

Never Have I Ever Been Called a Hero

Whalen Symposium Abstract

By Kate Tozlowski and Emma Iceman

This piece was created to explore what it means to be a hero in a piece of scripted media and to analyze what makes the main character of the Netflix show *Never Have I Ever*, Devi, the main character and how do we know this. In addition, this piece highlights how the pilot episode uses a lot of social commentary by commenting on issues like casual racism, internalized racism, and immigrants struggling with identity. This show was chosen to be analyzed since it's unique in the sense that it blends comedy with serious issues and comments on racial stereotypes and issues immigrants face. *Never Have I Ever* has been praised for breaking South Asian stereotypes and it does an incredible job of staging an interesting coming-of-age story for a young Indian girl.

The pilot script was used to understand the episode more, co-written by Mindy Kaling, the creator of this series. Kaling created this series based around her own childhood experiences, which provides a realistic view of the societal issues in the series. The book, *Heroes and Villains* by Michael Alsford was used as the basis for this analysis. In this book, Alsford describes what kinds of characteristics make a hero and what kinds of characteristics make a villain and how an audience member can distinguish the two. Alsford explains how a typical hero is presented in the media, and that most heroes have a sense of "otherness". This means that while a hero is part of the world, they also seem to stand outside of the world. Alsford's closer analysis of heroes makes it easy to understand that a hero of a story isn't always going to be just like Superman. In the pilot episode of *Never Have I Ever*, Devi is the hero because despite all her flaws, she is immersed in a world she feels separated from. Devi doesn't always make good decisions, which

makes her an unlikely hero. She feels isolated from everyone because of her Indian heritage and the strange and horrible things that have happened to her. She doesn't have any special powers and isn't trying to save the world like Superman either- she is simply trying to save herself by solving the internal conflicts that come with the journey of growing up.

The essay will be presented to the audience in the form of an oral presentation with a slideshow. One presenter will be in-person, while the other will be on Zoom. This essay proposes open conversations about multiple racial issues within the media. Television and movies have been white-washed for so long, and *Never Have I Ever* is a breakthrough from this common issue. Television should be diverse and should highlight societal issues instead of ignoring them. Additionally, the idea of an unlikely hero adds an interesting perspective to characters. It introduces the idea that humans are not perfect by any means, but making a few mistakes does not automatically make someone a villain and makes writers think about what makes a character a hero or a villain. Thinking about characters in this way can lead to more well developed and well rounded characters that show characteristics of both heroes and villains, much like Devi, who is seen to have characteristics of both throughout the pilot episode.

Bibliography

Alford, Mike. *Heroes and Villains*. Baylor University Press, 2006.

Gross, Terry. "Mindy Kaling Brings a New Nerd to TV, and Finds She 'Was Not Alone' as a Teen." *NPR*, NPR, 27 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.npr.org/2020/04/27/845440741/mindy-kaling-brings-a-new-nerd-to-tv-and-finds-she-was-not-alone-as-a-teen>.

Kaling, Mindy, and Lang Fisher. "Never Have I Ever: 'Pilot.'" *Netflix*, season 1, episode 1.