Who is from the Netherlands? Who is from France? Russia? China? Argentina? US? India? So, where are you from? It’s a question commonly asked and for many this question is a common to answer. Today I dare to call myself a Dutch Indian. However, my identity hasn’t always been clear enough for me & definitely not for others.

My first recollection of understanding how Dutch I am was during one of the annual family holiday to India while visiting my extended family. I won’t deny that a large part of what I’m about to tell you next attributes to hormones as I was just a teenager. I went shopping at the mall with my cousin who is about the same age as I. We are really close so rather than family, it was like I was shopping with a friend. We went into one of the stores and she tried on a dress. She was super excited once she tried it on and asked me for my opinion. My reaction was more like “oh no, that doesn’t suit you…”.

She’s like: “Why? What’s wrong with it? I love the colour!”

“sure, but it really makes you look kind of big and out of fashion…”

All of sudden her mood, expression and attitude changed towards me. She went back into the changing room, changed and we left the store in silence. Something was clearly wrong but I had no idea…honestly, I also didn’t think about it too much either.

It wasn’t till we met up with my mom that she overheard the conversation with my aunt that she pulled me aside to have a talk with me.

“You need to mince your words…Don’t be so direct, even if you’re asked for feedback..”

“But it didn’t look nice on her! I would tell my friends the same!”

“Yes I know, but for now just watch what you say”

Of course you need to remember I’m a teenager so anything said to me goes through one ear and out the other. So that evening we were sitting on the dinner table with the whole family and just discussing our plans for the next day and all of sudden advice, suggestions and recommendations were being forced upon us (at least this is what it seemed like to me). I have to add that we didn’t actually ask for any of this advice. In fact our plan for the day was the set and yet we were being convinced to change our course of the day. So I interrupted the discussed and asked: “who is actually joining us tomorrow?” 10 people on the table and the only people that were actually going were my parents and my brother. Then what was all this discussion and commotion about? Again, my mom had to pull me aside and explain to me…. It doesn’t matter that everyone is giving their input. To me it might feel like it was overwhelming but it was their way of feeling included in our plans even though they wouldn’t be there physically. It’s their way of showing affection, the same way they keep adding food to your plate even though you couldn’t even dream about taking another bite. This is the way of showing affection and in some families I’m sure some of you can recognize it’s predominately through the stomach.

Identity is a feeling. Identity is a construct, it’s your connection to feeling something. The question of who am I? What am I? Only I can answer these questions as no one can define me...but me.

I’m a mix of many cultures. I keep evolving because I encourage myself to keep learning about various cultures. I pick and choose what suits me best. Understanding a culture not only helps you adapt but also helps “defend” habits deemed as unusual.

I wasn’t aware of how I didn’t “blend” in the crowd as I grew up in the International School so everyone was the different with multiple cultures and identities. It wasn’t till I graduated that I was really faced with burning questions from others about my identity and was almost always forced to make a decision to what I strongly identify with. Later in life I would understand the cause of this pressure.

My first experience of “realizing” that I’m Indian was in my first year at university, in fact one of my first months. I had moved into my co-ed dorms as a completely lost 17 year old girl. Somewhat pampered as I never really cooked a proper meal or done laundry without adult supervision. So was trying to figure out the “how to adult”. My flat mates were amazing, they did teach me a lot but every so often I would get somewhat homesick. While I was having loads of fun, the familiarity of home was missing. That was until I bumped into my next door neighbors who were two British Indian girls. From the first hello we hit it off! And they took me under their wing and taught me what I needed to know to survive life. It was through them I was introduced to my first Indian club night. I walk into a club with Bollywood and Bhangra blasting through the speakers, I immediately felt totally in my element. Of course, I went straight to the dancefloor. After that I was taken to a few socializers and once again felt like I was in my element. I felt at ease with people with a similar ethnicity to mine. We hit similar walls, we had similar anecdotes about our families and some habits went without question. That’s why I realized how strong my Indian roots where.

Side note, did you know that 80% of Indian diaspora moms keep their girdle to make Indian flatbreads / Tawas in the oven? Yeah that’s because it’s traditionally the least used instrument in the Indian kitchen. I never knew this was a thing….till University.

So while my identity has always been very clear to me, it hasn’t always been the same for others. We have this need to put people in boxes to that it’s easier for us to understand what to say or how to behave around them. The boxes create stereotypes and we are all guilty of stereotyping others. Once we are able to put someone in a box, we can then pretend to understand or connect with them.

In university I was known as the Indian girl with an American accent but is from Amsterdam.

The truth is that I will stick out anywhere in the world. I’m a woman in a man’s world. I’m trying to create recognition in a community which has generally lead by the generation above me and a brown girl trying to get through the world. Guess what? I am being noticed. I’ll make sure it works in my favour.

How do I make a connection with others? It’s by finding a common interest, goal or experience which can stem from anything. Personalities and people are not one dimensional, we are so layered. Two people can share the same opinion on a topic but how and what the reasoning for the opinion is completely different.

Once I moved back to the Netherlands I came in contact with people who had just recently moved to the Netherlands, they had different backgrounds, lived in different countries. So the thing about being an expat or immigrant and living in a country that isn’t necessarily your first home it takes time to adjust and you keep comparing cultures. You’ll first find the qualities that you don’t like so much before you start seeing the beauty in your new home. Overtime I realized that I started explaining to people the culture they were surrounded with and the misinterpretation that they had. Such as when you ring the doorbell at 6 in the evening at your Dutch neighbor’s home, they won’t invite you in. Most likely they will deal with you at the door and send you on their way. Now to a foreigner this could be seen as cold and unwelcoming but for the Dutch it’s dinner time. They aren’t turning you away because they don’t want to entertain you but unlike Asian food, if there are 4 people on the table usually 4 steaks will be prepared. To accommodate an additional person (unexpectedly) would mean that someone else would need to give up their portion, which isn’t a bad thing, but the guest themselves wouldn’t have enough. So while to some this would feel like it’s being unaccommodating to others it’s being practicable about not being hospitable enough. It’s just how you look at it.

Indian weddings vs British weddings vs Dutch weddings… that’s another comparison all together which I’ll save for another day.

When I go for a job interview one of the first questions I get asked is to “tell us something about yourself, who are you?”. This questions and the one about your 5 year plan are the most difficult to answer. When I first started my career path, I was guilty of trying to fit in a predetermined box just so I would fit the mold and make it easier for others to understand me and connect with me. Now I do approach this question differently; I don’t need people to connect or understand me by fitting the stereotype. It’s about connectivity…How do you make a connection with others? It’s by finding a common interest, goal or experience which can stem from anything. Personalities and people are not one dimensional, it’s so layered. Two people can share the same opinion on a topic but how and what the reasoning for the opinion is completely different.

You are a product of where your roots are and most of all your life choices. You don’t need to fit in anyone’s predetermined box and you shouldn’t – how else are you going to shine?