

Different Shades of Womanhood in Rima Kagti's *Dahaad*: A Psychoanalytical Study

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Abstract:

Women in Rajasthan embody a complex duality: strong cultural roots, vibrant traditions and resilience in social movements, yet facing deep-seated issues like low literacy, child marriages, dowry system, gender-based violence and economic dependence. They have found place in literature and cinema extending to web series and those platforms have represented several shades of women character belonging to different strata of society. This article explores the multi-dimensional representation of women in the 2023 Indian web series *Dahaad*, directed by Reema Kagti and Ruchika Oberoi. Using a feminist and intersectional lens, the study analyses the different shades of female identity—ranging from the assertive subversion of the Dalit police officer to the tragic vulnerability of ‘disposable’ marginalized women. The research identifies how the series moves beyond traditional tropes of the ‘victim’ and the ‘saviour’ to present a nuanced critique of internalized patriarchy and systemic casteism. By examining characters like Anjali Bhaati and the silent victims of Anand Swarnakar, this article argues that *Dahaad* redefines the “Missing Woman” narrative as a structural failure rather than a mere criminal occurrence.

Keywords: OTT, caste, women, feminism, shades, patriarchy.

Introduction:

Recent studies show that on OTT (over the top) platform in India, women's representation in web series has significantly evolved. It has moved beyond stereotypes showcasing complex, multidimensional female characters as protagonists, antagonists, creators (writers/directors), and leaders. They reflect real-life experiences with strength and diversity in roles from law enforcement to entrepreneurs, rather than just victims. Web series, in recent years, are shifting from portraying women as just victims or supportive figures to showcasing empowered, complex individuals dealing with realistic struggles, growth, and resilience as in *Do You Wanna Partner*, *Delhi Crime*, *Bombay Begums*, *Aranyak* etc. They are being shown more empowered than ever before instead of idealised roles such as sister, mother or girl-friend. The OTT can be viewed using Television, laptop and mobile phones. Female driven narratives are found following the path of TV serials. There's a rise in female protagonists and narratives focused on women's lives, friendships, and challenges, finding a strong audience. Apart from this, more women are involved in producing and directing streaming content, bringing authentic perspectives and leading to more nuanced portrayals. It has also challenged norms in shows as mentioned above. Those series feature women in diverse professions (police, entrepreneurs, intelligence) and justifiably explore themes beyond traditional gender roles. Moreover, it also deals with intersectionality of society where content always keep exploring gender alongside other critical identities like caste, class, and region (e.g., *Scoop*, *Jubilee*), though more depth is needed.

Dahaad (2023) is an Indian crime thriller series that uses a serial killer investigation to provide a deep sociological commentary on caste, patriarchy, and the marginalization of women in rural India. It is set against the arid, socio-politically charged landscape of Mandawa, Rajasthan, serves as a significant text in contemporary Indian digital media.

Unlike traditional police procedurals that focus on the *who has done it* aspect, *Dahaad* focuses on the *why it happens*. Central to this inquiry is the representation of women, which is not monolithic but layered through several distinct shades.

Carl Jung was a Swiss Psychiatrist who founded Analytical Psychology which was a major school of psychological thoughts. After his split with Sigmund Freud, it is claimed that he further expanded on Freud's psychoanalysis. Jung introduced concepts like the collective unconscious, archetypes and personality types. Then other studies explored by Carl Jung, of which are concepts like the Persona (social mask) and Shadow (repressed self) as core components of his analytical psychology. He had evolved it through his self-exploration, with detailed explanations appearing in works like *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (1928) and later writings.

He defines that the Persona is the mask one wear to meet the demands of society and present oneself outwardly; as it is essential for functioning but can become problematic if they over-identify with it, losing touch with their deeper self. While Shadow represents the unconscious, often negative, aspects of themselves that they repress. For example, undesirable traits, instincts, or fears, but it also holds potential for creativity and vitality if integrated.

This paper shows how rural Rajasthan's socio-cultural landscape (caste + patriarchy) shapes the inner lives and traumas of its women. *Dahaad* (roar) presents a spectrum of womanhood—from the rebellious cop to the invisible victim—where each shade represents a different psychological response to systemic repression and the search for an authentic self. It applies Jungian theory of the persona and shadow to analyse the psyche of women characters.

Shade 1. Anjali Bhaati: The Mask of Protection

Anjali (played by Sonakshi Sinha) is a study in repressed rage and professional overcompensation. Her character is defined by double marginalization: being a woman in a male-dominated force and a Dalit in a caste-rigid society. Therefore, Anjali adopts traditionally masculine traits—riding a Bullet motorcycle as suggestive of challenging gender norms, symbol of independence and agency, professional authority, personal aspiration and freedom using a rugged dialect, and mastery of Judo—as a psychological defence mechanism. This armour is not just for her job; it is a way to project an authority that her identity as a lower-caste woman would otherwise deny her. She and her father struggle identity crisis which lead him to change their surname from *Meghwal* to *Bhaati* to protect her from discrimination. Psychoanalytically, this created a split in her identity—living a lie to survive. Soumya Mathew writes, "...The loneliness of the women who have, all their lives, been relegated to a place where love, respect or simply the act of being seen, is denied. It's easier for Anand (killer) to move on to the next woman and to the next and then to the next, because these women are structurally forgettable. So forgettable, that when they go missing, most of the families do not even bother looking for them". She continues, "..... it takes Bhaati *sa'ab*, whose lived experiences of being a marginalised caste woman facing the pressures of getting married (by her own mother) resonate with those of the victims, to give the case the importance it deserves. Her decision at the end of the series to reclaim the name *Meghwal* signifies the resolution of her internal conflict; she chooses the pain of truth over the comfort of a mask. While the antagonist Anand Swarankar represents destructive masculine rage (born with entitlement), Anjali represents constructive feminine rage. Her drive to solve the case is not just professional; it is a personal battle against a system that deems women like her "disposable." She is expressive in every possible manner, on the

contrary, represses her temporary relationship with a younger boy as a space where her desire exists outside the Superego that is, mother or society.

Anjali's character is a masterclass in the Jungian Persona. Her father, a police officer himself, gave her the surname *Bhaati* (traditionally associated with the dominant Rajput caste) to shield her from the discrimination faced by their actual community, the Meghwals (a Dalit community).

The Persona: Her police uniform, her Bullet motorcycle, and her “upper-caste” surname form a “Professional Persona.” This mask allows her to command respect in a hyper-masculine, caste-conscious police station. She performs the role of the Lady Singham—tough, unrelenting, and emotionless.

The Shadow: Her true identity as a Meghwal woman is her “Personal Shadow.” Because society deems this identity inferior, it is repressed. Her shadow also contains her vulnerability and her desire for a life not dictated by her mother's constant pressure to marry.

The climax of the series represents Individuation—the process of integrating the Shadow with the Ego. When Anjali finally reclaims her name, Anjali Meghwal, she drops the protective *Bhaati* persona. She no longer needs the mask to feel powerful; her power now comes from her whole, integrated self.

Shade 2: The Disposable Woman: The Psychology of Vulnerability

The 27 missing women in the series represent the most tragic shade. The women are rendered invisible by society. These women are typically from lower-income, marginalized caste backgrounds who are aging out of marriageable years. They are not just foundation of the plot, rather they represent collective psychological state of learned helplessness and emotional starvation. The restlessness and burden of being single. Those women are portrayed as in their social context, an unmarried woman over 25 years of age is treated as a

burden. This constant psychological pressure creates a vacuum of affection. The killer, Anand, does not use magic; he simply uses validation. He targets women whose families have stopped seeing them as humans and only see them as problems to be solved either via dowry or marriage. They fall prey to the killer not because he is a super hero but because they are burdened by the social shame of being unmarried and the economic weight of dowry. Hence, they choose elopement as an escape from miserable situation. For them, eloping is a calculated risk born out of desperation of getting married. Psychoanalytically, they seek a “Parental Substitute”—someone to offer the protection and love their own families withheld. Their vulnerability is a direct result of a lack of familial secure attachment. Most shocking thing is the silence by their own families except one, and the state. For years, their disappearance goes unnoticed because their own families choose shame over justice, assuming their disappearance as elopement. Thus, both the women Zoya Akhtar and Rima Kagti succeed in showing how the intersection of poverty and caste makes these women disposable in the eyes of both the community and the law.

The women, Anand Swarnakar targets, represent a Collective Shadow of small-town India. They are women whose Personas are defined entirely by their families, such as the submissive daughter, the “burden” waiting for a dowry, the invisible lower-caste girl.

The Shadow of Desire: Because these women are denied agency and romance in their “Persona” lives, their desire for love and escape is pushed into the “Shadow.”

The Exploitation: The killer, Anand, does not just lure them with gold; he lures them by speaking to their Shadow. He offers them the un-lived life—a secret elopement, a promise of being seen as a woman rather than a transaction. They are killed by the very parts of themselves they were forced to hide.

Shade 3: The Internalized Patriarchy (The Mother Figures)

One of the most complex shades is that of the older generation, specifically Anjali's mother and Devi Lal's wife. Anjali's mother serves as the primary psychological antagonist in her domestic life. She represents the gatekeeper of patriarchy. She is seen as the primary voice of marriage pressure, reflecting the idea that a woman's worth is tied solely to her marital status. Her obsession with her daughter's marriage is a projection of her own socio-cultural fear. She thinks that girl's safety and value are supposed to be tied solely to a husband figure. She is unable to digest Anjali's success as a cop because it does not fit the "survival script" she was taught. It creates psychological conflict between them. Anjali is busy in investigation day and night. When after sixty hours long duty Anjali returns home and try to find some sleep, her mother insists her to see photos of proposed boys, Anjali remarks showing victims obscene photographs that it is the *Mother*—the keeper of patriarchal norms—who holds the bloody knife by pushing daughters toward deceptive men in the name of marriage. The mother is not a villain but a victim who has stuck into the cycle of generational trauma which has internalised the very system that oppresses her. Her constant nagging is a result of this generational trauma, the belief that a woman's only roar should be confined within house.

Anjali's mother, Devki, serves as the enforcer of the societal Persona. She always keeps pestering Anjali about her marriage and meeting proposed boys.

The Persona: She is the "Traditional Matriarch," obsessed with pujas, marriage matches, and social standing. She does pujas (worship) despite being an untouchable.

The Shadow: Her shadow contains the resentment and pain of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Instead of integrating this pain, she projects it onto Anjali, demanding her daughter conform to the same narrow mask that likely stifled her own life. As the series

suggests, the mother's insistence on traditional protection is part of what makes the girls vulnerable to predators.

Shade 4: The Domestic Silhouette (Vandana Swarnakar)

Vandana, a working woman in the hospitality industry holding a respected position, is a seemingly an ordinary woman, living a domestic life who represents the shade of "domestic normalcy" used to hide monstrous misogyny. It is difficult for her to believe the police's claim about her husband. Her character highlights the domestic sphere's failure to recognize the "banality of evil." She herself has an extra marital affair with her colleague. While her husband, Anand is out of the house every weekend, his detachment from their and son makes her find psychological support in her colleague. When he comes to know about her affair he kills her boyfriend. Since his internal hatred for women (even his own wife's perceived flaws) fuels his violence. Finally, she is the one who helps the police to find out him. This leaves a great influence over her and their son. It is a terrible trauma for her to process with the fact that she was living with a cold-blooded murderer of about 27 women. Through characters like Vandana and the victims, the series critiques the societal pressures and lack of support for women, which enable men like Anand to exploit their vulnerability.

Shade 5. The Domestic Mirror: Shivangi (Shruti Vyas) Devi Singh's Wife

Shivangi (played by Shruti Vyas), serves as a character study of a woman constrained by traditional expectations, which creates conflict in her marriage to a more progressive-thinking husband. The relationship between SHO Devi Singh (Gulshan Devaiah) and her provides a subtle psychological contrast. Her character highlights the psychological toll on women who are progressive but still trapped in traditional roles. Her arguments with Devi Singh about their daughter's upbringing show the modern female struggle, the fight to ensure the next generation does not inherit the same psychological cages. Shivangi feels insecure

and begins to suspect Devi Lal of having an affair with Anjali Bhaati, largely due to Anjali being Devi's closest confidante at work and the difference in values between the wife and the colleague. This suspicion stems from her own lack of intellectual stimulation in the marriage and feeling inferior to Anjali in that context.

The writers use her character to highlight internalised misogyny and how women themselves can enforce regressive societal expectations, contrasting her with the strong, independent protagonist Anjali Bhaati.

Discussion

Dahaad (roar) gives voice to the women whom the system would rather forget. Through its different shades, the series successfully argues that the serial killer is not just an individual psychopath but a byproduct of a society that treats marginalized women as burdens. A psychoanalysis of the female characters in *Dahaad* (2023) reveals a profound study of how intersectional oppression (the meeting point of caste and gender) shapes the female psyche in rural and in urban India. The series, created by Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar, uses the police procedural genre to dissect the trauma of being a woman in a society that views her as a liability. Its creators reveal that womanhood is not a monolithic identity but a spectrum of psychological responses to a suffocating socio-cultural Superego. By examining characters through the lenses of Jungian Persona and Shadow, this paper concludes that the “shades” of womanhood in Mandawa are defined by their relationship with invisibility and the Father’s Law.

Final Reflection

Dahaad (The Roar) is the sound of the female Ego finally breaking through the silence of repression. The paper demonstrates that the shades of womanhood in the series transition from the Gray of invisibility and the Black of trauma toward the Vivid reclamation

of the self. The series concludes not just with the capture of a criminal, but with Anjali's psychological liberation—reclaiming her name, Meghwal, and asserting that her identity is no longer defined by the gaze of the "Father" or the "Predator," but by her own inherent authority. As the title *Dahaad* (Roar) refers to the moment the repressed Shadow finally finds its voice. For Anjali, the "roar" is not an act of aggression, but an act of authenticity. By acknowledging the parts of herself she was taught to hide, she becomes the only person capable of truly "seeing" the victims and catching the killer. In Jungian terms, the *Dahaad* is the moment the Self asserts its dominance over the repressive forces of the Shadow and the Persona. When Anjali walks away at the end, she is not just a cop who finished a case; she is a woman who has integrated her history, her caste, and her power.

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