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## **GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI (2022): THE EMPOWERING RESISTANCE**

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### **Abstract**

The paper argues that we can view the filmic representation of Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) as a symbolic 'empowering resistance' to injustice in forced prostitution in Asia. The analysis relies on an empowering feminist point of view throughout an investigation of film elements of narration, language use (as translated into English), and symbolization. The paper demonstrates that the resistance is based on three reasons: (1) Depictions of traumatic realities in prostitution with four factors related to India's prostitution, (2) Representation of the objectification of female bodies observed through Catherine Barry's four stages of dehumanization in prostitution, and (3) Portrayal of Gangubai as a moral character, being a virtuous leader and mother figure, which contradicts her conceived social stigmas as a 'devalued prostitute' and the underworld 'Mafia Queen of Mumbai.' Adding to the study, the symbolic analysis reveals that the representation of the color 'white' signifies the character's morality and purity, highlighting her position as an alleged victim. Furthermore, the color endorses a resisting message against prejudice against women in prostitution. The study sheds light on the social conduct of female prostitution that traumatizes women. Most importantly, it offers an alternative interpretation of the representation of a prostitute character, not as a woman in vulnerability, but as a victorious powerful feminist figure.

**Keywords:** *Gangubai, feminist point of view, representation of women, prostitute, prostitution*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The tremendous success and global admiration of the Indian film Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) have sparked great interest in the researcher to investigate this subject. The film gained international recognition when it was selected to be screened at the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival in February 2022. In April of the same year, the film was released on Netflix, and by May, it had gained immense popularity, accumulating 13.81 million hours of viewing on the platform. Additionally, the film made it to the 'Netflix Top 10' list in 25 countries worldwide, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and Thailand (Keshri, 4 May 2022; Shrivastara, 5 May 2022).

Adding to its global recognition, the researcher has observed the phenomenon of 'Gangubai Fever' in Thailand, the researcher's country of origin. Intrigued by this phenomenon, the researcher decided to closely observe the matter. The film reached the Number One spot on Thailand's Netflix streaming platform and its influence became viral, spreading across social media platforms among Thai individuals. Thai influencers, celebrities, online business traders, YouTubers, and the general public created posts and videos dressed up in Gangubai's costume. People showcased the iconic gesture of leaning against a wall with one leg standing and one hand beckoning, imitating the character's posture to lure clients. Furthermore, Indian food and culture have gained more popularity in Thailand as a result of this film (Dutta, 10 June 2022; Napatanapong & Saowakhon, 21 July 2022).

Towards the episode of nationwide fever, some critics have discussed the relatability of Thai people to the exploitation in the Thai female sex trade, which has been described as "a catalyst in helping Thai women relate to the sex workers industry in India" (Dutta, 10 June 2022). The film arguably enhances Thai people's awareness of the issues surrounding the neglect of the Thai female sex industry and sex trafficking as social problems. The narrative serves as a reminder to viewers about the shared characteristics between India's and Thailand's female prostitution, as both businesses contribute to national economic

profit despite the prevalence of common oppression and distress. The lack of balanced legal adjustments, as well as a welfare and protection system, are pressing issues that require immediate attention. As a consequence of this newfound recognition, Thai people are actively engaging in social movements in online communities (Dutta, 10 June 2022).

Regarding its global fame and popularity, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) contributes to the contemporary cultural and social dialogue surrounding 'female power' (Kasturi, 17 June 2022; Napatanapong & Saowakhon, 21 July 2022). The film portrays the story of Gangubai Kathiawadi, also known by her original name Ganga Harjivandas Kathiawadi, a former female sex worker and legendary activist in India. It resonates with the relatable idea of becoming one's own hero, transforming from an unfortunate and helpless girl to a fearless and courageous female leader. Such a story captivates and inspires women and people worldwide (Dutta, 10 June 2022; Napatanapong & Saowakhon, 21 July 2022).

The filmmaker, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, based the storyline on a chapter titled "Matriarch of Kamathipura" from the book *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* (2014) by S. Hussain Zaidi. The film stars Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt and transports the audience back to the 1960s, into the heart of Mumbai's infamous largest red-light district called 'Kamthipura,' a massive brothel area divided into approximately 14 lanes.

The storyline follows the life of Gangubai Kathiawadi, also known as Ganga (1939-2008), when she was a sixteen-year-old girl. She was born into a highly educated and prestigious family in Gujarat. Ganga develops a love interest in Ramik Lal, a twenty-eight-year-old man, who manipulates her by promising to support her acting career and fulfill her dream of becoming a movie star. However, upon arriving in Bombay (now Mumbai), he sells her to the brothel of Sheila Masi in Kamathipura for Rs 1,000. As a newly introduced prostitute, Gangubai endures a series of traumatic experiences, including abusive behavior from customers, male dominance, severe injuries from customer violence, social discrimination, and rejection from her own family. The film prominently portrays the theme of "a prostitute with a heart of gold," depicting Gangubai as a respected female character with strength and power. She emerges as a legendary leader who staunchly advocates for women's rights and dignity. The study will provide a detailed analysis of the film's representation.

In preparation for the detailed analysis, the researcher explored various relevant topics in the below section, it is to encompass the background of female prostitution in a global context, as well as specifically in India. It also included an overview of feminist perspectives on female prostitution, discussions on women's empowerment, and existing studies that examined the representations of Gangubai.

### **Female prostitution in a global context**

In the global context, female prostitution is widely considered to be one of the oldest professions (Davidson, 1998, p. 16; Monto, 2004, p. 163) that has existed throughout human history. Consequently, women involved in prostitution have often faced social prejudice, leading to social exclusion and discrimination. From a sociological perspective, this prejudice can be examined in three main aspects:

Firstly, sex is traditionally regarded as a private and personal practice between individuals. It is not seen as a commodity to be sold in exchange for money. Consequently, those who engage in selling sex are often perceived as dishonoring themselves and lacking respect.

Secondly, prostitution is associated with polygamy, which goes against certain religious beliefs, particularly in Buddhism and Christianity, where multiple sexual partners are considered unacceptable.

Thirdly, prostitution challenges traditional gender and sexuality norms for women. Women are expected to be modest and reserve sexual activity for their husbands or life partners. Therefore, women involved in prostitution face social condemnation, often under

the negative connotation of the 'Whore Stigma,' and are marginalized in society (Davidson, 1998, pp. 128-129; Pheterson, 1993, pp. 39-46).

It is important to note that perspectives on female prostitution may have changed over time, with some countries and societies increasingly recognizing it as a profession and even legalizing sex work. However, the stigma attached to prostitution remains one of the most distressing experiences for women. Every day, girls and women involved in prostitution worldwide continue to be traumatized by the societal condemnation they face. The analysis will discuss the condemnation of prostitutes, along with their representation.

### **Female sex work in India**

Sex work in India is a multi-million-dollar industry that has long been the subject of controversy and is intertwined with various complex social and cultural factors. According to the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956 (ITPA), sex work itself is legal in India. However, activities such as running brothels, soliciting, pimping, operating prostitution rings, and human trafficking for the purpose of prostitution are illegal. Interestingly, these illegal activities have persisted due to widespread bribery and corruption. Brothels, human trafficking, and sex tourism associated with prostitution can be found throughout the country, especially in major cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, and others (Desai, 2023; Vidushy, 2016). In 2016, UNAIDS estimated that there were over 657,829 prostitutes in India, while other sources suggested the total number to be over 3 million (prostitution.procon.org, 2016). Victims of sex trafficking can be found not only from India but also from other countries across the world, including South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe (Vikram, 20 June 2022).

The film portrays "Kamathipura" in Mumbai, which is one of the most prominent and oldest red-light districts in India. Its history dates back to around 1795. At its peak in 1992, there were over 45,000 sex workers operating within the 39-acre area, spread across 14 lanes and 3,000 buildings. Nevertheless, in recent years, the number of sex workers has decreased due to government efforts to combat prostitution, HIV/AIDS, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Banerjee, 30 April 2017; Singh, 7 April 2023).

With the absence of legal regulation of prostitution, studies have shown that sex workers experience extensive trauma and victimization. Exploitation occurs in various forms, including physical, emotional, and mental abuse. Clients and pimps are often responsible for abusive behavior and violence within the industry (Azhar et al., 25 March 2020; Nongrum, 2 June 2020). In the context of prostitution in India, women face significant risks due to multiple socio-economic factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, consumerism, and the dominance of male power (Vidushy, 2016).

### **Female prostitution**

In the realm of feminist perspectives on prostitution, there are two contemporary camps that hold differing opinions on the matter while acknowledging its exploitative nature towards women and the role of patriarchy in facilitating it.

Liberal feminists, represented by scholars like Priscilla Alexander and Wendy Chapkis, emphasize the legalization of prostitution as a potential solution. They argue that legalizing the trade can help mitigate the structural disadvantages faced by women involved in prostitution. These feminists advocate for using the terms "sex work" and "sex worker" in order to normalize it as a legitimate occupation deserving of welfare and recognition.

On the other hand, radical feminists, including scholars such as Carole Pateman, Catherine MacKinnon, Julia O'Connell Davidson, Katheleen Barry, and Sheila Jeffreys, hold a different perspective. They argue that changes in the law alone are not sufficient to address the deep-rooted issues associated with prostitution. Instead, they advocate for addressing global structural inequality and challenging the male-dominant culture that perpetuates it. The radical feminist camp prefers using the terms "prostitution" and "prostitutes," highlighting the objectification of female bodies inherent in forced prostitution and human

trafficking, and emphasizing the irreversible harm inflicted upon the women involved (Alexander, 1997, p. 84; Davidson, 1998, pp. 154-155).

Considering the context of the sex industry portrayed in the film, which involves forced sexual services and human trafficking, the researcher will adopt the framework of radical feminism and use the terms "prostitution" and "prostitutes." This referencing choice aligns with the portrayal of oppression depicted in the film and the critical analysis that follows.

### **Women's empowerment**

Feminists generally agree that women in prostitution face additional challenges due to the influence of male-dominant culture. They also recognize the importance of women's empowerment in addressing this issue. Women's empowerment is a widely acknowledged concept supported by organizations such as the UN Global Compact and UN Women. These organizations outline seven principles associated with women's empowerment, aiming to enhance the quality of life, expand visions, and increase power for women. Education and literacy rates are considered key factors in empowering women, as they help women recognize their personal strengths and potential. Taking an empowering perspective aligns with the contemporary argument and will be utilized in the research analysis.

### **Existing studies about representations of Gangubai**

The existing research and academic discussions on Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) are limited due to the recent release of the film. However, there are a few notable academic papers that provide insights into the representation of Gangubai and the themes explored in the film.

One such paper is "Suppression and Subjugation yet Daring and Dynamic: Representation of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Gangubai Kathiawadi as a Gendered Subaltern" by Sarkar and Rai (2022). The authors analyze the film from a Marxist perspective influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theories, within the framework of History Studies and Postcolonial Studies. They also incorporate feminist critiques, particularly drawing from Simone De Beauvoir's influential book "The Second Sex" (1949) and Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own." The scholars argue that Gangubai represents the "gendered subaltern" in Indian society, highlighting the realistic injustices of a male-dominant culture that devalues and exploits women. They examine how women are positioned as "Others" and marginalized, while men enjoy social rights and opportunities. The authors also explore Gangubai's resistance to the patriarchal system, emphasizing her roles as a mother, leader, and advocate for sisterhood within the prostitute community.

Another relevant literature is "Women's Empowerment in The Matriarch of Kamathipura," a chapter in Hussain Zaidi's book "Mafia Queens of Mumbai." Sumarsono and Masofa (2022) analyze the portrayal of Gangubai in the book, applying a feminist analytical lens. They argue that Gangubai is presented as a significant female figure in world history, making a political impact on female audiences in India and globally. The authors examine the narrative style, expressions, choice of words, and language used by the authors to convey empowerment. They discuss how Gangubai empowered women in Kamathipura and fought against men's oppression and exploitation, providing examples from the book chapter. The conclusion highlights Gangubai as a heroic figure who achieves her activist goals through determination, wisdom, and solution-oriented approaches.

While these previous studies provide valuable insights into the representation of Gangubai, including her empowerment and activism, there is still room for further investigation. Specifically, there is a need to explore the contrasting or contradictory aspects of Gangubai's portrayal, particularly in relation to her victimization and moral qualifications. Additionally, a feminist framework can be used to delve deeper into the realistic traumas experienced by women in prostitution. Furthermore, the symbolic

elements used in the film could be analyzed to enhance the understanding of Gangubai's representation. This study aims to fill these gaps in the existing literature.

## **METHOD**

The study of the film "Gangubai Kathiawadi" (2022) employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze its representation. The researcher takes a comparative approach, focusing on the discourse details of signs, symbols, and metaphors depicted in the film. The theoretical framework used is a feminist point of view, which informs the analysis and addresses the argument of empowerment in relation to contemporary feminist perspectives, interests, and representations.

The primary data for the study is collected through an investigation of the film "Gangubai Kathiawadi" (2022) itself. Secondary data is gathered from various sources, including related literature such as journal articles, books, and writings, as well as media and online sources such as film reviews and critics. The analysis process involves reviewing the film and related literature, sorting and classifying the depicted features, and applying feminist discourse and interpretation analysis.

To provide a comprehensive discussion, the researcher examines the historical and social background of female prostitution in India, as well as the global context of female prostitution. The cultural perspective of the phenomenon is given close attention, particularly in relation to poverty, limited educational opportunities, and patriarchal structures. The gathered information is then used to analyze the film from a feminist point of view, aiming to fill the research gap in existing studies. Furthermore, the researcher explores the symbolization used in the film to elucidate the empowering argument of the research.

Overall, the study combines quantitative analysis with a feminist lens to provide a detailed examination of the representation of Gangubai Kathiawadi and its connection to empowerment and feminist perspectives.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

From the investigation, the researcher argues that the film is an 'empowering resistance' to the oppression of women in prostitution based on three reasons. First, the film depicts the realistic and inhumane treatment of female prostitution in India, incorporating detailed elements of important socio-factors. Second, the representation reflects the reality of the objectification of female bodies in prostitution, drawing on Kathleen Barry's theory of the 'four stages of dehumanization' (1995). Lastly, the film portrays Gangubai as a morally upright character, challenging the stigmatization of prostitutes as immoral individuals. These three components strongly contribute to the resistance, and now the researcher will further discuss the findings.

### **Discussion**

#### ***The reflection of the four factors***

In the researcher's view, the film serves as a form of resistance against the multi-faceted oppression present in prostitution by depicting the harsh realities of India's sex trade. As previously discussed, prostitution is a complex issue intertwined with socio-economic factors such as poverty, limited access to education, consumerist values, and patriarchal culture (Vidushy, 2016). These factors can be further understood as follows:

Firstly, the impoverished economic background is a significant factor that forces young girls and women into the sex trade as a means of survival for themselves or their families.

Secondly, the lack of adequate educational opportunities often leaves female individuals struggling to earn a satisfactory and stable income. Consequently, they become

more vulnerable to exploitation and lack the knowledge or network to escape their disadvantaged circumstances.

Thirdly, the obligation to cater to the consumerist and materialistic desires of their families further increases the risk of victimization.

Lastly, the deeply ingrained patriarchy in Indian society reinforces the demand for commercialized sex from women. Within the confines of the patriarchal culture, women are perceived as inferior to men, limiting their choices and subjecting them to male control and pressure. This power imbalance makes them susceptible to manipulation and abuse, reducing them to mere objects for male sexual pleasure in India's sex industry.

The film effectively exemplifies these elements through the portrayal of its prostitute characters. One striking example is Madhu, a fifteen-year-old girl who is sold into the brothel by her aunt. The narrative highlights the dehumanization driven by poverty, lack of education, and financial desperation. Gangubai's story also sheds light on the financial greed of her lover Ramnik and his perception of male superiority. Lacking empathy, he disregards her feelings and rights, treating her as a mere commodity to be sold. The film further depicts the reality of bribery and corruption, which exacerbates the issues surrounding prostitution in India (Desai, 2023; Vidushy, 2016). This reality is demonstrated through dialogues depicting police officers demanding bribes and a scene of a police raid. The brothel loses a significant portion of its profits, 40 percent, to these bribes. Through such depictions, viewers gain insight into the complex realities of female prostitution, and the film's representation serves as a resistance against the unjust system.

### ***The objectification of female bodies***

The researcher contends that resistance is emphasized through the representation of female prostitutes being objectified as bodies for sale. This section will present feminist arguments against prostitution, highlighting its dehumanizing nature and its detrimental impact on women's dignity (Barry 1995; Davidson 1998; Pateman 2016). Prostitution is argued to be a coerced and unnatural condition of unwanted sex, which subjugates and reduces women to mere sex objects. Consequently, prostitution perpetuates a world where individuals are confined and constrained. Women are expected to conform to men's sexual fantasies, adhering to specific roles and behaviors. They are compelled to relinquish their personal rights and freedom, sacrificing their true selves. Feminists interpret such actions as a surrender of personal power.

Moreover, in cases of forced prostitution, women lack control over the circumstances and struggle to fully comprehend their situation. They find themselves under the dominance of external parties, including buyers, pimps, and/or madams. As time passes, women experience a decline in their sense of identity, self-worth, and security. To emphasize the gravity of this degrading condition, MacKinnon (1993) argues that prostitution constitutes sexual violence, equating it to "repeated rape" (p. 13-15). Such experiences leave women with enduring physical and emotional traumas.

Specifically, the renowned feminist Catherine Barry (1995) introduces the debate by describing the 'four stages of dehumanization in prostitution' (pp. 28-36, 207-208). These stages represent the techniques commonly employed by prostitutes to endure forced sex. They are as follows: (1) distancing, (2) disengagement, (3) dissociation, and (4) disembodiment. These practices reflect the ways in which women adapt and cope with their circumstances, but they ultimately result in a profound disconnection from their true selves. Barry's framework will now be applied to argue that Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) resists these destructive stages.

According to Barry (1995), 'distancing' is the initial phase in prostitution where individuals undergo a transformation of their personalities and appearances to meet the expectations of the market. Prostitution inherently prioritizes men's sexual desires over women's needs and individuality. Women find themselves in a position where they feel

compelled to shed their former traits and behaviors and adopt a new prostitute identity. This technique serves as a defense mechanism to shield their personal feelings from harm and alleviate negative emotions such as embarrassment, discomfort, and inferiority. Such a transformation highlights the dehumanizing nature of prostitution, which disrespects and diminishes women as human beings. The researcher suggests that the lead character, Gangubai, exemplifies this destructive change.

After Gangubai accidentally enters the world of prostitution, the film portrays her process of transformation, which involves changes in appearance, name, and a symbolic gesture of burning banknotes. When she is coerced into selling her body, on the seventh day, the character relinquishes her resistance. Tragically, the voiceover narrates, "I was branded as one of the whores of Kamathipura. How could I go back home?" From that point on, the film illustrates Gangubai's adaptation to the life of a prostitute, marking the beginning of the 'distancing' stage. Her transformation is depicted as she applies makeup to her emotionless face, an action symbolizing her attempt to conceal and detach herself from agonizing personal feelings. Subsequently, Gangubai allows another prostitute to adjust her posture, making her appear more sexually inviting in front of the brothel. Through these scenes, viewers can comprehend the immense pressure within the sex trade that transforms an innocent girl into a commodified object in the sex market.

Later in the film, Sheila, the madam of the brothel, hands Gangubai a banknote given by her first client, symbolizing her initiation into the new identity. To fully embrace this new persona, Gangubai deliberately requests to be called by her new name, 'Gangu,' instead of her original name, 'Ganga.' In a poignant moment, with tears of pain in her eyes, Gangu sets fire to the banknote, declaring, "I'm cremating the old Gangu." This particular scene signifies the culmination of the 'distancing' technique, as Gangubai fully embraces her role as a sexualized object. It emphasizes that the prostitute's identity is not chosen but forced upon them. In the business, the women have to undergo the agonizing experience of erasing their individuality.

The depiction illustrates another stage of dehumanization according to Barry's framework, namely 'disengagement.' This technique involves the use of drugs and self-destructive habits to detach oneself from the emotional pain. In the portrayal, Gangubai develops addictions to Bidi cigarettes and sugarcane alcohol. These addictions are connected to her traumatic experiences throughout years in prostitution, where she has had to trade her body and endure difficult clients and violence. Even as a madam of the brothel, Gangubai is frequently shown indulging in these habits. The film presents several scenes highlighting how excessive drinking helps her cope with daily tasks. However, her prostitute friends often express concern and warn her about the consequences. Through the film, viewers can understand that substance abuse becomes an escape from chronic stress and a means of avoiding personal emotions. It underscores the cruelty of the business and the ways in which it complicates women's lives.

Furthermore, the film serves as a representation of the third dehumanizing step, 'dissociation,' which refers to how men perceive women as mere sex objects, disregarding their dignity. This dissociation is depicted through the portrayal of the Whore Stigma and the symbolism of the color white.

As discussed earlier regarding female prostitution in a global context, discrimination is a prevalent experience for women in the industry (Davidson, 1998; Pheterson, 1993). Despite attempts to frame sex work as a legitimate career choice, some people still view prostitution as morally wrong. The investigation highlights that the film specifically focuses on the Whore Stigma within the social context. This is evident in the representations of (1) social exclusion, (2) the shame experienced by families, (3) the limited opportunities and education for prostitutes' children, and (4) the restricted access to healthcare.

The film effectively portrays prostitution as a demeaning practice, featuring three significant aspects that contribute to the discrimination faced by prostitute characters. The

first evidence of this discrimination can be observed during Gangubai's speech at Azad Maidan.

In her speech, Gangubai puts the question of why 'prostitution' as the oldest profession, is not equally respected as other occupations and receives such prejudiced perception. At the heart of her speech, Gangubai highlights the conventional norm of prostitution as inherently "immoral" which is associated with numerous disadvantages. Gangubai resists such a double standard by leaving a thought to her audience ...

"You lose your dignity once, it's gone forever. We sell our dignity every night, yet it doesn't seem to run out ... No matter what you think, we're women in integrity ... No matter who turns up at our doorstep, you don't judge them. It's our principle. We don't ask your religion or caste. Dark-skinned, light-skinned, rich or poor, everyone pays the same rate. When we don't discriminate among people ... Why do you discriminate against us? Why are we excluded from your society?" (Bhansali, 2022, 2:09:10)

The speech effectively highlights the social condemnation that women in prostitution often face. It simultaneously empowers and resists the underlying exploitation by advocating for equal rights and fair treatment that these women deserve.

Moving on, the film intensifies its message during Gangubai's meeting with the Prime Minister of India. In this scene, the character engages in a conversation with the country's leader...

"Legalize prostitution! ... But as long as society exists, so will prostitution. As we speak, some girl is being sold off or someone is buying her. The seller and buyer should be punished, but who gets the punishment? That innocent girl." (Bhansali, 2022, 2:20:28)

Intriguingly, the scene employs a symbolic object, the "black rose," to represent the Whore Stigma faced by women in prostitution. During the interaction, Gangubai successfully persuades Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to consider legalizing prostitution and protecting the rights of these women. In response, he presents her with a "red rose," prompting Gangubai to challenge him with a metaphorical question: "Have you ever seen black roses, Mr. Prime Minister?" Surprised, he asks, "Black roses? Do they even exist?" Gangubai then responds, "They do. Visit our neighborhood sometime. You'll find a garden filled with them."

To the researcher, the metaphorical "black roses" symbolize the discrimination faced by women in the sex trade, portraying them as impure, dishonorable, and immoral. Symbolically, the color "black" stands in contrast to "white," which represents purity, prestige, and morality. The word "black" conveys a sense of inferiority. Moreover, Gangubai's question serves as a gentle irony, drawing attention to the dignity and rights of these women.

In fact, the expression of 'white' was used earlier in the dialogue, and it is a part of the resistance against bias towards women. When Afsaan offers his white tailored saris for Gangubai to buy, she intentionally asks him to differentiate the shades of white. In her defense, she argues...

"Which white should I choose? As white as the moon? Or as white as the clouds? As white as paper? Or as white as a white rose? As white as snow, or as white as salt? As white as milk? Or as white as seashells? As white as the streams, or as white as sand? Or as white as smoke?" (Bhansali, 2022, 53:40)



Instantly, Afsaan grasps her exquisite defensive meaning, and he responds, "As white as a swan." In this context, his answer is a clear statement countering her perceived unfavorable identity. It humanizes and supports Gangubai's virtuousness and integrity. The conversation concludes with Gangubai tearing up, appreciating his empathy. To a greater extent, the film continues by featuring a song that says, "I shine as bright as the moon." Symbolically, the words "bright" and "moon" emphasize Gangubai's inherent worthiness in contrast to social prejudice. In conclusion, the film communicates a message of resistance against social exclusion faced by victims of prostitution, utilizing the contrasting pair of colors, "black" and "white."

The third portrayal that exemplifies discrimination against prostitution is the community's petition to remove Kamathipura, the brothel area, from the neighborhood due to its perceived negative influence on the nearby school. In response to this exclusionary mindset and to continue their resistance, the film depicts Gangubai and Karim Lala reacting with anger to the representative of the school board. In a later scene, Karim Lala forcefully tears off the man's shirt, stating, "And tearing down their homes isn't an insult to them?" This action clearly embarrasses the man, serving as a fitting response to his unjust attempt to terminate the homes of 4,000 women based on unfair prejudice.

Next, the representation portrays the shame that the families of these women experience, which distinctively highlights the prevalent practice of Whore Stigma. Through the film, viewers gain insight into the discriminatory culture surrounding prostitutes in India, where women are often seen as "outsiders" and "Others." Gangubai, having a deep understanding of this norm, considers herself a disgrace to her family once she becomes trapped in prostitution. Determined to detach herself from her family, she writes a letter to her father, seeking his forgiveness and expressing her love and growing guilt. However, this sense of shame is deeply ingrained, and it takes 12 years for Gangubai to reconcile with her family. When she finally makes a phone call home, the response she receives is filled with her mother's hatred and resentment. Faced with this bitter rejection and burdened by the shame associated with her family, Gangubai decides not to leave Kamathipura for 15 years, further isolating herself from the outside world.

In addition to portraying the resistance against female prostitution, the film also highlights the harsh consequences of discrimination, which significantly impact the lives of women and their children. It depicts how social exclusion limits the opportunities for children, particularly in terms of education. In the film, it becomes evident that if the children are female, there is a high likelihood that they will follow their mothers' path into prostitution, face difficulties being accepted outside the brothel, and even encounter obstacles in accessing education. This hardship is exemplified through the character of 15-year-old Rohini, who was born to a prostitute mother. Her mother contemplates confining her in a bird cage and feeding her opium, driven by the fear that Rohini will eventually face the same life as her mother if clients develop an interest in her. Moreover, due to the discrimination they face, some prostitutes make the difficult decision not to keep their children and resort to abortion as a common practice. The depiction also sheds light on the injustice prevailing in the education system. Prostitute daughters are rejected and denied the right to receive an education simply because they are associated with the brothel.

Lastly, the film effectively emphasizes the resistance against injustice by depicting the reality of inadequate access to healthcare faced by prostitutes. A recent report in 2022 confirms that in India, more than 66% of female prostitutes are treated as inferior outcasts during hospital visits, leading to common rejections of treatments and check-ups (Deeksha, 21 Dec 2022). The representation brings attention to this discrimination through a hospital scene where Gangubai seeks medical care. The nurses purposely move her bed into a storage room and leave her alone in the dark throughout the night. In this distressing situation, Gangubai, a severely injured patient, is denied equal services and respect.

The portrayal supports the argument that it conveys a resistance message against female prostitution by presenting evidence in line with Barry's concept of 'dissociation'

(1995). This is evident through the detailed portrayal of social exclusion, family rejection, limited life and educational opportunities for prostitutes' children, and the women's restricted access to healthcare.

To conclude this argument, it is important to note Barry's final stage of dehumanization, known as 'disembodiment,' which signifies the highest level of exploitation. This stage involves women being forced to assume a new identity that disconnects them from their personal characteristics. The film showcases the extreme hardships faced by these women in a scene where Gangubai meets with the Prime Minister. The dialogue by Gangubai is as follows...

"No one can understand what we go through. Not even God himself. All our rights have been taken away from us. Be it a school or a hospital, bank or queue at a grocery store .... A mother's love, a father's protection, we are deprived of it all. Now even our home is being taken away from us. They want us to vacate Kamathipura/ They have even dragged us to court!" (Bhansali, 2022, 2:21:00)

The dialogue provides a deeper understanding of the concept of Barry's 'disembodiment,' which signifies that women in prostitution are placed at a significant disadvantage in all aspects of life.

### ***The portrayal of Gangubai as a 'moral character'***

The representation of Gangubai as a 'virtuous leader' is a significant aspect of resistance against the exploitation of women in prostitution. This argument aligns with the detailed descriptions provided by Sarkar & Rai (2022). The researcher suggests that the film deliberately employs a sympathetic tone of narration to create a stark contrast with the immoral outcast identity, thereby strengthening the resistance. Additionally, the researcher argues that Gangubai's virtue is characterized by three main features: (1) Living life with a purpose, (2) Sacrifice, and (3) Portrayal of empathy and friendship.

Firstly, in contrast to the prevailing social stigmas that label her as a 'devalued prostitute' and an underworld 'Mafia Queen of Mumbai,' the film presents an empowering theme by depicting Gangubai as a woman with strong leadership qualities who prioritizes the well-being of her people. Recognized as the captivating star of the brothel, she rises to become the madam of the establishment at the young age of 27, assuming the name 'Gangubai' (replacing Sheila). Eventually, Gangubai becomes the President of Kamathipura, a renowned community of over 4,000 prostitutes. In both positions, the film highlights her unwavering commitment to humanizing their lives and bringing about positive changes. Unlike her predecessor, Gangubai refrains from coercing girls and women into prostitution and instead seeks their consent. Moreover, she fosters solid friendships and sisterhood among the women while also providing greater opportunities for their children's education and overall quality of life.

In recognition of women's rights and dignity, Gangubai utilizes her position to advocate for them. The film highlights two significant moments of her advocacy. Firstly, during her speech at Azad Maidan, despite being perceived as an outsider in such elite discussions, Gangubai fearlessly expresses her thoughts and stands firm in her beliefs. Her demand for "social inclusion" for women resonates with the crowd and earns their admiration. Secondly, in Gangubai's one-on-one meeting with the former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Mafia Queen of the underworld engages in a humble yet courageous negotiation for the legalization of sex work, emphasizing the need for women's protection.

As seen, the film emphasizes the concept of a "leader with virtue" through the portrayal of Gangubai's role as a mother figure to the unfortunate girls and women. Driven by selfless motherly love, Gangubai achieves all her accomplishments not out of personal fulfillment but out of a deep desire to care for others. Throughout the film, she embodies the

qualities of a warm, understanding, and empathetic mother figure. This nurturing motherly character is evident in various scenes. For instance, she genuinely allows new girls to make their own decisions about entering prostitution. Her nurturing nature is also showcased when she refuses to exploit some new girls and instead sends them back home due to her growing empathy. Furthermore, despite the potential for greater financial gain, she chooses to settle for less in business deals.

The filmic representation highlights the mother's role in a school scene where Gangubai demands that her name be registered as the mother of the prostitute daughters. Despite the absence of a biological mother-daughter relationship, Gangubai recognizes these girls as her own and takes responsibility for their school fees. Another significant example is Roshini, a daughter of a prostitute whom Gangubai acts as a mother figure. Gangubai liberates Roshini from a life of prostitution and ensures her well-being. She even arranges a marriage for Roshini and takes care of all the expenses involved. Moreover, when Gangubai's prostitute friend, Kusum, is on her deathbed, Gangubai adopts Kusum's daughter as her own and vows to raise her with love and care.

The researcher suggests that 'sacrifice' is a key element in the portrayal of Gangubai as a moral leader, and the film consistently depicts this quality to highlight the resistance it offers. Gangubai sacrifices her personal happiness in order to fulfill her role as a good leader. One example of this is seen in her romantic relationship with Afssan. Despite her deep love for him, she abruptly ends their relationship and arranges a marriage proposal for him with Roshini. The film focuses on Gangubai's lingering emotional distress and the subsequent increase in substance abuse, underscoring her moral character and the film's rejection of the exploitative prostitution system.

Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) further strengthens the portrayal of Gangubai as a moral character by highlighting her traumatized feelings towards her roles as a leader and mother, which reinforces the empowering resistance. In order to counteract discrimination, Gangubai leads a life driven by a strong passion for her responsibilities and personal emotions. Despite facing numerous difficulties, she remains resilient due to her unwavering compassion for her people. She dedicates her entire life, including her love life, to her leadership, and therefore chooses to remain single. Even when Gangubai falls in love with Afssan, she sacrifices her own happiness by letting him go and arranging his marriage with a girl from her brothel. The film demonstrates that another priority for her is securing a brighter future for the girl born in the brothel, who becomes the bride of her beloved. This portrayal reveals that Gangubai is not a heartless or immoral prostitute, but a character filled with emotions, often depicted through lingering guilt towards her family and resulting self-sabotaging habits. The representation of her humanizing emotions serves as a powerful message of resistance against the dehumanization of prostitution.

Another piece of evidence that supports Gangubai's moral character is her reluctance to exploit her illegal connections to the underworld, despite the potential opportunities. Soon after becoming the Madam of the brothel, Gangubai learns to bribe the police and establishes a close relationship with the underworld figure Karim Lala, who initially saves her from a violent customer. As their relationship deepens into a brother-sister bond, Karim Lala supports Gangubai in her role as a leader, assisting her in business profits and helping her secure the presidency of Kamathipura through the election. However, the film emphasizes that these connections are solely intended to sustain the business for the betterment of the women. Gangubai, despite being aware of the influence and potential advantages of the underworld, recognizes her limitations and refrains from exploiting it further.

## **CONCLUSION**

The researcher has analyzed the film "Gangubai Kathiawadi" (2022) with elements of narration, language use, and symbol use. As a result, the researcher argues that the film is a symbolic 'empowering resistance' against injustice in India's forced prostitution. The

meaning of empowering resistance is built on the perspective of feminist empowerment for women and the socio-understanding that female prostitution is an endless oppressive system. By employing this approach, we can see that the film resists against the unfair treatment of prostitution and empowers women and viewers to a sense of inclusion and equality. The researcher has supported the argument with three notions as follows.

Firstly, the representation illustrates socio-realities of financial constraint, insufficient educational opportunities, consumerism, and patriarchy prevalent in India's prostitution system. Viewers can understand how these factors are systematically intertwined and complicate the lives of girls and women. Secondly, the empowering resistance employs a radical feminist point of view which supports female individuals by protesting the commodification of female bodies in the sex trade. To demonstrate this point, the researcher utilizes Catherine Barry's (a radical feminist) four stages of dehumanization in prostitution in the analysis. By applying the framework, the researcher discovers that the film features all four stages in the depiction. Viewers can receive a comprehensive idea upon objectification process of female bodies in India's prostitution. In the trapped victimhood, individuals are gradually reduced as commodities; into the most damaging stages when women's humanity, dignity, rights, and power become absent. Additionally, the researcher puts forward that the film describes the victimhood with the symbolism of white color. The white color is a symbol that signifies prostituted women as innocent victims despite social condemnation and exclusion.

Subsequently, the researcher suggests that the combined portrayal of four socio-factors, powerlessness according to the four dehumanizing steps, and color symbolization can be read as an 'empowering resistance' to forced prostitution in India. The combination is a statement of resisting voice against prostitution. To the extent, the portrayal is empowering for calling upon public awareness on the issue of prostitution and its exploitation.

Thirdly, this empowering resistance is intensified by the portrayal of Gangubai as a moral character. The film depicts Gangubai as a 'virtuous leader' who is embodied with 'motherly qualities.' The characterization is composed of the depiction of her (1) Pursuing a purposeful life, (2) Devoting life to others, and (3) Having compassion and friendship. This humanizing and empathizing representation constructs an image of Gangubai as a 'prostitute with a heart of gold' in a victim to victory formula. The prompted image is the opposite of immoral bias shaped by social stigma against females in prostitution. The researcher argues that the 'contradiction' resists against discrimination over the profession that associates women to experience marginalization. Along the line, the representation of Gangubai being a character embedded with vulnerable emotions, centralized by her traumatic feelings is, in turn, considered empowering and demonstrates a sense of social inclusion. The image of Gangubai as a traumatized victim, rather than an immoral Mafia Queen, enhances an empathetic view and balances understanding toward women in prostitution. Through this recognition, the film brings more public awareness toward the existing (but overlooked) unfairness in the industry.

In short, the film's value is not limited to its entertaining purpose or function of reflecting realities, but its existence as a communicating media. A closer examination of the film leads us to a greater understanding of our societies. It reveals that the film contains a meaning of resistance to social injustice. Further, it celebrates and reinforces the contemporary 'female power' and 'feminist voice' which bring a sense of empowerment to its audience. Moreover, it contributes to respect for human equality and rights in our modern transitional world.

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