

Made in Heaven appropriated queer ‘coming out’ and so did Yashica Dutt, writes Sumit Baudh

Coming out is not a onetime declaration. For many queer persons, it is a repeated experience.

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Radhika Aapte as Pallavi Menke in *Made in Heaven* season 2, episode 5 | Amazon Prime

This is the second line at the start of episode five of *Made In Heaven*’s second season—“Denied tells us what it means to be Dalit in India.” The show is currently streaming on Amazon Prime. In the said episode, “Denied” is the title of a book written by the character of Pallavi Menke. This article explores the theme of denial as a point of departure from the fictional story of Menke.

Recent public conversations on the second season of the television series have devoted more than necessary attention to the idea of “coming out as Dalit,” when this idea is neither core nor indispensable to the story. It’s peripheral and easily replaceable by the idea of voluntary disclosure—of something which was previously concealed. This concept is on the lines of a short story titled *When I*

Concealed My Caste, written in Marathi by a Dalit author Baburao Bagul, which was published 60 years ago in 1963. This Dalit Marathi literature was denied acknowledgement in the elite English sensibilities of *Made in Heaven*.

Appropriation of ‘coming out’

Linguistic usage of “coming out” has origins in voluntary disclosures of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) queer persons about something that was previously undisclosed in relation to their sexualities and/or genders. “Coming out” is often a recurring experience, not a onetime declaration. The nature of this process can change over time and it may not be always acknowledged by people we out ourselves to. Similar to gay character Karan Mehra in *Made in Heaven*, despite my coming out to my family, I’m denied acknowledgment of this for over two decades. Rather than liberating, “coming out” can be distressing when it is denied by our loved ones.

In the Amazon Prime show, by coming out as Dalit in her book Menke is said to have inadvertently ‘outed’ her biological family too. Her brother is shown to be upset about it as he’s called a ‘quota student.’ He’s denied the agency to decide whether or not he wants to declare his caste identity. He is denied the cover of dominant caste that was available to his sister, and worse, she denies him any commiseration and lectures him about social conditioning instead. In the show, Menke’s status and her narrative is elevated while her brother is denied the consideration he deserves.

Privileging of the underprivileged, a Dalit woman in this case, is a welcome new approach in storytelling. It’s transformational. However, this kind of positioning must be examined alongside its assumed context. Menke could be assumed to be cis-gendered (cis) and heterosexual (het). These are privileges on the lines of gender and sexuality that may not be available to openly ‘out’ queer Dalit persons. The invocation of caste and gender rhetoric by assumed cis-het Dalit women as Menke must be analysed more closely, especially when it appropriates ideas from queer discourse.

In her opening scene, Menke is said to have “come out as Dalit”. At no point in the episode does anyone question this brash appropriation. Mehra could have made a statement to this effect, but he is denied that opportunity—in the storytelling—because he’s not involved in the planning of Menke’s wedding. While his business partner, Tara Khanna has no meaningful insights on the appropriation from queer discourse, apparently because she’s also a cis-het character. Interestingly, the supporting team of wedding planners, including a trans character by the name of Meher Chaudhry is shown to be watching the interview of Menke that mentions her “coming out as Dalit.” Even Chaudhry is denied the opportunity of posing a question over an apparent cis-het appropriation.

Overshadowing discourse

Dalit author Yashica Dutt seems to have appropriated the idea “coming out” from queer discourse, and used it as an appealing title of her 2019 memoir, *Coming Out as Dalit*, now slated to be republished by Penguin in February 2024. More recently, the author has demanded credit from the *Made in Heaven* makers—for basing the character of Menke on her without ‘permission or credit’.

The show makers have denied credit to Dutt on the ground that the idea of ‘coming out as Dalit’ was [originally](#) articulated by me in 2007. Resulting in a public row, Dutt invoked caste and gender rhetoric. Any opposition to it from “savarna” women was posited as casteist, and any opposition from men was labelled as misogynistic. Dalit women are uniquely posited in this discourse, yet those who are offended by previous public remarks of Dutt about a prominent Dalit woman leader such as former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Mayawati are simply posited as “haters” of Dutt. Queer Dalit women, as Jyotsna Siddharth, who took the lead in calling public attention to the Dutt’s appropriation, were falsely maligned for “forcing” Dutt to come out as queer.

In this rhetoric, the prior public disclosure of Neeraj Ghaywan, who directed the said episode of *Made in Heaven*, as a Dalit person, was virtually overshadowed.

The failure of Dutt's memoir to acknowledge and credit my published essay was also eclipsed. Currently, there is a call for "supporting Yashica Dutt" and to "stop the hate campaign" via a [letter](#) circulating on social media. Even this letter doesn't mention Ghaywan and me.

Unrelated to the show, I was nominated as 2022-23 Fulbright-Nehru Visiting Chair on Civil and Human Rights at the Emory University in Georgia, US last year. Despite having clearly communicated my interest, eagerness, and requests to teach at the law school, somehow my course was offered as an "interdisciplinary" one at the Institute for the Liberal Arts (ILA) at Emory College of Arts and Sciences.

In discussing the complexities of identity, it is essential to consider how societal structures impact individuals. The challenges faced by queer individuals in India, particularly regarding family and parenthood, highlight the ongoing struggle for recognition and rights. This is particularly evident in the context of [queer parenting](#), where legal and social barriers continue to hinder the ability to form families.

Upon my persistent enquiries over why my course could not be offered as a law course, a senior level university administrator replied cursorily over an email to me, stating that the law school was "unable to host" and the ILA was "both able and enthusiastic to host" me. This was not an explanation of my disciplinary dislocation from the law to the liberal arts. The law dean's office expressed a lack of clarity about this and declined to engage with me any further. The reasoning was opaque to me, and it remains so to date.

Effectively, I was denied the opportunity to be part of the legal academia as a faculty instructor at the law school. Systemic exclusionary forces based on race, caste, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. operate within American academia, and beyond, often denied by academics themselves. The US based academics who seem to be eagerly signing on to the call for "supporting Yashica Dutt" in a matter that has nothing to do with the academia, those academics are unlikely to lend their names to questioning matters of

discrimination and exclusion squarely within the academia in the US, in their own home turfs, only because it might jeopardise their career prospects within the system.

More broadly, these are vital issues of representation in visual media, book publishing, and academia. In the ongoing initiatives and existing understanding of representation, rhetorical invocations of caste and gender may not suffice. There needs to be more nuanced attention to caste and its intersections with gender and sexuality for improving the understanding of everyone who is invested in advancing equal protection.

Prof. Dr. Sumit Baudh (they /he) teaches Caste, Law and Representation, among other courses and sources, views in this article are informed by their reading of Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and its applications to caste. Views are personal.

(Edited by Ratan Priya)

Yashica Dutt's response to Sumit Baudh

“My request for the makers of *Made in Heaven* was simply to formally acknowledge my obvious likeness that has been pointed out by thousands of the show's viewers. It was instead turned by the makers into an issue of the origin of a term and who it rightfully belongs to. ‘Coming Out’ is a more than a [century](#)-old term that was used in its current context by gay men in the pre-World-War era to signal their entry into ‘homosexual culture’ and was based directly on the ‘coming out’ of debutants in 19th-century socialite balls.

I wrote a book based on my specific life experiences and life story, using a term whose various addendums (coming out as gay/trans/lesbian/asexual/pan, etc.) have been in use for many decades across the world. As any Dalit and queer person would, I saw the unmistakable similarities in closets of ‘caste’ and ‘sexuality’ and put them together. Borrowing from language that describes one

form of oppression to create an expression that could help further the understanding of a different kind of systemic discrimination isn't 'appropriation'. It's called building a discourse – a revered academic practice any academic worth their salt ought to be familiar with.

What gave the words 'Coming Out as Dalit' the mainstream recognition it has today, that allowed the makers of the show to use it in the first place, wasn't because they were written in an essay that by the acknowledgement of three separate anti-caste writers – [Rajesh Rajamani](#), [Swati Kamble](#) and [Sumeet Samos](#) – was unfamiliar to even the most involved activists in the anti-caste movement (even Neeraj Ghaywan solely credited this term to my work in his Instagram post). But instead, it was my life story, my book and my years of publicly responding to the immense backlash on my own, which I still continue to receive for simply saying these words that so many today identify with, that created this current discourse.

The fact that there has been a large attempt to shift the focus from the show's theft of my likeness to my use of a globally prevalent framework of identity in my work, which then has been used as a device to further denigrate me and 'show me my place' as a Dalit woman, should tell you everything about how masterful and coordinated this effort is.

More astoundingly, that some people are now claiming to be the spokespersons, arbiters and deciders of the entire global Dalit queer identity and policing other marginalised writers from 'lower' castes from using language that has been around for a century, if not more, is as absurd as it is inaccurate. The global queer discourse and LGBTQ+ rights movement has already established that there is no timeline for someone to 'come out'. The beloved actor and singer Queen Latifah [came out](#) as lesbian at 53, while CNN anchor Anderson Cooper [came](#) out at 45. Both and many others who have come out at various ages have been accepted and celebrated with open arms.

More importantly, pressuring someone to reveal their sexuality and then denying them their queerness by labelling it as false, which both the above Dalit

queer academic and another Dalit female identifying queer person have done, is a hateful act of violence that is [recognised](#) as such by the global queer community. The fact that they are allowed to do this to another Dalit queer person in public view and online and have yet to be called out by the larger Indian LGBTQ+ community shows the lack of solidarity for Dalit queer people in general, and sadly, the limitations of the queer movement in India.”