



Decoding the Interlocking Factors of Caste-Gender Dynamism, Intersectionality and Suffering in the Web Series *Dahaad*

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the intermingled relationship between caste and gender and its intertwining impact in the case of the subjugation of the Dalit women's section in India. Reema Kagti's *Dahaad* (2023) is a web series that depicts how caste, as a societal marker, class, as an economic marker, and gender positioning make the Dalit women doubly oppressed compared to their Dalit male counterparts. Interestingly, for a prolonged time, the Hindi film industry's approach to Dalit women's representation has been relegated to the periphery, and most of the time, their representation sticks to a stereotypical style in which they are portrayed as poor, mute, hapless victims with no sense of agency or assertion of their own. This is the point from which *Dahaad* shifts substantially. From being unassertive, silent victims, the characters on screen now adopt an assertive stance to defend their community and assert their identity. Centering the discussion on *Dahaad*, this article explores the suffering of Dalit women, who are often targeted on the pretext of their caste-gender intersectional identity, and how contemporary filmmakers challenge the established trajectory of representation associated with Dalit women characters that perpetuates subjugation, discrimination, and exclusion. Through close textual analysis of the series, we discuss how the perspectives of Dalit women were sidelined and neglected in Bollywood for a substantial period. This topic needs to be addressed to understand postcolonial cinematic discourses.

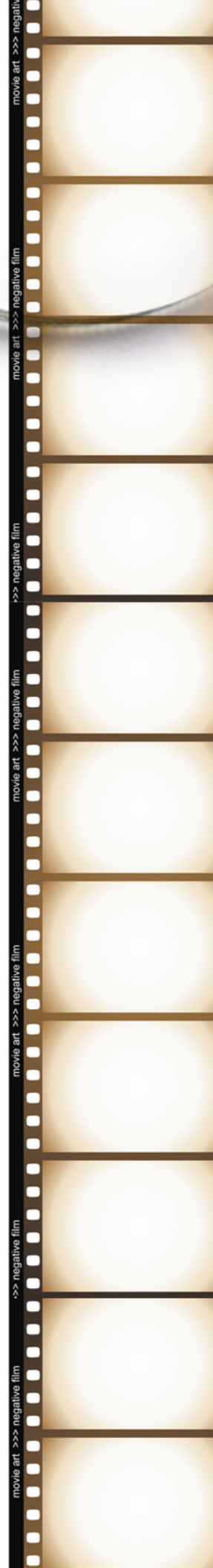
Keywords: caste; gender; Dalit women; suffering; intersectionality



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Introduction

The Indian Hindi cinematic space, colloquially known as Bollywood, has not consistently represented the predominant caste factors prevalent in Indian society through its cinematic portrayals for a prolonged period. Due to this, Indian cinema as a cultural artifact and a form of mass entertainment was vastly dominated by the caste hierarchy, putting the upper caste populace at its center and engrossed heavily in its belief system, marginalizing the other factions in the process. Suraj Yengde (2018), in this regard, suggests “the mainstream Indian cinematic sphere, with few exceptions, has been responsible for sustaining a dominant caste hegemony” (503). This research article critically analyzes the contemporary portrayal of caste-gender intersectionality, its representation, and the suffering associated with Dalit women’s identity, using the web series *Dahaad* (2023), directed by Reema Kagti, as a case study. This article also aims to navigate and decode the Dalit-resistant stance and agential position of the Dalit women protagonist, unlike their stock representation in most mainstream cinematic representations, by analyzing *Dahaad* as an alternative imaginaire. The nuanced understanding of the web series

and the discourse associated with the caste-gender trajectory helps us to navigate and decode how caste-gender intersectionality affects the lives of the Dalit women substantially in India. Using the lens of intersectionality, as propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Anandita Pan's application of intersectional feminism in the Indian context, this article examines the positionality of Dalit women characters in society and how their issues and concerns have been under-discussed in majoritarian cinematic discourses. Additionally, through an analysis of *Dahaad*, this article also discusses how the Dalit female characters have been subjugated when factors such as caste, class, and gender interact in an interdependent manner.

Focusing on the history of Indian cinema, the first and foremost Hindi films that primarily dealt with the question of caste are *Chandidas* (1934), *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Achhut* (1940), and *Sujata* (1959). Placing untouchability at the center of the discussion, these films primarily focus on the Gandhian proposition of uplifting the Harijan populace, rather than emphasizing the Ambedkarite notion of the annihilation of caste. Over time, though, the cinematic narrative shifted away from its singular objective of untouchability. Still, its focus was restricted mainly to showcasing “Dalit people trapped in the anarchic and wretched social conditions, which is far removed from the normal imagination of a civilized person” (Wankhede, 2023, p. 20). From Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) to Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (1981) and Goutam Ghose's *Paar* (1984), the clichéd stock representation of Dalit characters primarily depicts them as hapless

victims, emphasizing the discriminatory attitudes that Dalits have faced in society due to their caste identity. From the 1970s onwards, with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers and its assertive politics, the Ambedkarite notion of the annihilation of caste was brought to the forefront, substantially impacting public discourse.

Though the emergence of Dalit Panthers substantially impacts society, in the realm of Hindi cinema, “the paucity of films made on the issue of caste discrimination reveals that caste has been a tabooed topic in the Hindi film industry despite its ubiquitous presence in the Indian society” (Deshpande, 2007; Dwyer, 2014). In the Hindi film industry, the emergence of educated, modern Dalit characters who were aware of their rights occurred in the 1990s. In this regard, Harish S. Wankhede (2023) comments, “though he/she appears to be heroic, confident, and aspirational, he/she is often relegated to the role of second fiddle and never portrayed as a mainstream hero” (p.22). Even in the more recent scenario, Priyadarshan’s *Aakrosh* (2010), Prakash Jha’s *Raajneeti* (2010), and in Jha’s *Aarakshan* (2011), all the Dalit characters are portrayed as secondary figures. Their role primarily centers around the mainstream male, upper-caste, philanthropic hero, who is the central attraction of the narrative. Vishal Chauhan suggests that:

...there is an emergence of new Dalit representation in popular Hindi films, especially in the post- 2010s. This new Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema is indeed a break from the continuity of stereotypes.

Nevertheless, what is more important at this historical juncture is to explore the nature of these changes and to probe whether they constitute a discontinuity or a shift (2025, p. 170).

A few years back, Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019) got much attention for its dealing with the discriminatory stance posed towards the Dalit women strata due to their caste identity in various parts of our country. In this film, the protagonist, IPS officer Ayan Ranjan (played by Ayushman Khurana), hails from an upper-caste background and acts as a messianic figure for the Dalit populace of Laalgaon (a remote Indian village). Though there are a few instances in which Bollywood films put the Dalit characters on the center stage around which the narrative unravels itself gradually, Subhash Kapoor's *Guddu Rangeela* (2015), Ketan Mehta's *Manjhi—the Mountain Man* (2015), and Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015) are prominent among those. In the domain of Hindi cinema, "the exploration of a Dalit hero as an ordinary, emotional being was a fresh experiment" (Wankhede, 2023, p.23). Interestingly, in the broader corpus of the Hindi film industry, the crucial factor of gender, intermingled with the notion of caste identity, is often relegated to the backstage. The depiction of caste-identified women, their experiences, and their sufferings alters the modality of the stereotypical rendering of the women figure in the Hindi cinematic sphere as Brahmanical/upper-caste entities in most cases. In India, the experiences of women cannot be reduced to a uniform, homogenized matter solely based on their gender identity; the conceptualization of caste, class, religion, and ethnicity contributes significantly to their diverse experiences. Caste identity associated with Dalit women's gender

positioning makes them twice as subjugated as the Dalit men section. This series extensively explores the nemesis of Dalit lives in the contemporary socio-cultural scenario, positioning the central protagonist against the caste sanctions and discrimination. The cinematic intervention of *Dahaad* is crucial because:

...a large amount of content, ranging from films to web series that are streamed on various SVOD (subscription video on demand) platforms in India, uses woman-centric themes and depicts most of the female protagonists largely as independent, confident women who are forthright when it comes to asserting their choices (Paunksnis, 2023, p. 93).

Narrativizing the journey of the lady protagonist at the intersection of caste and gender positioning is a relatively new development in Indian cinematic discourse.

Gender, entangled with caste as a representational theme, has been sidelined or compromised for a substantial period in the Hindi film industry. The portrayal of Dalit female characters as central protagonists remains unimaginable for many people in the Hindi film industry. Stereotypical representation of the lives and experiences of the Dalit populace as helpless victims and portrayal of their miserable lives on the silver screen majorly restricted itself to the portrayal of male Dalit characters, where the suffering of ‘Dalits’ becomes synonymous with the suffering of ‘male Dalits.’ In this regard, Farhana Naaz suggests:

...the issues of lower castes, in the general sense of the term, did reach the silver screen through the issue of untouchability. However, the problem of lower-caste women, even in contemporary times, remains unknown to the wider world. Bollywood failed to record the subordination spawned out of the intersection of their various identities as ‘Dalit’, ‘poor’, and ‘woman’ altogether (2023, p.165).

According to Sharmila Rege (1998), since the 1980s and 1990s, “several crucial theoretical and political challenges besides underlining the Brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics start emerging” (p.WS39). Unfortunately, all these activities failed to attract the attention of Bollywood, and due to this, it was impossible for the Dalit women’s section, who are thrice marginalized on the pretext of their caste, class, and gender identity, to gain any space in Bollywood’s representational territory. In some of the rare instances where Dalit women have been portrayed in Bollywood, their roles were strictly confined to the periphery as supporting characters, rather than as protagonists. Examples of these sorts of characters include Lakshmi in *Ankur* (1974), Jhuria in *Sadgati* (1981), Phagunia in *Manjhi* (2015), and Gaura in *Article 15* (2019). Regarding the treatment of Dalit women in Bollywood, scholars suggest, “Bollywood handled the subject of Dalit women with casteist, patriarchal, and sexist undertones and hence confirms to the dominant idea about them being submissive, sacrificing, powerless victims, and mute spectators of their own deprivation” (Naaz, 2023, p. 166). This is the specific point at which Reema Kagti’s *Dahaad* shifts substantially. The Indian web series *Dahaad* (2023) was released on Amazon Prime Video on May 12, 2023, exploring the ramifications of caste- and gender-centric inequality through the journey of a Rajasthani Dalit female cop, Anjali Bhaati (played by

Sonakshi Sinha). It is possible to focus on the pertinent topic of caste-gender subjugation from which Bollywood has distanced itself silently, because:

...the popularity of SVOD platforms in India has been growing exponentially since their inception in the first decade of the twenty-first century... Moreover, not only is SVOD content made available to a large number of viewers across India, but it is also made affordable to survive in an aggressively priced, competitive neoliberal market (Paunksnis, 2023, p. 93).

This fictional crime thriller series critically reflects the jeopardized situation of the impoverished Rajasthani Dalit women hailing from the rural areas, aged between thirty and thirty-five years of age, who became the targets of the psychopathic killer Anand Swarnakar (played by Vijay Varma). Written by Zoya Akhtar, this series is a timely portrayal that highlights how significant societal factors, including caste, class, and gender, have profoundly impacted the social structure of Rajasthan. The plotline of this thriller series deals with the suspicious suicide cases of numerous Rajasthani Dalit women aged between thirty and thirty-five years, all of whom have left their respective houses with their lovers/partners who had promised them marriage and a life full of happiness. Anand, the villain of this series, is a respected Hindi literature professor at Mandawa Girls College in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district. In addition to being a professor, Anand spends every weekend traveling to remote, isolated villages in his mobile library van to teach impoverished children for free, which makes him a respected figure in society. With his shrewd strategic moves, Anand disguised his identity

every time. It went after the impoverished Dalit women whose families were unable to marry them off because of the high dowry demands from the groom's side. In this sort of scenario, the Dalit women members became a potential burden on their family members. Taking advantage of their lower caste identity and destitute situation, Anand enters into the lives of these impoverished Dalit women under the guise of being their lovers. Anand (who forged his identities as Kartik Sharma, Mayur, Mahesh, and Richard Abraham) tricked the women with the false promise of marriage, without a single penny of dowry.

Using strategic words full of love, Anand played on the emotions of the Dalit women, convincing them to leave their homes and to leave a letter behind. Since their daughters are adults and have left the family of their own free will, the family members cannot file a case of kidnapping with the police. Twenty-nine Dalit women from rural low-income families are poisoned and killed by Anand. With the fake promise of marriage, Anand first convinces these women to leave their homes, then, after fulfilling the urge for his vivid sexual lust, he kills them by giving them cyanide-infused pills. The climax of *Dahaad* centers around Inspector Anjali Bhaati of Mandawa police station, who takes responsibility for solving the murder mystery and, in the process, identifies the actual culprit behind this gruesome episode. In terms of cinematic intervention and Dalit subjectivity, *Dahaad* emerges at a pivotal historical juncture, engaging critically with the socio-cultural discourses shaping contemporary visual narratives.

The central plot of this series becomes vital because *The Hindu*, one of India's most critically engaged newspapers, reports in 2024 about the states in India that are at the top in terms of the cases of atrocities against Dalits. Of the 51,656 cases registered under the law for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in 2022, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 23.78% of the total, with 12,287, followed by Rajasthan with 8,651 (16.75%) and Madhya Pradesh with 7,732 (14.97%). The present report exposes the alarming prevalence of atrocities against Dalit communities in Rajasthan, which consistently occupies a prominent position among Indian states in official documentation of caste-based violence. Although *Dahaad* (2023) deals with the narratives of caste-gender violence, putting the Dalit women characters at the center, its illustrative framework remains essentially detached from the complex and pervasive realities of Dalit suffering in contemporary India. From a Dalit feminist standpoint, the narrative technique of *Dahaad* appears to be mediated through dominant cultural facets, focusing only on the select aspects of caste oppression while sidelining the everyday indignities, hostile circumstances, hegemonic outlooks, and complex forms of agency that characterize Dalit lived experiences. The series, though, is thematically significant and discusses the systemic subordination of the Dalit female section, offering a mediated representation that fails to shed light on the systemic structural violence and everyday manifestations of the caste subjugation prevalent in contemporary society. This sort of cinematic portrayal also limits the scope of testimonial

authenticity. It risks reproducing hegemonic discourses due to insufficient problematization of deep-seated social asymmetries that persist at the level of praxis. This series minutely depicts that, seventy-eight years after Indian independence, the caste system is still widely regarded as a rigid mechanism of social stratification (Ramesh, 2020).

Understanding *Dahaad*: As an Alternative Imaginaire

In terms of the women-centric narratives that are popular in the postmillennial cinematic and SVOD space, the construction and representation of women:

...as independent, sexually adventurous, free subjects owes to the pervasiveness of a market-oriented notion of feminism that holds participation in a consumerist culture as the key marker of emancipation...such representation, which refrains from addressing the intersectional realities of Indian women located at the overlapping axes of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, age, and geographical location, reveals how dominant power structures interpellate us within the neoliberal culture of consumption, pleasure, and free choice (Paunksnis, 2023, p. 97).

Apart from homogenizing the suffering and concerns of Indian women under the monolithic framework of gendered disposition, *Dahaad* considerably navigates to decode the differentiated repercussions that the Dalit women have to encounter due to the compounded marginalities of their caste-gender identity. The point from where *Dahaad* shifts substantially and acts as an alternative *imaginaire* from the clichéd Bollywood representational tactics is that, shifting from displaying an upper caste, privileged male police officer in solving the critical case of serial killing, the director boldly chooses to project a Dalit female police officer for this case. Anjali Bhaati, who belongs to a Dalit community and is popularly known as Lady

Singham² of Mandawa, is a pivotal force in solving the serial-killing case. The representation of characters like Anjali as a potential messianic figure towards the assailable Dalit women section is identified as having many of the characteristic traits associated with the post-1990s new woman (Anwer & Arora, 2023, p. 153). The new woman's conceptualization comes to the forefront as a product and a barometer of India's post-1990s neoliberal state. The new Indian women symbolically oppose the romanticized popular idea of Bharatiya Nari. As a cinematic rendition, *Dahaad* is one of the first web series of its kind, depicting a new Dalit woman who challenges the stereotypical representation of Dalit women prevalent in the Hindi film industry.

In this regard, Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (2023) comment:

... while Indian cinema's new woman is symptomatic both of India's rise to the status of a world superpower as well as a site upon which the contradictions of this meteoric ascendancy are worked out, Dalits, especially Dalit women, remain on the outskirts of inclusion into categories of 'newness' (p.152).

Dahaad distinctively shifts from this standpoint through its portrayal of a Dalit female protagonist who embodies the characteristics of the new woman. This series situates its female protagonist, a new woman, in a casteist, patriarchal world to explore how her Dalit subjectivity intersects with the intricate tropes associated with the new woman's traits: free will, choice, sexual desire, and mobility. It is essential to mention that in a serious situation where the Mandawa police have to find the serial killer of these twenty-nine women, it is Inspector Anjali's persistence, courage, and steadfastness that became the key contributory factors behind

solving the case. Reema Kagti's approach regarding the portrayal of Anjali's character shifts from the representational tactics of her Bollywood predecessors because, unlike them, she has not portrayed Anjali's character as the "stereotypical image of Dalit women as helpless, silent victims of the system" (Chakraborty Paunksnis, 2021, p.151). In the mainstream Indian cinema, the patterns have been popularized that the Dalit women holding the peripheral spaces of the narratives are often stereotyped as stigmatized, despised, and acutely ashamed of their identities. Shifting away from this stereotypical modality, this series reveals that Anjali's agential neo-womanhood is undoubtedly a symptom of her exceptional, individuated personality, in which she is well aware of her rights and knows when and how to use them effectively. Though Kagti's cinematic framework marks a steady departure from conventional, stock representations of Dalit women characters in mainstream cinema, the decision to cast a non-Dalit, upper-caste actress like Sonakshi Sinha in the role of Anjali Bhaati, who is coming from a family of established actors, foregrounds persistent concerns regarding the hegemonic practices embedded within Bollywood casting mechanisms. The casting mechanism of *Dahaad* perpetuates a classic pattern in which Dalit characters, even when central to the narrative's thematic demands, are frequently pushed to the periphery or relegated to supporting roles, thereby materializing the prevalent structures of social, cultural, and structural marginalization. Discourse associated with such representational tactics reveals that, often in their effort to

subvert hegemonic, patriarchal, and heteronormative paradigms, these cinematic interventions reinscribe the exclusion of Dalit subjectivity, thereby obstructing the transformative potential of Dalit narratives within the public sphere.

Regarding the filmic representation of lower-caste women, Jyoti Atwal (2018) suggests, “the mainstream feminists’ representation of lower-caste women is often confined to salvaging the pain rather than exploring and studying anger” (p.735). *Dahaad*, on the contrary, significantly attempts to portray the personality, lived experiences, and struggles that Anjali, a Dalit police inspector, has to encounter for her Dalit identity, and also has to trace the ground-level reality of impoverished Dalit women in Rajasthan, where serial killers like Anand have targeted them. In addition to these factors, this series sought to portray Dalit feminist aesthetics of resistance that oppose societal subjugation. Shifting from the stereotypical stance of portraying Dalit female characters as mute, wretched victims subjugated by the dominant sections of society, the first scene of the series portrays Anjali as a student of martial arts, defeating her male counterparts badly in the game. She also rides a Royal Enfield motorbike, which is very popular among men and not commonly seen among women bike riders, portraying her physical mobility and director’s agenda to portray her character as an equal to her male counterparts in the true sense. This series aims to discuss major issues surrounding the

causes of Dalit women's suffering. Firstly, how the intermingled factors of caste-gender identity have affected the lives of Dalit women in a significant manner secondly how multiple factors of subjugation like caste, class and gender contribute collectively to the lives of Dalit women that needs to be examined through the framework of intersectionality; and lastly to trace the Dalit feminist assertion, agency and the resistive stance of the Dalit female protagonist after a prolonged invisibilisation of this particular stance from the mainstream Bollywood films.

Decoding *Dahaad*: Through the Lens of Intersectionality

Dahaad begins with the missing case of Krishna Chandal (played by Adithi Kalkunte), an impoverished Dalit woman who was missing for more than two months. Even after several requests from her brother, Murli Chandal (played by Yogi Sinha), the police were reluctant to take action on this case. In the first episode, we see Inspector Kailash Parghi (played by Sohum Shah) repeatedly ignore Murli's request to find Krishna and tell her that her sister is an adult and may have left home of her own accord. From this scenario, we can infer that the Dalit identity of this family played a crucial role in the police's delayed intervention in this case. How caste, as a social marker, becomes vital in this sort of case becomes clear to the audience in the scene where Murli comes to the Mandawa police station to inquire about the status of her sister's case. He was not even entitled to enter the room of the officer handling the case. The officers instructed Murli to ask his questions outside the room's boundary, and once he left, the

inspector attempted to purify the room by burning incense sticks. This same treatment was applied to Inspector Anjali every time she passed by that room. At this point, the series *Dahaad* becomes analogous to the Netflix-released film *Kathal – A Jackfruit Mystery*, directed by Yashowardhan Mishra and released in the same year 2023. In its narrative plotline, *Kathal* “emphasizes prejudice based on caste and the persecution of the underprivileged” (Kumar & Pareek, 2023, p. 1). Similar to Anjali Bhaati in *Dahaad*, the character of Mahima Basor (portrayed by Sanya Malhotra) in *Kathal* also occupies the subject position of a Dalit female police officer. In a manner analogous to Anjali’s experience in *Dahaad*, where her upper-caste colleagues burn incense sticks to purify the space she occupies, Mahima Basor in *Kathal* experiences similar spatial and symbolic exclusion due to her Dalit identity. Mahima “gets reprimanded for stepping on the carpet with her shoes. The MLA then sprinkles sacred Ganges water on the carpet for purification soon after she leaves” (Kumar & Pareek, 2023, p. 5). These analogous incidents related to the spatial purification of sites occupied by Dalit characters illustrate the embodied caste dynamics and ritual mechanisms of purity that regulate and discipline Dalit female bodies within institutional and socio-cultural milieus.

Dahaad poignantly illustrates that the Dalit characters are self-sufficient to handle the most severe problems and do not need to rely on their upper-caste counterparts. In this approach,

Dahaad significantly departs from previous Bollywood films, such as *Sujata* (1959), *Arakshan* (2011), and *Article 15* (2019), in which progressive and generous upper-caste characters have typically solved the most severe problems faced by the Dalit strata. In this endeavor, a significant portion of the plot revolves around the upper-caste characters, relegating the Dalit thematic concerns to the background. In this case, it was Anjali, who, with her intellectual abilities, connected the dots of the case and figured out that it was a case of strategic serial killing. Anjali's agential stance and acute awareness of her rights were the sole reasons she solved the murder mystery. During the investigation, in several instances, upper-caste male figures tried to stop Anjali from entering their house premises because of her caste identity. In one such episode, Anjali told her senior officer Devilal Singh (played by Gulshan Devaiah) "I have had many doors shut in my face, but no one has managed to shut me up" (Episode 1, 25:09). Though the oppression based on caste-gender factors effects substantially the character of Anjali, but her marginal position as a Dalit female character "is not only a site of repression but also a site of resistance from where she sees the world differently" (Naaz, 2023, p.166). In case of developing resistance while being in a marginalized position, Bell Hooks (1984) comments:

...living on the margin, they developed a unique way of seeing reality: we looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center and the margin. We understood both (p.x).

As a central protagonist, Anjali's marginal position has helped her to understand the gravity of the scenario. In this regard, Sharmila Rege suggests, "Dalit feminist standpoint acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among Dalit women, acquiring a perspective against an unjust order" (2021, p. 133). When her senior inspector, Kailash Parghi, scolded Anjali because, according to him, she was unnecessarily bringing the caste factor into the case in her reply, Anjali states:

...because the girls are poor, and largely from the backward caste. No one cares whether they live or die. Do you see a single girl from an upper-caste family? If there were, someone would have raised hell. This bastard knows how little a backward caste girl's life is valued in this society (Episode 2, 00:36:06-00:36:40).

Interestingly, Anjali became the sole factor due to whom twenty-nine murdered Dalit women got justice, whose murders were previously treated as simple cases of suicide. Therefore, to fully understand the trajectory of discrimination and suffering imposed upon the Dalit women characters on *Dahaad*, this study applies intersectionality as a theoretical framework to decode how multiple factors of oppression substantially contributed to the Dalit women's subjugation. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) develops a framework for analyzing power and hierarchical subordination that encompasses and connects several factors, including gender, class, and race-based subordination. Crenshaw further suggests, "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite-

that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (p.1242). Within the Indian context, racial subordination is supplanted by structures of caste-based hierarchy and oppression. The positionality of a Dalit woman “is located at the intersection of caste and gender” (Pan, 2021, p.23). Here, in this case, all the Dalit women characters, including Anjali, have to bear the dual brunt of caste and gender, due to which their experience is substantially different from that of the Dalit male populace. Using the intersectional framework and its critique in the Indian context (Menon, 2015; John, 2015), this study delves deeply into caste-gender dynamics and seeks to decode Dalit women’s agential stance and the subjugation they encounter in an upper-caste, patriarchal, heteronormative society. In this context, this article analyses how casteism, classism, and gender work in tandem in the lives of Dalit women, highlighting how intersectionality helps us understand the particular manner in which a Dalit woman is subjugated on multiple fronts. Mary E. John (2015) suggests that “theory of intersectionality provides us scope for the critical dialogue across global feminist margins and centers which significantly contributes to building solidarity across subjects that are recognized as otherwise getting lost between movements and agendas” (p.76). Drawing on *Dahaad*, this article emphasizes the significance of adopting a Dalit feminist perspective, combined with an intersectional framework, to analyze the multifaceted aspects of oppression and cultivate a critical understanding of the representation of Dalit women in cinematic discourses.

This series can be seen as a narrative of sexploitation where “underprivileged women become soft targets for the sexual gratification of the social elite” (Singha and Acharya, 2012, p.xxxvi). Shifting from Bollywood’s monolithic, stereotypical approach to Dalit thematic concerns, this series engenders a serious empathetic response among its audience by orchestrating the murder and silenced victimhood of the twenty-nine murdered Dalit women, whose voices remain unheard throughout the narrative. Central to this narrative is Anjali’s assertion of agency and her heightened consciousness of her legal and moral rights, which serve as the pivotal impetus for unveiling the truths behind these murders. This dynamic underscores Anjali’s enactment of “solidarity as a mode of resistance,” as theorized by Pan (2021, p. 141), in which collective identification and commitment serve as critical strategies against institutional erasure and marginalization. Although the intersectional factors of caste and gender bind Anjali Bhaati’s identity to that of victimized Dalit female figures, the aspects of class, educational qualifications, and societal position she holds have had different consequences for her and the other Dalit female characters—marginality as a concept needs to be understood and deciphered based on one’s location and societal markers. Although the caste and gender factors bind Anjali and the other twenty-nine Dalit victims in a single frame of reference, the differentiation in terms of class, access to educational opportunities, and social capital are factors that contribute significantly to the diverse lived experiences of Anjali and the other

murdered Dalit women characters of the narrative.

In response to the representational norms and content expectations characteristic of SVOD platforms, Reema Kagti explicitly foregrounds the central protagonist, while also allotting a substantial portion of the script to the systemic subjugation prevalent in the day-to-day lives of the Dalit strata. Although placing the Dalit woman character at the center of the narrative marks a significant departure from Bollywood's conventional representational mechanisms, ultimately focusing the spotlight on the protagonist risks rendering the overarching narrative a composite of fragmented, episodic events, thereby attenuating the cohesion of the central plotline. By projecting *Dahaad* as Anjali's saga of Dalit feminist assertion, this series inadvertently reinforces a hegemonic paradigm of 'heroine worship,' which benefits individual triumph, sidelining the structural realities associated with caste atrocities, the lived experiences of the Rajasthani Dalit women, and overlooking the quotidian struggle and commodification they experience due to their caste-gender intersectional identity.

Sufferings of 'She-Dalits': Hierarchy, Marginality, and Subjugation

Dahaad projects a multi-layered exploration of caste as a factor of structural inequality prevalent in the lives of Dalit women. Using the intersectional framework to elucidate the interlocking systems of oppression that Dalit women encounter, this study navigates caste subjugation, Dalit women's resistant stance, and agential outlook, which become the focal point

of the narrative. The narrative arc highlights Anjali's mother, Devki, and her challenge, foregrounding how caste and gender are mutually constitutive axes that shape her daughter's personal autonomy, socio-economic mobility, and marital prospects. Devki's anxious efforts to find a suitable Dalit groom for Anjali project the enduring salience of endogamy and the commodification of Dalit female bodies in matrimonial markets, where property and savings become leveraged as compensations for caste-based deficiency. This dynamic underscores the intersectional relevance of B. R. Ambedkar's theorization of caste as an endogamous institution designed to perpetuate social closure and exclusion (Ambedkar, 2015).

Devki pays the local Brahmin priest to find a suitable match for Anjali, which is emblematic of the "market" logic and portrays the Brahmanical supremacy inscribed in everyday interactions, depicting how caste capital must be transacted even in the marriage prospects of Dalit brides. Anjali retorts, "One thousand rupees? Because of our name" (Episode 2, 00:37:17-00:37:25), which becomes a moment of agential resistance against the precarious societal norms. Based on Crenshaw's argument on intersectional oppression meted out towards the coloured women on the pretext of their race and gender, it becomes evident that in the Indian context, Dalit women face not only gendered subordination but also a specific form of caste-driven marginalization, amplifying systemic precarity (Crenshaw, 1989). This confluence of

caste-gender subjugation has been widely discussed by Sharmila Rege, who asserts that Dalit women's subjectivity is produced through their negotiation with patriarchal and casteist structures, and their continuous resistance against both (Rege, 1998).

Anjali's bold act of reclaiming her paternal surname, Meghwal, in the final episode of the series operates as a site of counter-hegemonic assertion. The choice to return from Bhaati (a protective erasure of actual identity enacted by her father to avoid caste violence) to Meghwal articulates a radical politics of self-identification and Dalit consciousness. Meghwal, this self-referential Dalit surname, marked by caste identity, confronts one of the crucial operative modes of power that Gopal Guru (1995) identifies as the 'external.' This symbolic reclamation of her Dalit identity challenges the mechanism of structural inequality, mirroring Gayatri Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism," the tactical mobilization of identity for political resistance (Spivak, 1988). Furthermore, this act of identity assertion resonates with Gopal Guru's idea of Dalit subjectivity, in which the acknowledgment and naming of caste become performative acts of resistance to Brahmanical subjugation (Guru, 1995). *Dahaad* translates the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality into visual and dialogic form, rendering visible the structural violence and resistant agencies that define Dalit women's everyday lives. This series critically demonstrates how the refusal to efface one's caste identity marks a profound agential gesture,

foregrounding the tensions and possibilities of identity politics within the matrix of caste-gender intersectionality.

Dahaad encapsulates the intricate mechanism of caste-gender subjugation and body politics, projecting how Dalit women's bodies become sites of systemic exploitation and graded patriarchal violence. Employing Gopal Guru's idea of "mutual bracketing" (Guru, 2000, p.112), we can understand that the Dalit women characters in the series are socially marginalized and systematically ghettoized through the dual axes of caste and gender oppression. The twenty-nine murdered Dalit women, whose bodies are targeted, exploited, and ultimately disposed of by Anand, signify Dalit women's bodies as corporeal terrain on which caste and patriarchal hegemonies inscribe violence. As Pal et al. suggest, the Dalit female body is subjected to capture, control, and incarceration by hegemonic masculinity intertwined with caste hierarchies, positioning Dalit women's bodies as "territories to be possessed through weapons of sexual violence" (Pal et al., 2021, p.59). Anand's modus operandi revolves around enticing Dalit women, using them according to his needs, only to kill them via cyanide capsules camouflaged as contraceptives. This whole scenario projects the horrific instrumentalization and erasure of Dalit women's subjugation under the guise of deceptive patriarchal and casteist stratagems.

Anand, as a psychopathic killer, embodies the graded patriarchal power structures linked to upper-caste supremacy, whereby impoverished Dalit women's bodies become disposable sites of conquest, territorialization, and annihilation, reflecting Spivak's theorization of subaltern bodies as powerless "territorial sites" for symbolic and material domination (1988, p.303). The caste-gender violence in *Dahaad* vividly illustrates how the intersection of caste-class dynamics imposes multifaceted repression on the Dalit community's most vulnerable section, reinforcing their marginality and invisibility within socio-political contexts. As Jill Nelmes (1999) asserts regarding filmic representations, such portrayals are deeply embedded in socio-economic realities, thereby affirming that *Dahaad* is an ethically situated critique that refuses to isolate caste and gender discrimination from their broader societal and cultural contexts. In this regard, Sharmila Rege suggests that "the issue of violence exercised on Dalit women must be located in the links between caste and gender, failing which Indian feminism might itself end up contributing to inequalities" (2020, p. 101).

Dahaad substantially portrays the differentiated discourse of suffering between the twenty-nine deceased Dalit women and the protagonist Anjali. The murdered Dalit women epitomize the orchestrated killings based on the caste-gender intersectional identity. However, their narratives remain largely silent and relegated to the periphery, where their entire identities are reduced to mere statistical representations. The identity of all those twenty-nine murdered

Dalit women becomes synonymous with the file numbers containing their postmortem and missing report. On the contrary, Anjali's suffering is marked by active resistance, resilience, and assertion of agency within oppressive structures. Her character navigates the nexus of caste and gender as an agent of change, confronting systemic inequality within both the police force and society at large. This cinematic divergence aligns closely with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which not only exposes the compounded marginalization of Dalit women but also foregrounds their capacity for agency in the face of multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Anjali in *Dahaad* embodies the dual brunt of caste-gender identity, which is enfolded in subjugation yet exhibiting critical consciousness and resistance. At the same time, the twenty-nine murdered Dalit women become potent symbols of the silenced and invisible victims of casteist patriarchy.

By focusing on the tropes of victimization and resistance, *Dahaad* complicates the monolithic portrayal of Dalit women, highlighting the fluidities within caste-gender oppression and the possibilities of subaltern subject formation. In sum, *Dahaad* offers a profound cinematic intervention into the intersectionality of caste and gender, visualizing the bodily and sociopolitical violences that Dalit women endure while simultaneously illuminating pathways of agency and systemic resistance. Sharmila Rege suggests that:

...the violent practices against women reveal definite variations by caste; while upper castes are subjected to control and violence within the family, it is the absence of such control that makes lower-caste women vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment, and the threat of public violence (2020, p. 103).

In the case of the relationship of caste and gender dynamics, Chandra Sekhar (2020) suggests that “the social relations of caste and gender are based on the exercise of power through the use of force” (223). Anand Swarnakar’s *savarna* outlook, infused with patriarchal hegemony towards the Dalit women characters, enables him to manipulate and exploit them by preying on their vulnerabilities and social marginalization. His strategic deception, pretense of unconditional love, and promise of a happily ever after act as strategic moves to fulfill his sexual longing, which exemplifies how caste supremacy and patriarchal entitlement converge to objectify Dalit women’s bodies as sites of domination and control. Anand’s subsequent cold-blooded, well-planned murders, disguised as suicides, epitomize a brutal exercise of power, exposing the precarious condition of these women, ensuring the erasure of their subjectivities, and silencing any traces of resistance or justice. This reflects a larger structural violence where caste-based privilege and patriarchal authority sanction the disposability of Dalit women, reducing them to expendable bodies for the gratification and perpetuation of *savarna* dominance. When Anand was apprehended by Anjali and taken aback to Mandawa police station in Rajasthan, Anjali asked him, “I just want to know why you did it. Why did you kill those innocent girls?” (Ep.8: 45:23-45:32) with respect to this question he replied “they were

not innocent. Innocent girls do not flirt with strangers and spread their legs too quickly for them. Innocent girls do not cross the line” (Ep.8: 45:40-45:46). According to Anand those girls who did not fit into his self-formulated definition of innocent girls, they need to be punished. In this case, he himself took responsibility for punishing them.

In continuation of this dialogue, Anand also proclaims that Anjali also needs to be punished like the other Dalit girls, inside the lock-up, and with an outrageous outlook, he told her, “What did you think? You thought you would become a police officer and rise above the others? A uniform cannot change your skin. Wherever you go, people can see straight through you who you are and from where you belong” (Ep. 8: 45:58-46:09). After being arrested, Anand, in a surprising manner, justifies his deed with the logic that it was all the fault of the murdered Dalit women that they indulged themselves with his friendly behavior and trusted him in a blindfolded manner. The physical relationship for which the twenty-nine victims have agreed because they were in love with him and have complete faith that he is going to marry them eventually; Anand has considered this a sign of their immoral character. Through analyzing the nature and manner of torture imposed on the bodies of murdered Dalit girls, Anand symbolizes his upper caste male egoistic attitude, deep sexist philosophy, and abhorrence for the Dalit women strata, due to which he has played with their lives in a use-and-

throw manner. The sexual intercourse happened just one night before the murder of all the victims became a marker of the “hegemonic masculine power to capture and incarcerate a Dalit woman’s body, and with this act, the purpose of controlling the body is fulfilled” (Pal et al., 2021, p.62). Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran (1991) rightfully argue that “the ‘manhood’ of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of the passivity of the women of the caste” (p.2131). Unfortunately, the bodies of the twenty-nine murdered Dalit women become territories that are conquered through the strategically planned, manipulative means. In this manner, both casteism and casteist-sexism assert their power and control over the victims. This series offers a nuanced portrayal of the dual dimensions of body politics that apply to Dalit women. In this regard, Charu Gupta (2011) suggests:

...the Dalit female body was both at the same time repulsive and desirable, untouchable and available, reproductive and productive. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women was an everyday fact, which was often expressed in terms of the alleged “loose” character of Dalit women themselves (p.25).

Here in *Dahaad*, it was Anand who allured the twenty-nine women through using his romantic tactics. However, when those women trusted him and fell for him, he questioned the character and morality of the twenty-nine murdered women. He told Inspector Anjali that those girls were killed because of their loose character and their habit of spreading their legs to strangers too quickly. This scenario portrays the hypocritical double standards of Anand, who, with their upper-caste, patriarchal mentality, sexually exploits the Dalit women and later

murders them, and tries to convince society that the characters of those women are questionable, which becomes the sole reason for the consequences they have encountered. From Anand's deeds and his mindset, this point became clear that the factor of lower caste identity of the murdered girls has become a crucial factor behind their murders. According to Anand's thought process, their lower-caste identity serves as a marker, making them easily accessible and subject to use. In *Dahaad* Anand's deeds can be compared with 'sexual colonization' (Christy K.J., 2020, p. 115), where the character of Anand is that of a colonizer, and the twenty-nine Dalit women become the colonized. Reema Kagit, through her nuanced directorial vision, not only exposes the structural violence meted out to Dalit women but also, by placing the character of Anjali Bhaati at the center of the narrative, tries to recentre Dalit feminist agency as the central argument of the series. As a competent, self-assertive, courageous Dalit female police officer who ardently fought against embodied social injustices rooted in caste-gender identity, the character of Anjali, the Lady Singham of Mandawa, foregrounds the Dalit feminist standpoint, a perspective that has long remained underrepresented in mainstream Bollywood films.

Conclusion

Drawing on an extensive analysis of *Dahaad* (2023), this article discusses the compounded subjugation imposed on Dalit women by the intersecting factors of caste, class, and gender, and the associated repercussions that play a crucial role in shaping their lived

experiences. The intersectional dynamics of gender and caste are a distinct feature of this series. However, this study also interrogates how the factor of class, vis-à-vis the economic condition of the Dalit women section associated with their twofold caste-gender identity, can become the marker of the differentiated societal position for the protagonist Anjali Bhaati and the twenty-nine murdered Dalit women. The compounded subjugation of Dalit women characters based on the caste-class and gender identity makes the Dalit women characters exposed to the threats posed by patriarchal hegemony and its vicious consequences, which make their lives worse.

Reema Kagi's *Dahaad* serves as a socially conscious web series that highlights the enduring hierarchies of the Indian caste system and the multifaceted oppressions associated with it. Distinctively, this series illustrates a cinematography "where the margin can make interactions with the center and frame questions on its existential position. In this manner, the muted margins attain speakability and performability" (Pal et al., 2021, p. 65). Through the portrayal of structural violence, acute helplessness, and abjection that project the experiences of the majority of Dalit women, this series foregrounds the critical situation, oppression, helplessness, and powerlessness that are prevalent in the case of the majority sections of the Dalit women strata. *Dahaad* effectively highlights the significant fact that the intersectional factors of caste and class, associated with gender identity, contribute in tandem to their marginalized position in society, and their issues should be discussed holistically through

cinematic representations. So, placing Reema Kagti's *Dahaad* at the center, this article critically examines the overlapping intersectional factors associated with Dalit women's identity in relation to their oppression and how these factors contributed to the agential stance adopted by the Dalit female protagonist. In the long-standing Hindi cinematic discourse, *Dahaad* distinctively attempts to reclaim the rightful narrative space for Dalit women characters, positioning them not only in supporting roles or as victims of systemic subjugation, but also as central subjects capable of fighting counter-hegemonic agency within and against hierarchical, oppressive structures. *Dahaad* also plays a crucial role in focusing on the societal scenario of Rajasthan about the condition of the Dalit populace, with a special focus on the subjugation experienced by Dalit women. Kundan Welfare Society which is supported by National Commission for Women in its report titled "Violence Against Dalit Women in Rajasthan" (2025) suggests that "the latter's weak economic condition highly influences the violence perpetrated against Dalit women, and lack of education and awareness about their rights...the weak economic condition is the main cause of violence against Dalit women in Rajasthan i.e. 86.87 percent" (p. 89–90). Focusing on the systemic violence exercised towards Dalit female characters, *Dahaad* initiates critical discussions around the oppressed condition of Rajasthani Dalit women and outlines the necessity of debate around the condition of Dalit women, who, even after seventy-eight years of Indian independence, face complex contours of oppression.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Dowry refers to a system consists of transferring of assets including money or property, given by the bride’s family to the groom or groom’s family during marriage.

² Here, Anjali is compared with famous cop character of Bajirao Singham appeared in the film Singham (2011) directed by Rohit Shetty.