

Suppression and Subjugation yet Daring and Dynamic: Representation of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Gangubai Kathiawadi as a Gendered Subaltern

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Abstract:

Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'A Room of One's Own' wrote, "A woman must have a room and money of her own if she is to write a fiction." (Woolf 1) Although Woolf wrote the essay for the 19th-century women of the United Kingdom or European countries, who were subjugated and denied a creative space of their choice, Woolf's statement can be very well compared and applied to the character Gangubai from Bhansali's latest film Gangubai Kathiawadi, a prostitute from Mumbai's Kamathipura region. The film dates to the time of the 1960s. Gangubai is portrayed as a victim who is being exploited physically, mentally, and financially, but despite all these mental and physical tortures, she fights back and starts owning and reigning in her kotha(brothel) and creates her own identity being a social activist and fighting for legal rights of the sex workers in her locality. Keeping in mind Gangubai's journey from a well renowned sophisticated home being a barrister's daughter to a daring and dynamic politician amid a filthy and bleak setup of a so-called disdainful brothel, this paper is an earnest attempt to figure out the oppression and helplessness perceived in Gangubai's life and how she successfully resisted the domination bravely and won against the patriarchal challenges accessing customary

living rights and justice to sex workers and their children.

Keywords: gender, brothel, subaltern, sex-workers

Introduction:

Sanjay Leela Bhansali is a renowned Indian filmmaker, screenwriter and film director who was conferred with the prestigious Padmashri award by the Government of India in 2015. He has marked various records in the history of filmmaking by creating remarkable and critically acclaimed films like Padmavaat, Black, Devadas, and so on. His recent film Gangubai Kathiawadi, which according to Wikipedia, opened after massive delays due to Covid 19, has stirred a significant impact in the heart of the audience both emotionally and sagaciously with the heart-touching story of Gangubai. The film unfolds the story of Ganga from Kathiawad, who was trapped in a fake engagement of love and sold in a brothel in Mumbai for thousand rupees. Just at the tender age of 16 years, Ganga, who aspired to be a Bollywood actress, was pushed inside the four walls of a dingy and grubby brothel at

a dilapidated and ignored lane in the shunned corner of the City of Dreams known as Badnam Gali or Kamathipura. Ganga's journey with her boyfriend Ramnik was a ritual in her life which completely transformed her from an elite class life of being a barrister's daughter in Kathiawad to a silent, suppressed, and forced sex worker in Kamathipura. However, the director could not place Gangu under the vindictive hands of patriarchy and matriarchy for a longer extent. Instead Gangu came out as a lady of honor and valour, breaking out of the brutal path of the male-dominated society and chasing out the disgraceful male gaze. Just as Virginia Woolf, through her essay 'A Room of One's Own' encourages women of her time to write their narrative and fight for their creative rights, in the same way, Gangubai's story and her contribution toward the society being a social and child activist were penned down and proliferated to the world through the creative mind of the journalist Mr. Faizi.

Literature Review: The film Gangubai Kathiawadi is the latest film released in 2022; till date, very little research, and reviews have been done on the film from the subaltern angle. Thus, this paper is written with an attempt to unravel a gendered subaltern perspective of Gangubai's character as portrayed and comprehended through Bhansali's lens.

The Story of Gangubai: Basically, the film is an adaptation of the real-life story of 1960s social activist Gangubai Kothewali. According to a biography written by Starsunfolded, an online website,

Gangubai believed that if she had offered her body for other people's pleasure, it did not give anyone the right to abuse her or downgrade her dignity. As the biography further revealed, Gangubai had strong connections with the underworld, and she did even seek help from a powerful don named Karim Lala. She was even involved in peddling drugs, but her motto was to add a better business to her brothel. She was pretty rich and she held a powerful position. Although Gangubai was compelled to opt for the prostitution trade she later tried to give this trade a respectful position. She never allowed any woman to enter the profession without her choice and even rescued many children and girls from this illegal trade. She had once met the former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to demand rights and justice for the sex workers in India. According to Wikipedia, Mafia Queens of Mumbai is a book written by Hussain Zaidi which consists of the inspiring life story of thirteen women who influenced Mumbai, among which Gangubai is also recognized as a brave lady don who has aware people about the importance of brothel and initiated to open brothels in other cities of the country.

Discussing the theory of Subaltern, Gender, and Literature: Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern'. Gramsci's main aim was to categorize subalternity by identifying and analyzing subordinated groups whose political activity was ignored, misinterpreted, or left in the margins of the dominant history. Though Gramsci's writings have generated new ideas on

nationalist history and post-coloniality, various scholars have interpreted the meaning of 'subaltern' in the Prison Notebooks solely in class, asserting the word is code for the proletariat, born out of prison censorship. (Green 116) The term subaltern roughly meant inferior status or rank. 'Subaltern Studies' was part of the critical movement under Postcolonial Studies which was first used by Ranajit Guha. Scholars of subaltern studies tried to break away from the histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias of the current imperial history. The main aim of the South Asian Group of scholars in 1980s was to study "history from below." Ranajit Guha protests that the historiography of Indian Nationalists is best with the prejudiced elitism of two kinds-the colonial or the imperialist approach. (Jain 373-374) According to an article by Subaltern Studies by Scholar blogs, Dipesh Chakraborty, another scholar from the South Asian Group, states that "the declared aim of subaltern studies was to produce historical analysis in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history."

Simone De Beauvoir, in her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Butler 35) Her argument rests on the fact that one's biological sex cannot determine her social activities. Beauvoir further argues that while the sexual difference between men and women is real and unalterable, it cannot be the grounds for injustice and inequality. She proposed that women must take charge of their own choice and be Subjects in their own right. She tried to

demystify or demolish the concept of patriarchy which treats man as the Subject and woman as the 'Other.' Sarojini Sahoo, an Indian Feminist, comments that although women have the same status as men as human beings, they have their own identity, and they are different from men. They are "Others" in a real sense, but it is not always due to man's active and subjective demands. (Gahatraj 2) Renowned Subaltern and Feminist critic and translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak assert that subaltern is always 'represented' by and in the elite dominant discourses; the actual story of the subaltern is never heard. (Chakraborty 5) In her essay, 'Can the subaltern speak?', Spivak points out how 'sati' or widow self-immolation is a rule framed by the dominant elite class society, and the voice of women demanding their rights is wholly silenced:

Between patriarchy and imperialism...the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak 102) Gender is a very recent concept that deals with man and woman, and in gender studies, patriarchy affects those who intrude under this umbrella. Patriarchy has given men the access to dominate women. Related to this concept, the term 'hegemonic masculinity' has been popularized by RW Conwell to show the proposed practices that promoted the dominant social position of men and the subordinate or subdued position of women. (Sarkar et al. 55) Saurabh Kumar writes in

his paper 'Demystifying Womanhood in her stories: 20th century Bengali woman writers' that even in the ancient Indian epics like Mahabharat and Ramayanawoman have been kept in a status where they are subordinated, marginalized, and commodified. Women are a source of enjoyment in the scriptures and are subjected to inhuman injunctions. (Kumar 194) Gender representations in literature never had the privilege of being accurate and valuable. The feminist voice is either diluted, distorted, or silenced. Most of the women writers were considered less educated. Thus, their writings were limited within the demarcation of the domestic world and were held less critical in the worldly affairs. Thus, it was considered easy to either ignore or submerge their role in the historical contribution of the nationalist struggle. (Ravi 84)

However, Bhansali's heroine Gangubai (originally the role played by renowned Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt) is rather a bold and daring lady just like the legendary figure Rani Lakshmi Bai, who is not ready to sob alone in silence. However, instead she faces every sorrow brilliantly with a smile in face and triumphantly wins against all odds in the patriarchal paradigm. The film opens with a sad and pathetic image of a fourteen-year-old girl Madhu, to whom strenuously lipstick was applied, and a nose-ring was pierced. However, Madhu was constantly retaliating and crying as she wanted to go home. When the situation was no longer controllable by the brothel in charge, Rashmibai, Gangubai was invited to save the situation and control and persuade

Madhu to accept her future as a prostitute, but Madhu hearing the whole story of Gangubai in flashback, chose to consume a poison toffee from Gangubai's hand and instead wanted to commit suicide rather stay in the brothel as a sex worker. Getting a sense of the entire scenario, Gangu became entirely emotional and relieved Madhu from the brothel like a mother and made her safely reach home. Gangu's motherly treatment of Madhu clearly reflects a soft side of Gangu's personality. Even though she was as hard as a stone while playing politics or managing her kotha, inside her heart and soul, she always wanted girls to choose prostitution as a profession while they were only willing to do so. According to a review of Gangubai Kathiawadi written in 'The Times of India', women invitingly standing at the doorstep of a kotha (brothel) in the infamous bustling lane of South Mumbai's Kamathipura region are very real, tragic, and dramatic.

The line carries us to the sad and disconsolate story of Ganga, who belonged to a wealthy and aristocratic family in Gujarat and unfortunately fell in love with a man named Ramnik Lal, who promised her to fulfill her dream of becoming a Bollywood actress and thus Ganga was trapped. At the age of sixteen years, Ganga, without informing her parents, ran away with Ramnik on a train from Kathiawad to Mumbai. Ramnik smartly handled Ganga in the entire scene, telling her that he was taking Ganga to his Sheela masi's (aunt) home, but that was a gritty corner and one of the ignored red-light areas of Mumbai. Thus, Ganga was forcibly closed inside a

room and dressed like a prostitute by Sheela masi. Initially, Ganga was utterly shocked and silent, she perhaps did not know exactly to behave, but with the passage of time and the meeting of one after the other clients, day by day, she became strong and fierce and transformed herself from Ganga to Gangu. She started receiving gifts and gold from her clients. Also, there was a shift of position. The brothel, which was run by the rough and ruthless ideas of the matriarchal figure and money-thirsty person Sheela masi was threatened by Gangu's words and actions. Gangu very soon became a leader of the girls and started empathizing with each other's problems.

In this case, Ramnik's character is a huge mystery to the viewers. Is he a villain who has exploited the life of Ganga by acting as a pimp? Or is he a victim of the jobless patriarchal world, where to acquire money, he had no other easy option but to sell a girl in a brothel? Kamala Visweswaran, in her work 'Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Historiography', extends the definition of a subaltern, where she says that anybody (whether it is a man or a woman) who fails to get justice in a patriarchal structure can be called a subaltern. (Sarkar 2022 et al., 67) So, probably Ramnik can be a helpless subaltern man or a cruel patriarch, as revealed through the film. However, Gangu's bonding with the other brothel girls gelled up very powerful. Gangu always protected her colleagues in the brothel from getting tortured or unnecessarily harassed by the brothel in charge or the pimps, or the clients. Moreover, this bonding is very akin

to the famous feminist slogan of the Second Wave of Feminism, "Sisterhood is Powerful." (Ahmed 200) Gangu's formation of sisterhood with the other energetic girls of the brothel ultimately paved the way for the deconstruction of the patriarchal narrative in social constructionism. Gangu's sisters encouraged her to be a mentor of the Nation and be a strong politician.

There is also a scene in the film where it is seen when Gangu was winning the heart of the clients, and due to that, her in charge, Sheela masi was getting jealous over the fact and also landing into a fear of she is losing her power and control in the brothel. When a gangster Shukat Abbas Khan, one night visits the brothel and asks for Gangu, Sheela masi could very well figure out that the man is a scoundrel and could be dangerous for Gangu, but instead of saving Gangu, she makes him carry on the violence, and as a result, Gangu was miserably attacked physically and exploited financially by the man. However, Gangu was too dauntless and courageous in her approach when Sheela Masi cheated her. She herself became her defence. Disguising herself as a Muslim woman, she immediately met the don of the underworld of 1960s Rahim Lala. Hearing Gangu's pitiful narrative of violence and torture and getting impressed by her valiant attitude, Rahim Lala treated Gangu as his sister and that began a new bonding between Rahim Lala and Gangubai. Gangu was given much financial support from the side of Rahim Lala. She even became the don Rahim Lala's business partner and started the trade of alcohol in her Kotha and that added extra

money for the sex workers. Dr. S. Prasanna Sree, in the Foreword of his book, mentions how Shashi Deshpande deals with the excess committed upon the female fold for centuries leading to their deep but quiet suffering and passive resignation. However, she shows how women revolt against it and try to search for their own identity in the hostile world of male chauvinism. However, she has also considered a home-a home of peace and love that can provide security to the women.

Another essential side of the film was Gangu's candidature in the presidential elections against Razia, who was transgender or a eunuch. Although Gangubai won the elections as the President of Kamathipura against Razia by using brilliant political tricks and convincing people to vote for her, Razia left the viewers in the quiet and thought-provoking corner of our Indian society where even though a third gender was allowed to stand in the elections, but a transgender person is still not considered capable of being a leader or are still denied a respectable position in the society. Sonia Jayant, in her paper 'Eunuchs establish identity through Indian narratives', writes:

Eunuchs are a unique social group who face multiple obstacles in societies across the globe primarily due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Transgender has been pushed to the margin over the years. It's a rather grey area of the society as this group is misinterpreted, and oftentimes, others fail to understand the subculture that exists within their

communities and the problems that they face. (Jayant 22)

There is special mention of the pitiable side in a mother's life, a prostitute by profession. It is seen Gangu's colleague Kusum hiding her daughter Roshni inside a cage in the broken corner of the terrace so that the lusty clients cannot see her daughter. Because if incase, Roshni is caught in the eyes of the clients, Kusum will be rejected, and Roshni will be used for the business. However, a prostitute mother always wants her daughter to live a respectful and dignified life, which our society fails to offer to a sex worker. Later, when Gangu arranges Roshni's marriage with her love Afsaan Razzaq, initially, Afsaan's mother is not ready to accept the marriage as she is a prostitute's daughter. However, after that when Gangu offers precious gifts and gold necklaces to the family, the marriage proposal was immediately accepted. Also, we see the character of Kamli, Gangu's friend who, after giving birth to her child Pammi dies due to medical complications. The sex workers are devoid of proper treatment in the hospitals, and they are also discriminated against in the hospitals as portrayed in the film. The sex workers mostly stay single in their life, and in order to survive, sometimes they plan not to abort their children but to be a mother. They always go through a transitional phase, and face uncertainty about their future, and certain instances are experienced in the film through the character of Kamli, Kusum, and Gangubai herself.

The film unfolded an intriguing message when a Christian Missionary school was built near Gangubai's kotha, and they wanted to acquire the region of Kamathipura by removing the brothel from there according to the literates, the culture of the brothel was spreading immorality among the children of the school. Gangubai protested the decision of the school by directly visiting the principal's office and challenging the principal with sweet and kind words, and requesting the person to allow admission of her brothel children in the same school.

Although she faced many hurdles when her brothel children were sent back to the kotha from the school, receiving maltreatment from the side of the schoolteachers, Gangubai did not lose hope so quickly. She kept fighting for her children's education and equal rights by seeking help from Rahim Lala and the journalist Mr. Faizi. She also visited Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's office to discuss the problems faced by sex workers.

The film ends with a brilliant and astonishing note of Gangubai's speech in the Azad Maidan, where the convenor of the program was embarrassing issues about how to introduce Gangubai to the audience, whether to say 'Miss' or 'Mrs,' to which Gangubai replied, "Kumari apne chode ni aur Srimati Kisi ne banayanahi." (You did not leave me a virgin, and nobody was ready to marry me). In the speech, she asked the gathering why no respect is given to the sex workers when they are an integral part of protecting the country's dignity. She

further mentioned in a very confident and vernacular tone that when the man feels appetized about sex and they do not find any woman to satiate their hunger, they reach out to the prostitutes to fulfill their thirst. If sex workers were not there, the country would have become a dome of violence against women, so the sex workers deserve as much respect as an ordinary man or woman does in their life in the Indian society. She challenges the position of women, comparing it with men. That when power, property, and intelligence are the three synonyms of women, than why put men in a superior position. In her paper 'Gendered Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's Bedanabala, Her Life, Her Times', Dr. Indrani Singh Rai writes that Mahasweta Devi, through her novel Bedanabala, Her Life, Her Times, questions when the men folk is not accused, instead they are considered blameless while entering into the domain of a brothel, then why are the whores blamed? The men also share the same peripheral territory as the prostitutes, then why are the whores considered the 'Other'?

Gangubai's speech and her story stand incomplete without the journalist Mr. Faizi. If Faizi was not there to spread it among the masses, we couldn't know Gangubai today. Faizi is an alter ego of Gangubai, who played a mirror image to place Gangubai in a more divine status. The speech of Gangubai can be assessed as voice of protest for decolonization and the masculinized society of India. Gangubai's narrative, although covers the period of the 1960s but is relevant in the life of every

woman even today, especially when she says, "Azad Maidan mein Gangubai one akhein jukakar Nahi, Akhein Mila Kar Apne Haq ki baat ki," which means, in the field of Azad Maidan, Gangubai asked the countrymen for her living rights not by looking down but by directly facing with proper eye contact and making her head proudly held high among the people. Thus, Gangubai is not just a historical figure to cherish in our minds, but also, but she is a woman who intrigues in us with the awareness to fight for our rights with confidence.

Conclusion:

Gangubai's story and her demands asking for customary living rights for sex workers perhaps stand significant in the 2022 scenario as the Supreme Court has recently recommended a guideline where the police or the central force has got no right to harass or arrest a sex worker if a brothel is in case raided for running unlawfully. The sex workers should be provided essential protection of human decency and dignity. The workers should no longer limit themselves to the fringes of society, as stated in an article in Economic Times. While colonial historiography has separated itself from the experiences of the subaltern classes, the postcolonial Indian cultural productions have actively engaged with the plight of the oppressed and marginalized sections. Subaltern theorists have noted that gendered subaltern is complex as often the restraints of the gender transcend class, allowing for subalternity to be free from pure association with socioeconomics. Since this trend in

Indian history and social studies has been so influential, so modern Indian literary, dramatic, and cinematic texts have reflected a strong interest in the suffering, trauma, and representation of the subaltern classes. (Menon 1) Thus, even though we met a subaltern personality like Gangubai in Bhansali's film but if we search and research through the pages of history or the documents left in the archives, probably there are more Gangubais and Raziabais who can even influence us with their suffering stories in a new dimension.

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