

Opinion | *Dahaad* vs *Them*: Lessons In Representing Caste - In Full

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May 21, 2024



Sonakshi Sinha as Anjali Bhaati in *Dahaad* and Deborah Ayorinde as Dawn Reeve in *Them: The Scare*

The question of representation has gained significance in the popular culture of the day - in particular, the representation of subordinate groups such as women and racial minorities. The success of the Amazon Prime series *Them* (2021) led to the release of its second season, *Them: The Scare* (2024), last month. Another series, *Dahaad* (2023), recently marked a year since its release, and there is some anticipation about a renewal.

The popularity of such shows demands that we pay attention to how social identities are portrayed, especially when these identities stand at odds with dominant power systems. What difference does this 'different' identity make?

(Spoiler alert)

Drawing From Life Experiences

The protagonists of *Dahaad* (2023) and *Them: The Scare* (2024) are women police officers, and they are located in two very different parts of the world: Rajasthan in India and California in the US, respectively. Both discover patterns in seemingly isolated cases of unnatural deaths. They suspect that these murders are the work of serial killers, and their investigative approaches are informed by their life experiences in some ways. Anjali Bhaati, the protagonist of *Dahaad*, looks beyond the trope of runaway brides ending their lives in despair after their grooms abandon them; Dawn Reeve, the protagonist of *Them: The Scare*, rises above the stereotypical theme of 'violent Black men' killing 'innocent helpless women'.

Anjali is denied entry into the house of a dominant caste man, who wants to register a police complaint about the abduction of his daughter but doesn't want Anjali to enter his home. This man makes a cryptic reference to Anjali's caste when he tells her supervisor, "How dare you bring her to my doorstep! ... Caste cannot be changed by change of name". The reference is cryptic because even though caste is clearly the 'problem' here, the dialogue does not go into the details of whether she is an 'untouchable', 'low caste', or Dalit.

Later in the series, Anjali asserts her position as a police officer as she produces a legal search warrant to enter another dominant caste household. In doing so, she invokes the rhetoric of equality and non-discrimination, two things guaranteed by the Constitution. This projects a favourable characterisation of the law and police powers.

Police Abuse And Failure Of Law

In contrast, *Them: The Scare* is thematically rooted in the abuse of police power and the failures of the law. Early on, the very first episode makes explicit references to the assault of Rodney King in 1991. King, an African-American man, was beaten up savagely by the officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). His injuries resulted in skull fractures, broken bones and teeth, and permanent brain damage.

Them: The Scare makes it amply clear that African-American communities are generally suspicious of the police because of their complicity with racism. So much so that the word "pig" is commonly used as a slur for the police.

Dahaad, on the other hand, steers clear of discussing the relations between police and subordinate groups, even when it's well-known that the former often enable impunity in cases of caste-based violence.

Race, Sex And Caste-Based Harassment At Work

Dahaad also has a recurring motif, in which a colleague lights incense sticks every time Anjali is around. This action is not explained. Nobody cares. Anjali herself is not shown to be affected by this behaviour.

But *Them: The Scare* explicitly shows slurs such as "Black bitch" and insults like "affirmative action hire" hurled at Dawn. Along similar lines, 'reservation quota' is a common insult used at workplaces to humiliate people who avail of caste-based affirmative action policies.

Dahaad chooses not to get into all this. Or perhaps Anjali, working as a general category 'Bhaati', has not availed of reservations. Either way, the point should have been part of the narrative somehow.

The Differences Within

Them: The Scare showcases many other ways in which race and racism operate. Dawn's African-American mother, Athena, who works at a toy store, is fired by her Asian-American employer after she refuses to sell a particular doll because of its racist nature. The irony highlights an important aspect of inter-minority differences: racial minorities are not a monolith, there are significant ideological differences within groups.

Something similar happens in India, especially in police divisions, where the caste and class location of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Backward Classes (BC) play out in significant ways. Both groups are subordinated, but they are not necessarily unified.

There are internal hierarchies within SC groups too. For example, the first woman victim in *Dahaad* is said to be a Chandal, an SC caste, but the series makes no effort to acknowledge the difference of stature between Chandals and Meghwals - the latter being the caste Anjali is later revealed to be from.

The Workings Of Sex And Caste

The high point of the mystery in *Dahaad* is that the victims have consensual sex with the serial killer and are found dead in the isolation of public toilets the next morning. How the killer gets his victims to go to public toilets willingly, secure the door from the inside, and poison themselves, is something no one can figure out. Except, Anjali. She surmises correctly that the killer somehow persuades his victims to take a contraceptive pill laced with cyanide, convincing them to do this inside a toilet given how nauseousness is a known side-effect of the pill.

The reason Anjali figures this out is that she's an unmarried sexually active woman who uses the morning-after pill herself. As a viewer, I'm neither a woman nor a customer of morning-after pills, but even I was able to guess this *modus operandi* long before it was revealed.

So, if Anjali must be given credit for solving the mystery, the credit must go to a sex particularity-Anjali is a sexually active unmarried woman who uses contraception. This particularity has nothing to do with her caste in the show. But such a separation between her sex and her caste can be justified in an 'ideal' world, where Anjali can choose to act with agency as a woman with no repercussions. In the fictional world she inhabits, the show's conscious intersection of Anjali's gender and caste can - and does - entail repercussions, which play out as common prejudices against Dalit women, that they are promiscuous, 'willing' and 'available' for sex. To portray Anjali as unaware or untouched by this is unrealistic.

Meanwhile, the particularity of Dawn's identity in terms of both race and sex is integral, recurring, and inseparable from the plot. Stopping her white male colleague, McKinney, from beating up a Black single father shows Dawn's empathy and solidarity in the context of race. Winning the confidence of an Asian-American boy, who allows her into the

bedroom of his sisters, shows how Dawn's race and gender set her apart from the domineering white male composition of the LAPD.

Declaration Of Name As A Path To Redemption

Among other sensibilities that prevailed upon Anand Swarnakar, the killer in *Dahaad*, misogyny was a bigger driver than casteism. In reply to Anjali's question of why he killed so many women, Anand says they were guilty of lust. He also tells her that he can see through her lust (for her supervisor) and knows her real "*aukaat*" (caste). She, in response, walks away quietly.

The following scene ends the series with Anjali reclaiming her actual surname, Meghwal. Neither of her two surnames is explained in the show. The accompanying visual is a cryptic ending that shows Anjali in police uniform, looking defiantly into the camera, adjusting the cap over her head.

The significance of Anjali giving up her fictitious surname, Bhaati - a Rajput (warrior) caste name - is that Anjali is shown to have surpassed caste-assigned occupations of Meghwals, and she now takes immense pride in her job as a police officer.

On the other hand, the climax of *Them: The Scare* is a confrontation between Dawn and the killer. It is a rapid narration of the failures of foster care systems in the US. At this point, race and racism have been so well-presented throughout the series that it does not need to be said out loud that Dawn is invoking aspects of structural racism. The antagonist in *Them: The Scare* is racism. It collapses when Dawn acknowledges the racism to its face-something like Constantine, who sends demons back to hell by naming them.

Naming It As It Is

Unlike a more charitable characterisation of policing systems in *Dahaad*, *Them: The Scare* unabashedly characterises the police as tools of oppression and subordination. Dawn rejects a handout desk job, dispassionately says "fuck the police", and walks out. Among other things, *Them: The Scare* shows the resistance of African-American cultures

to institutional biases of the US policing systems, and the name Dawn signifies hope in a despairing landscape.

Dahaad means roar, and it could be an implied characterisation of the audaciousness of its protagonist. This audacity contrasts with her name, 'Anjali', which means something more benign - a divine offering. Perhaps the characterisation of Anjali is an audacious divine offering: sometimes, self-sacrifice is precisely that. Anjali reclaiming her Meghwal caste identity is a profound gesture, but it remains to be seen how this identity will play out in her life.

One hopes that the second leg of *Dahaad* will learn a thing or two from *Them: The Scare* and illuminate the structural workings of power systems a little more clearly.

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