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Womanhood in Dark Winds

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Womanhood in *Dark Winds*

The show *Dark Winds* is an AMC+ original based on the book series Leaphorn & Chee by Tony Hillerman. Set in the seventies, the show follows Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Tribal Police as he investigates the deaths of two indigenous people in the Navajo Nation near Monument Valley. The first episode opens in Gallup New Mexico, where a team of robbers steal from an armored truck and escape via helicopter. It flies over a nearby Navajo reservation where it is noticed by a man named Hosteen Tso. Three weeks later, he and a young Navajo woman named Anna Atcitty are found dead in a motel room, and the only witness to the deaths is Anna's grandmother, a blind Medicine Woman. As Leaphorn begins his investigation into the murders, he is joined by Deputy Jim Chee, who is actually an FBI agent planted in the Tribal Police to investigate connections to the helicopter robbery. The murder investigation is taken over by the FBI, and Longhorn begins to investigate the robbery. During all of this, Leaphorn's wife, Emma, asks him to investigate the home life of a young pregnant girl, Sally Growing Thunder, who visited her clinic. Emma convinces Sally to come live with her and Joe to escape her home. FBI agent Whitover, who is responsible for planting Chee, believes that a Navajo radical group called the Buffalo Society is responsible for the robbery. Together, Leaphorn, Chee, and Sargent Bernadette Manuelito begin to unravel the connections between the two crimes. The series ends with the revelation that Agent Whitover was working with two members of the Buffalo Society, James Tso and Frank Nakai, and was responsible for both the robbery and the murders.

One of the ways that *Dark Winds* excels is in its portrayal of Navajo women and their importance. The show spends a lot of time focusing on the relationships the women have with one another and the close bonds they form. From their first interaction, Emma is quick to protect Sally. While Sally is getting examined by a white doctor, Emma translates what he is saying, but

also warns the pregnant girl that if she gives birth at the hospital, they will sterilize her against her will. In the seventies, about 25% of indigenous women were sterilized without their knowledge or consent. These women were often tricked into agreeing to the procedure, even if they were at the doctor for something completely unrelated. Some of them would never even realize what had happened to them. Emma's warning to Sally comes from her own experience, as she was sterilized after the birth of her son, Joe Junior. bell hooks briefly touched on forced sterilization in her book *Feminism Is For Everybody*, where she described how these gross injustices that primarily impact non-white women are massively underrepresented. Native women are twelve times more likely to go missing or be murdered than any other ethnicity, and yet the crimes against them receive little to no publicity or attention. This sentiment is also reflected in *Dark Winds* in how the FBI treats the death of nineteen-year-old Anna Atcitty. The white agents tasked with her case show no urgency or interest in solving it, writing her off as a prostitute. When Joe informs her parents of Anna's death, he tells them that because it seemed like a murder, the FBI would be responsible for conducting the investigation. Anna's mother tearfully replies, "Since when do the FBI give a damn about the death of an Indian?" She has no faith that they will make any effort to give her daughter justice, and she is correct in feeling that way, as no one except for the members of the Tribal Police makes an effort to do so. This idea is discussed by Kimberle Crenshaw in an article for Stanford Law titled *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and the Violence Against Women of Color*. There, she discusses how women of color experience violence in a way that is different from that of white women or men of color. The duality of being a woman and non-white makes their situation even more dangerous. Relating back to earlier, she also describes how language barriers prevent women from getting the care they need. "...such barriers not only limit access to information

about shelters, but also limit access to the security shelters provide. Some shelters turn non-English-speaking women away for lack of bilingual personnel and resources.”

Another part of the show that focuses a lot on the bonds the women form with one another is Emma’s niece’s coming-of-age ceremony. Known as the Kinaaldá, the ceremony takes place after a girl’s first period and lasts four days. The niece, Nanobah, stays with the Leaphorns for these four days and people all over the community join in on the celebration. Sally is unfamiliar with this tradition, and they happily teach her to help her connect deeper with her culture. Their kinship and deference to Emma as the head of the household is something that has rarely been depicted in mainstream media, as it is rare for indigenous women to be portrayed with so much autonomy. There is also a very close relationship between Bernadette and Emma, and their bond is very similar to that of a mother and daughter. Bernadette talks to Emma about the feelings she has for Chee, updating her throughout the series and coming to her when upset about it. Their close, familial bond is something that has not really been done before when it comes to indigenous women in television. The relationships that the women have with one another are where the show shines, telling stories that not many people have heard before. Emma’s care for Sally goes far beyond just helping her at the doctor’s. She is quick to welcome her into the Leaphorn’s home and provides her a great deal of comfort in what is a very fearful time for her. The father of her baby is one of the members of the Buffalo Society, James Tso, and she fears that he will hurt her. Emma reassures her that she will be safe in their home and tells her to stay as long as she needs. Joe is unhappy with this situation and tells Emma he would rather Sally go to a women’s shelter, but his wife shuts the idea down and insists she lives with them. It is clear she cares very deeply for Sally and is there for her throughout everything she goes through. She opens up to the young woman about her own pregnancy and the fears she had

and goes into further detail about her sterilization. She promises to make sure that the same does not happen to Sally. The women of the community have been shown time and time again that the world does not care what happens to them, so they resolve to care for one another. bell hooks talks about the idea of sisterhood and looking out for one another as women. She describes female bonding as such: “We did not bond against men, we bonded to protect our interests as women.” The women of *Dark Winds* have a habit of looking out for one another.

During the investigation, the FBI and Tribal Police butt heads on multiple occasions. It is clear that the FBI has little respect for them and what they do. Not only do the initial agents sent to investigate the murders show a resounding lack of interest, but Chee also faces a significant amount of pushback from the people in the Bureau. They are not eager to help him and often doubt his abilities and credentials. When he visits the lab to request they test a sample of water he has, the technician insists he does not look like an FBI agent despite Chee’s polished appearance and manner. After he sees his badge, he remains indifferent and rude about the water sample, mocking the people that live on the reservation and being very flippant about the test. Chee then replies, “Yeah, I would like tap water, but instead we have wells, thanks to scientists like you that need uranium for your labs. Means that we have cancer and kidney disease. I’m not asking you to drink it, I’m asking you to analyze it.” Only then is he taken someone seriously by the lab technician. This attitude reflects a common theme throughout the show, as people outside the tribal police show little interest in getting justice for Anna Atcitty, writing her death off as insignificant. This goes back to what Crenshaw was saying about how women of color experience violence; not only are they more likely to be the victim of it, but they rarely get justice for the crimes committed against them. Crenshaw uses Black women as her main example in the article, but comparisons can be drawn when it comes to the lack of

intersectionality in the situation. As it is revealed at the end of the show, the people responsible for Anna's death are members of the Buffalo Society, including Sally Growing Thunder's mother. These people all face some sort of "justice" due to the efforts of the Tribal Police, not the FBI. In fact, it is revealed that Agent Whitover was behind both the heist and the murders. He used his position of power to twist the Buffalo Society's agenda to fit his own, which led to the deaths of many Navajo individuals, something that the Society should have been against considering their mission.

Dark Winds paints a beautiful picture of female solidarity and belonging, done in a way that does the bonds these women have justice. It grants them autonomy and their own unique stories in ways that have not been done before on television. The show also is a great example of the importance of intersectionality in investigation work, and the way that people of color, specifically women of color, often slip through the cracks and are forgotten despite being the victims of brutal and heinous crimes. bell hooks and Crenshaw both provide examples of how women of color are left out of these conversations and spaces despite how often they are victims of violence and cruelty.