculturalism suggests. Similarly, the second and the third pictures, here in the second and the third pictures, we see the multicultural environment of Devi's school and her classroom respectively, where we find characters such as Paxton who is a Japanese, Ben who is a Jewish, all of these characters'

kids actually coming from different descendants, different backgrounds, socio-historico-cultural backgrounds, and so this particular scene if we try to decode it. Devi is buying coffee from a coffee shop while wearing a sari, which is an Indian traditional attire, and she has worn a sari on the occasion of Ganesh Puja. It elucidates her bicultural identity and the multicultural nature of the American society,

Image credit: gettyimages

Biculturalism

- Devi buys coffee from a coffee shop while wearing a sari, an Indian traditional attire, during the occasion of Ganesh Puja. It elucidates her bicultural identity and the multicultural nature of the American society.
- She is forced into wearing a dress matching the colour of Princess Jasmine's dress, and is even mistaken for the Disney character by a little girl.



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And she has been forced into wearing a dress that matches the color of Princess Jasmine's dress. Right. And She is mistaken as a Disney character by a little girl. So the little girl in

the scene, who is standing in the queue, mistakes her for a Disney character, Princess Jasmine.


So this identification of what is India and Indianness through Disney pictures, through the symbols that Disney has created—the metanarrative about India that Disney has created. It is very striking, and at the same time, one could say that it is also problematic because India is definitely more than what Disney understands and appreciates. It is more layered and complicated, more heterogeneous, more complex than what Disney has to show to the rest of the world. So, Devi has been reduced to Disney Princess Jasmine here.

Right? The whole Vishwakumar family reflects bicultural traits, including Devi's cousin Kamla, and the show is full of instances where Devi deals with her diasporic identity. She is shaped by her two different cultural backgrounds. The first episode opens with her praying in front of the different Hindu idols in her home temple. Why is she praying as a teenager? To fulfill her American teenage wishes, she is praying to the Hindu gods like Ganesh, Lakshmi, and Shiva.

But her aspirations are very much American or very much identifiable with the wishes of an American teen. What are these wishes? She would like to be invited to a party with alcohol and hard drugs. She would really, really like to have a boyfriend. So all these aspirations that a girl has in her early teens in American society, she harbors all of them.

Never Have I Ever

- The whole Vishwakumar family reflects bicultural traits, including Devi's cousin Kamla.
- The show is full of instances where Devi deals with her diasporic identity: shaped by her two different cultural backgrounds. The first episode opens with her praying in front of idols of Hindu gods including Shiva, Ganesh, Lakshmi, and Hanuman, in her home temple, **to fulfil her American teenage wishes**, as any American teen would have, such as **she would "like to be invited to a party with alcohol and hard drugs"**, and **"really, really have a boyfriend"** ("Pilot" 00:20).
- Devi gets irritated when she is considered **"too Indian"** by someone and **"not Indian enough"** by others.



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And then we see she gets irritated when she is considered either as too Indian by some people or not Indian enough by others. She does not like to be associated with either of these two very extreme images or perceptions. So the colored woman's body is a ready site for the enactment of gaze. In the modern day, we see the role—the vital role—that media plays in shaping discourses and in disseminating them for consumption.

Scholars like Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hebert note that the image-dominated world has shaped people's knowledge based on the images, symbols, and narratives that are formed and shaped through radio, television, film, music, and the media. How individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, Black, White, Asian—all of these perceptions are shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. Right. So this is the same thing we see in *Never Have I Ever*. How Netflix, as a platform that endorses and promotes multiculturalism and biculturalism, depicts Devi as the essential brown Indian actress.

teenage girl located in America, right? The layeredness of her identity sometimes are conflated, sometimes they are obfuscated into creating a stereotype, a type that she becomes in the American society. This happens through taking away a lot of her complex Indianness. A lot of Indianness is left to be desired, is left to be further discovered that is not talked about in the depiction of Devi. Sometimes Indian characters are shown as very straight jacketed, very oversimplified and that is problematic.

So here we see the different snapshots of Devi praying in front of the Hindu gods for her American teenage wishes to be fulfilled. This is an American home. In her American home, in her home, she has the Hindu temple where she has the icons, the images and statues of the Hindu deities. And she's praying for a very successful teenage life, basically fulfillment of her American dream. in front of her goddesses and gods.



So she is praying with folded hands in front of the deities for fulfillment of her American dreams. Even Devi's mother Dr. Nalini Vishwakumar played by Purna Jagannath is trying her best to retain the Indian customs through her daughter. But we see that Nalini also struggles to navigate between the two cultures. She is also clearly reflecting the

bicultural traits and the dilemma associated with such, you know, very different values that the same person needs to maintain.


Although Nalini does not want to adhere to the Indian stereotype, she wants Devi to follow Indian culture and beliefs. Her typical Indian mother's role of helicopter parenting, as well as the American lifestyle that Nalini cherishes, depicts her bicultural nature. So, Nalini has set much stricter rules for her daughter Devi, in contrast to her friend's mother, for example. So, for example, Devi's friend Fabiola's mother desperately wants her daughter to find a boyfriend. This is not the case for Nalini.

When Paxton, who is Devi's crush at school, comes to talk with Devi, her mother Nalini constantly keeps watch over the two of them. So, here we have a brief scene from the show. So, the mother is telling the daughter—Nalini is telling Devi—to get into Princeton. Don't waste your wishes on stupid things like world peace. Right.

So, on the occasion of an Indian festival, the mother and daughter—the mother-daughter duo—pray, but they pray for personal advantages. That's what the mother prompts the daughter to do. Pray for your personal advantages, personal gains, not for world peace, for example. Now, in this regard, Slavoj Žižek points out that a particular content, which is promulgated as typical of the universal notion, is the element of fantasy and the phantasmatic background or support of the universal ideological notion. So, in other words, the universal acquires concrete existence when some particular content starts to function as its stand-in.

To put it very plainly, I mean, this is where the shows such as *Never Have I Ever* become problematic and can be questioned. They can be problematized and complicated. The figure of Nalini does not represent each and every Indian in diaspora. She is, you know, she functions as a stand-in figure for the universal and through a depiction of figures such as Nalini and Devi, Indian culture is globally understood, which is once again a very romanticized, a very one-sided stereotypical understanding.

- Slavoj Zizek - A particular content which is promulgated as 'typical' of the universal notion, is the element of fantasy, of the phantasmatic background/support of the universal ideological notion ... the Universal acquires concrete existence when some particular content starts to function as its stand-in.
- The mother is shown as a prototype of the professional woman, who values career over anything else, and treats religious act as transactional terms with god.



In fact, Understanding of a community, understanding of a religion sometimes very problematically emerge through such standing depictions. These typical depictions sometimes try to cover a universal notion, right? The mother in the show, Nalini, has been shown as a prototype of the professional woman who values career over anything else. She's asking her daughter to pray for admission at Princeton University rather than pray for something abstract and something self-negating as world peace.

And we also see that she is treating religious act, she is treating her religion in transactional terms with God. So, there is a transactional terms that she is setting with God, which could also be problematic when we try to, you know, apply the same lens to see the entire Indian population. You know, it may not essentially be the correct lens for understanding the entire Indian diaspora. So when we have such characters, such standing characters starting to function as universal symbols for certain social groups or certain communities, then that could become very straight-jacketed with very simplistic significations and they actually disable the possibility of plural meanings, of plural ways of being, plural existence that Indians have, right?


So, through Netflix, through depiction of Disney, we have a particular perception about life back in India, right? In fact, this leads to reorientalizing oneself. So, it is through the Indian filmmaker's eye that the Indians are exoticized and romanticized, which can be definitely problematized and questioned because the rest of the Indian population is certainly you know, has more things to offer vis-a-vis their culture, vis-a-vis their clothing and thinking and religious affinity, more than what we see in the case of Devi or in the case of her mother. So we see that the Indian society is more layered, more complex and has more narratives




to offer to the rest of the world compared to what we see being depicted through the character of Devi or her mother Nalini. So, Indians may have a different culture to boast from what we understand through a platform such as Netflix that is trying to give a very straight jacketed image of Indians in a bicultural reality. Next, we see that Kamala who is Devi's cousin also navigates between two cultures. She has a PhD from Caltech but she is still bound to her parents' wish for an arranged marriage,

which is considered as a prevalent Indian way of marriage. She is secretly dating her college boyfriend Steve and at the same time she also meets the prospective bridegroom arranged by her family. So, this is because Kamla is afraid that her parents will be disappointed if they get to know about their relationship, Steve and her relationship. So, here Kamala is stuck between her Indian parents' choice and her own choice. Once again, in Indian life at the ground zero level, the real Indian life, we see that arranged marriage is quite passé, quite outdated.

Biculturalism

- Kamla, Devi's cousin, also navigates between two cultures. She has a PhD from Caltech, but she is still bound to her parent's wish for an arranged marriage, a prevalent Indian way of marriage. She is secretly dating her college boyfriend, Steve, and, at the same time, she also meets the prospective bridegroom arranged by her family.
- She is afraid that her parents will be disappointed if they get to know about her relationship. She is stuck between her Indian parents' choice and her own choice.



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While it is a reality in certain sections of society, it is not a very prevalent practice anymore. So, platforms such as Netflix and the bicultural lens, the multicultural lens added to it, they try to straitjacket Indian culture in a certain sense, reorientalize, romanticize, and exoticize certain facts about Indian society. Perhaps Indian society enjoys a more plural existence and plural possibilities than is depicted. in such shows.



So, *Never Have I Ever* is a representation of a multicultural society in the epoch of the Salad Bowl. It depicts interaction and integration among multiple cultures of people from different ethnic backgrounds. So, at the same time, it also gives insight into the bicultural life of immigrants through three central characters. A first-generation immigrant as represented by Nalini. So, Devi's mother Nalini; and then we have an American-born migrant teen, Devi; and then we have the Indian who is studying in the US, the character of Kamala.

So, through Nalini, Devi, and Kamala, we see a representation of a multicultural society in the epoch of the Salad Bowl. I will bring the lecture to an end here today, and let us meet for further discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

