

Reclaiming Dignity: A Recognition-Based Reading of Gangubai Kathiawadi

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi* through the lens of Axel Honneth's recognition theory, focusing on the efforts to achieve dignity through a prestigious profession. While sex workers in India are often victims of shame and exclusion, the film serves as a narrative counter depicting how Gangubai managed to turn stigma into empowerment. This study employs qualitative content analysis methods to examine scenes and dialogues, exploring how Gangubai navigates three domains: love, human rights, and solidarity. The findings of the study show that this degree is achieved by assuming the role of a mother figure in her community, by demanding legal and political recognition for sex workers, and by earning social esteem as a respected leader. By making dignity a central theme, the study moves beyond conventional discussions of marginalization and stigma by offering a new look at how Bollywood films reimagine sex workers as agents of empowerment and justice. This analysis places *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as a significant cultural text that redefines womanhood and advocates for the recognition of marginalized identities.

Keywords: Gangubai Kathiawadi; reclaiming dignity; Honneth's Theory of Recognition; sex workers; empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Sex work in India has long been subject to a deep cultural stigma, where sex workers are excluded, silenced, and denied their social dignity in society. Women in India are forced into the world of prostitution due to many things, including poverty, misassociation, their own choices, being forced by others, family traditions, violence, helplessness, and because they do not have a breadwinner (Azhar et al., 2020; Gore & Patwardhan, 2022). And what is worse is that sex work is often associated with religious and social practices, such as the devadasi system (Deka, 2022; Huynh et al., 2019; Rohilla & Rani, 2024; Shankar & Ganesan, 2021; Wilson, 2020). In India, sex workers are grouped into two, namely those who are victims of human trafficking and those who become sex workers by their own choice (España et al., 2023). Sex workers are the most marginalized group in India (Sinha & Prasad, 2021). They often face a negative stigma, causing them to lose their right to housing, health, and legal protection (Alam & Fatima, 2023). This stigmatization also leads to the creation of barriers for sex workers in social inclusion and economic opportunities (Acharya & Azhar, 2024).

The representation of sex workers in Bollywood films has long been associated with shame, victimization, and marginalization. Most Indian cinema portrays sex workers in an inhumane and stigmatized way (Pokhariyal et al., 2025). They are not presented as individuals who are intact with their feelings, rights, and dignity, but rather as male objects or symbols of moral degradation. Sex workers are often portrayed as women trapped in victimhood and marginalization, with little agency (Shukla, 2019). They are considered representations of the body for the pleasure of men, not as human beings by degree. They are also portrayed with the stigma of being outsiders, immoral, and shameless figures. In cinema, they are rarely given complex and positive roles, but rather are often portrayed as opposed to ideal and respectable female characters.

In contrast to this backdrop, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* emerges as a cinematic intervention that challenges these stereotypes by depicting sex workers not as marginalized figures but as strong leaders, advocates, and symbols of dignity. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi* offers a different perspective on the issue by focusing on the life of Gangubai, a woman who rises from social rejection to achieve her dignity as a respected brothel leader and activist for sex workers' rights (Nandkumar, 2022). In contrast to typical Bollywood films portraying sex workers as figures who deserve to be pitied, Bhansali emphasizes their sense of solidarity, leadership, and social mobility, as evidenced by the scenes where Gangu negotiates for sex worker holidays, resists oppression, and defends her community's recognition before the law (Sengupta, 2022).

Set in a context of patriarchy and class stratification in mid-20th-century India, the film presents a powerful narrative about the social intersection of stigma, gender, and power blocking women's agency (Dissanayake, 2024). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is a film produced based on the life of Gangubai Jagjivandas Kathiawadi, written by S. Hussain Zaini under the title *Mafia Queens of Mumbai: Stories of Women from the Ganglands* (Arivanantham & Radhakrishnan, 2023; Sumarsono & Masofa, 2022; Vidya & Balakrishnan, 2023). The film takes place in Kamathipura, a red light area for sex workers, both in the brothels and on the streets (Karandikar et al., 2022). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* also made history as the first Indian film to debut in the top 10 ranking on Netflix (Lestari et al., 2024). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* achieved success at the 68th edition of Filmfare Awards by winning 10 trophies, including Best Film, Best Director for Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Best Actress for Alia Bhatt (Chaubey, 2023).

This study illuminates the pervasive discrimination that sex workers face, leaving a narrow space for understanding how sex workers' dignity can be achieved while they carry a stigmatized identity. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* offers a narrative that transcends the depiction of stigma by portraying a protagonist who actively challenges such exclusion and redefines her identity. However, the studies that analyzed the film focused more on marginalization, without examining the process of achieving dignity as a transformative social action. This study bridges the gap by applying Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to explore how dignity, which is often overlooked in sex workers, can be achieved through recognition in the domains of love, rights, and solidarity.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how dignity can be restored in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. This study uses Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to uncover how the protagonist redefines her identity and transforms stigma into empowerment through recognition. This study aims to demonstrate that dignity can be restored and strengthened through personal agency and collective recognition.

This study follows some of the key questions that define the analysis of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. The study seeks to understand how the film portrays the stigma experienced by sex workers as a backdrop to their struggle to be accepted by society. Second, this study examines how Gangubai regained her dignity by achieving recognition in the domains of love, rights, and solidarity, as theorized by Axel Honneth. Finally, the study questions how the film frames the identity of sex workers from stigmatized subjects to agents of social empowerment, thus offering a counter-narrative to the dominant portrayal of victimhood in Indian cinema.

This study makes significant contributions to both academic and social spheres. Academically, this study contributes to film studies, gender studies, and cultural studies by applying Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to explore a dimension often overlooked in discussions about sex workers: dignity. By shifting the focus from marginalization to dignity, the study provides a new perspective on how cinema can portray marginalized women not only as victims but also as agents of recognition and empowerment. Socially, this study challenges perceptions of sex workers by showing how stigmatized professions can reclaim dignity. The study fits into a broader discussion of social justice, recognition, and human rights, positioning *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as a cultural text that advocates for the rightful place of sex workers in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on *Gangubai Kathiawadi* has been conducted from several different perspectives; however, there is still limited space compared to this study. Lestari et al. (2025) analyzed the adaptation of *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* from book to film, focusing on obedience and deviance, while Arivanantham and Radhakrishnan (2023) analyzed the white sari cloth as a visual symbol of Gangubai's transformation and purity. Tangtenglam (2023) examined audience acceptance in Thailand and the film's impact on cultural interest. Pongpan (2023), with Afandi et al. (2025), analysed Gangubai's resistance to injustice by examining dialogue to expose gender discrimination and the representation of sex workers as marginalized lawbreakers. Sumarsono and Masofa (2022) analyzed Gangubai's role in women's empowerment by advocating for equality of rights using the perspective of feminism. While all of these studies contribute significantly to our understanding of women's adaptation, symbolism, audience acceptance, resistance, and empowerment, most are limited to themes of oppression, cultural attraction, or leadership. This study offers novelty by applying Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, by shifting the focus from

stigma and victimhood to dignity obtained through recognition in the domain of love, rights, and solidarity. By framing dignity as a moral foundation that transforms shame into empowerment, this study goes beyond symbolic and feminist readings. It places *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as a cultural text that redefines femininity and achieves recognition for marginalized identities in Indian society.

Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma provides a significant background in understanding the marginalization of sex workers in India, as explained in the concept of "spoiled identity", which describes how individuals are socially discriminated against and morally degraded by negative stereotypes (Goffman, 1963). Individuals who experience stigmatization face not only social rejection but also systemic discrimination, which can cause them to lose access to their dignity, rights, and opportunities to participate in society (Ghosal et al., 2022; Goffman, 1963; Hearty, 2024; Robson, 2023). Stigma is a labelling involving stereotypes and discrimination against individuals or groups or situations where individuals are considered not to meet the qualifications acceptable to society (Aranda et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2023; Goffman, 1963; Hart et al., 2023; Tsang et al., 2019). Stigma is divided into three types: physical deformities, character blemishes, and tribal stigma (Goffman, 1963; Whelan, 2021). Society often views sex workers with a negative view, looking at them through a moral lens, considering their profession to be immoral, sinful, and deviant. This perception of society leads to discrimination and social isolation, which is a key element in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*.

To balance the effects of stigma, Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory is very relevant because it emphasizes the importance of love, rights, and solidarity as the basis for individuals to achieve dignity, social self-esteem, and a sense of belonging in society (Fraser, 2018; Honneth, 1995). This theory is crucial in analyzing the struggles of marginalized communities to achieve dignity and justice. According to Honneth, a healthy "positive self-relation" requires mutual recognition. The denial of such recognition leads to social conflict and demands for justice. Love makes individuals feel confident because love makes them feel seen and cared for (Fraser, 2018; Honneth, 1995). Recognition of love is essential for fostering self-confidence, while denial of love causes emotional harm. The recognition of rights creates expectations of recognition before the law and makes individuals realize their potential in life (Pada, 2022). Recognition of this right is obtained through formal acknowledgment by the state and society that a person has equal rights before the law. Exclusion and marginalization are forms of violation of individual rights. Meanwhile, solidarity or social esteem means recognition of the contribution of individuals in society (Waelen & Wiczorek, 2022). It is the most complex form of recognition, where the wider community evaluates a person's skills, achievements, and lifestyle. The denial of this sphere is a denigration of ways of life. When all these three elements are met, individuals will be able to live freely and participate in building their lives (Andersen, 2022; Honneth, 2006).

Stigma and recognition are two opposing forces in shaping dignity. Stigma serves to discredit individuals, degrade their social standing, and erode their identity. At the same time, recognition plays a role in achieving a person's dignity, as dignity is an acknowledgement of a person's position in social relationships. If a person does not receive recognition and respect, it will cause them to feel humiliated and lose their self-esteem (Honneth, 1992). Instead, recognition builds a moral foundation that allows for the attainment of dignity by validating one's identity and social contributions. Recognition makes people able to accept others in society (Lepold, 2019). Thus, recognition counteracts the discrediting effect of stigma and becomes crucial in regaining dignity and rebuilding one's rights within society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method of content analysis, utilizing a descriptive film analysis approach. Qualitative research is well-suited to explore the representation of social issues in film, as it enables an in-depth analysis of meaning, symbols, and narratives that extends beyond surface descriptions. By adopting a descriptive film analysis, this study focuses on how *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) constructs and describes the process of reclaiming her dignity amidst stigma. The writers collect data in the form of scenes that show conversations depicting the stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers, as well as how the protagonist fights against the stigmatization and marginalization and how she fights for equal rights for sex workers. The collected data were then analyzed using Goffman's social stigma theory.

The primary data of this study is *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. The film presents a narrative of Gangubai's journey from marginalization to empowerment, making it an appropriate text for investigating the themes of stigma and recognition. Data collection involves a careful selection of scenes and dialogues that illustrate both the stigma experienced and the strategies that Gangubai applied to achieve her dignity. The scenes were identified based on their relevance to the study's focus, including depictions of social exclusion, acts of resistance, and moments of public recognition.

The collected data is analyzed using Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, with an emphasis on three domains of recognition, namely love, rights, and solidarity. Using this theoretical framework, this study examines how the film portrays Gangubai's attainment of dignity, taking into account emotional recognition, legal equality, and social esteem. This analysis aims to uncover how the film reimagines the identities of sex workers and places them as subjects who deserve honour and dignity.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

STIGMA AS BACKGROUND

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma provides a significant foundation for understanding how society marginalizes sex workers, particularly through the notion of "spoiled identity," in which individuals experience humiliation and moral condemnation from society (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatization of sex workers is often manifested in the form of rejection, discrimination, and exclusion, which hinders them in gaining rights, dignity, and social participation (Ghosal et al., 2022; Robson, 2023). In this context, stigma acts both as a social label and a control mechanism, which supports a hierarchical structure that pushes women to the margins of society.

One of the stigmatization moments was when Gangubai was betrayed by her lover and sold to a brothel. As she screamed for help, her voice was silenced, and she was forced to become a sex worker. Goffman (1963) described stigma as a "spoiled identity," in which an individual experiences discrediting and a lowering of their social status. The transformation from Ganga to Gangubai began with betrayal, where her social identity as an innocent woman was humiliated and forced to accept the stigma of being a prostitute. This new identity changed her social status and caused her to be treated not as a human being with dignity but as an object of transaction. The brothel was the first place she gained the stigma of being a sex worker.

Gangubai I want to go home.

Sheela How will you face your family? Your beloved sold you off for Rs. 1,000. This is Sheela's brothel, and she's the boss here! You have two days to decide and comply. There are people here who will use force and pay for it, too.

(Bhansali, 2022; 17:59 – 18:37)

According to Goffman, stigma is a form of "spoiled identity", where an individual's social identity is diminished in credibility, making them ostracized. Gangubai became a commodity that was traded at a certain nominal price, which dehumanized her. Gangubai is no longer seen as an individual with social and family ties, but as part of the prostitute community, who are marginalized and experience both physical and non-physical violence.

Another stigmatization is public humiliation, when Gangubai and other sex workers are about to watch a movie, the audience insults them. They do not respect the sex workers who are not doing their profession, but are treated with contempt as if they are working. This incident illustrates Goffman's assertion that stigma leads to exclusion and discrimination.

A man Hey, beautiful, let's go have some fun. I'll take you to the 'night show.' Come. (Gangubai slaps him several times)

Gangubai Taking me to the night show, huh? Can't we enjoy our day off in peace? Let's go. The movie is about to start

(Bhansali, 2022; 25:41-26:12)

They experience rejection when going to the cinema, not because of any individual fault, but because of their collective identity as sex workers, which indicates that society does not want their presence. Their presence in public spaces is considered a form of pollution, and the reactions of other spectators indicate how stigma leads to the rejection of them as members of society who have equal rights to participate. This exclusion reinforces marginalization and highlights the resounding social rejection of them.

Sex workers are labelled by society as immoral because of their profession, in Goffman's case, as a tainted concept of identity. Their community excludes sex workers, considering them not part of that community. When Gangubai is invited to meet a girl who has just been sold to a brothel, she tells the girl that once a woman enters Kamathipura, there will be no way out. Women who return from Kamathipura will be hanged by their families because they do not want to bear the shame of having a prostitute.

Gangubai Once you enter Kamathipura, there's no going back... There was a girl like you who went back home. Her family publicly hanged her to death.... And he made you play 'wife' to the world? Everyone here has the same story. Every night is a wedding night with a new husband.

(Bhansali, 2022; 09:18 -10:00)

Once a woman becomes a sex worker, no matter what her background, she will be stigmatized as an immoral woman. She would not be able to return to her family even if she intended to leave her profession. The stigma remains attached to her, making it difficult for sex workers to escape the stigma and marginalization. All Kamathipura women have lost their identity, degraded by the stigma they receive as sex workers.

The stigma attached to the individual causes them to experience injustice because the negative attributes have erased their previous social role. This stigma not only hurts those who get it but also affects their families. Women whose families shunned them for being caught working

as prostitutes showed that the stigma also had an impact on their families. The stigma causes them to feel ashamed, and to make up for the shame is done by hanging the woman in public.

Discrimination is also structurally depicted, for example, when Gangubai was rejected when she enrolled the children of sex workers in school. This signifies the systemic exclusion of the rights and opportunities that sex workers have.

Gangubai My dear Sister, I will leave, but only after my children get admission in this school....

Father Take it back. We cannot enroll your girls here.

Gangubai So what if they're from a brothel? They have a right to education. ... I will make sure they get it, Father. Imagine if one of them becomes a doctor, an engineer, or a barrister. Her life will change... Common Sister, take out the admission form. Write... Mother's name, Gangubai Kathiawadi.

Father And father? What should we write as the father's name?

Gangubai The mother's name is not enough, huh?

(Bhansali, 2022; 1:54:08-1:55:11)

This moment represents Goffman's so-called "spoiled identity," where society's rejection is not rooted in the actions of these children but because of the moral judgment inherent in their mother's profession. The stigma has not only been individual discrimination but has extended to institutional, systematically excluding sex workers and their families from fundamental rights and opportunities. The rejection suggests that the stigma is not limited to sex workers individually but extends across generations, leading to a circle of marginalization and denying the possibility of changing sex workers' lives.

The depiction of stigma in this film is not only descriptive but fundamental to the film's storyline, because this stigma provides a stage for Gangubai's struggle to achieve recognition and dignity as a human being. The harshness of exclusion and discrimination was the driving factor behind her transformation, from a stigmatized woman to a respected leader and defender of the rights of sex workers. By showing how stigma works, the film shows the importance of recognition as a force to achieve dignity through Honneth's spheres of love, rights, and solidarity.

RECLAIMING DIGNITY THROUGH RECOGNITION

When stigma changes an individual's social value, Axel Honneth's theory of Recognition provides a theoretical framework for understanding how dignity can be achieved, as a recognition through love, rights, and solidarity that allows marginalized groups, such as sex workers in Gangubai Kathiawadi, to claim their humanity and reshape their place in society.

The first sphere of recognition is love, which, according to Honneth (1996), represents an emotional affirmation achieved due to closeness. This caring relationship gives individuals a sense of confidence and a foundation for their dignity. In the film, Gangubai assumes the role of a mother figure who is not only a support for her community but also for all the women and children in Kamathipura. This motherhood is evident in the scene where she protects the girls from falling into prostitution by making sure they do not experience the same exploitation as she did. By treating the girls with care, Gangubai gives them the emotional recognition they need to see themselves as dignified individuals.

The madam Have you explained it to her?

Gangubai I have. Now you need to understand. This girl will go back home.

The madam I didn't call you here to set my girl free.

Gangubai She would rather die than comply. If she dies, you'll be in trouble.

The madam I don't care. If she doesn't spread her legs, she'll beg. But she will stay here. I have paid Rs. 1.000 for her.

Gangubai Come and take ten thousand from me tomorrow.

(Bhansali, 2022;49:22-49:50)

The confrontation between Gangubai and the brothel owner to save Madhu is an example of the application of Honneth's (1996) concept of love as a recognition, which is based on care, empathy, and emotional affirmation. Madhu, a young girl who was forced into prostitution, would rather die than become a prostitute. Gangubai's intervention transformed from a feeling of despair into an opportunity to defend her dignity. By paying ten times as much as the brothel owner spent to buy Madhu, Gangubai has made Madhu's life more precious than the price that has been paid for her body. This act of motherhood makes Madhu feel that there is someone who cares and is valued as a human being, not as an object of transaction. According to Honneth's theory, this kind of recognition provides an emotional foundation for self-confidence, which enables Madhu to maintain her dignity in the face of exploitation. Gangubai's willingness to fight the brothel system on behalf of the girl positions her not only as a leader, but also as a mother figure who loves those who are stretched, by fighting stigma through caring in relationships.

A pivotal moment in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* that depicts Gangubai's struggle to gain her dignity is when she brings a proposal for the daughter of one of the sex workers, whom the Afshan family initially rejected because they could not accept a sex worker as their daughter-in-law.

Gangubai Ms. Salma, I've found him a match that you won't be able to refuse. This is Kusum. I've brought her daughter, Roshni's proposal for you son, Afshan... Around 350 grams of gold. Fifty thousand rupees in cash and sweets worth Rs. 25. If you're still unsure, have a look at this tray full of gold, and the whole world will sparkle in front of you.

Afshan With all this...are you trying to buy me or sell her?

Gangubai Sir, make him understand. I'm not trying to buying or selling. I'm saving her from ending up as a prostitute. And by marrying her, you will do a noble deed, my dear.

Afshan I'm not interested in being noble. I reject your proposal.

Afshan's uncle Dear, how can a prostitute be our daughter-in-law?

Gangubai That's exactly what I'm trying to say. That's a prostitute can't be your daughter-in-law. Her mother is a prostitute but the girl isn't.

(Bhansali, 2022; 1:27:24-1:29:01)

This scene shows how pervasive the stigma attached to sex workers is, where the spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) of the girl's mother must be unfairly borne by her ignorant daughter, perpetuating the circle of exclusion. Gangubai's intervention in the proposal illustrates the effort to achieve dignity with Honneth's (1996) sphere of love, where recognition is linked to caring and emotional affirmation. By advocating for the girl's future and making marriage a way of protecting her from exploitation, Gangubai succeeded in making the child of a sex worker entitled to be seen as an individual rather than an extension of the stigma. This scene shows Gangubai's role as a mother figure with her love and recognition for the marginalized, which has become a foothold for her to regain her dignity.

Similarly, when Gangubai defends the children of sex workers to get access to education and achieve a better future (Bhansali, 2022: 1:54:08-1:55:11), she describes her concern for the next generation by maintaining the relational dignity that transcends the boundaries of her

profession as a sex worker. This moment describes her role as a mother figure by spreading her love to everyone in her community. Thus, the sphere of love in Honneth's theory serves as the foundation on which Gangubai establishes her authority and regains her dignity, transforming herself from a stigmatized sex worker to a respected protector and mother of her community.

Based on Axel Honneth's theory, the second sphere is rights, which makes the individual legally and institutionally recognized as a member of society. In contrast to love, which is rooted in personal relationships, recognition in the form of rights ensures that individuals are respected and have equal protection, justice, and participation in society. The denial of rights leads to exclusion, injustice, and marginalization, while recognition recognizes a person's dignity and existence within a broader legal and political framework.

This dimension is very clearly depicted in the scene where Gangubai experiences rejection when registering the children of school sex workers. She had to confront the principal who rejected the children. The principal argued that the children did not deserve an education because their mothers were sex workers, so their rights were not recognized. Gangubai resisted by insisting that the children should not be punished for their mother's work. Her resistance points out that the stigma that deprives sex workers' families of fundamental rights also exposes structural discrimination in society. According to Honneth, what Gangubai is doing is demanding legal and institutional recognition, recognition that these children, as members of society, have the right to have the opportunity to get an education. By advocating for their education, Gangubai not only challenges injustice but also seeks to preserve the dignity of the next generation, thereby transforming a moment of exclusion into an act of political recognition.

Gangubai You have made me the President of Kamathipura today. You have given Gangu so much love. Gangu will return your love with interest, it's my promise to everyone. Gangubai will say three things. First, people think we're dishonest, no problem. But do this dishonest work with honesty. Complete honesty. Second, a flower by nature, is fragrant whether it is in a temple or a shrine, at a brothel or a funeral. Spread your fragrance. Satisfy your clients fully, but remember to get paid...fully. We want progress. Third, live with dignity. Never fear anyone. Be it the police, be it an MLA or a minister or a pimp. Fear no one. When women are the embodiment of power, wealth and intelligence, what makes these men feel so superior?

(Bhansali, 2022; 1:37:57-1:39:38)

Gangubai's speech in front of sex workers was not just rhetoric; it reflected her efforts to gain institutional recognition of the legal rights of sex workers. Her three messages, honesty at work, the dignity of women wherever they are, and fighting fear, are collective entitlements. By framing sex workers not as criminal or immoral acts but as legal workers who demand fair treatment and pay, Gangubai is claiming the right to economic justice and bodily autonomy. When she declared that women should not be afraid of men, police, or politicians, she considered sex workers to be citizens entitled to protection, in line with Honneth's view of the legal inclusion of marginalized groups. This moment goes beyond the personal morality of the political recognition of sex workers as a community, which transforms from a stigmatized outsider to a community demanding equal rights and dignity.

Gangubai's speech at Azad Maidan was the culmination of her struggle for the rights of sex workers, where she transformed individual resistance into political demands, justice, and equality as a collective citizen. The speech was the sex worker's most precise articulation of the demands for recognition in accordance with Honneth's love, right, and solidarity.

Gangubai They didn't let me be a 'miss,', and nobody made me a 'missus.'...all of you sitting here must have occupation...business...a doctor, an engineer, or a teacher....a qualified person sells his intelligence, but we sell our bodies. We work bloody hard! What's wrong with that? Why do they object only to our establishment? Why is our profession only seen as immoral? Men from your neighborhood come to ours, yet our neighborhood is infamous. Why? Do you know what the oldest profession in the world is? Prostitution. Without us, even heaven is incomplete. You must give us some respect. We have more dignity than you. ... 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 are women of integrity. ..No matter who turns up at our doorstep; we 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? The minister who was preaching about unity and equality...we practice what you preach! ...To politicians, we are their votes. To policemen, we're currency notes. To men, we're winter coats. And to women, you all know who we are...We have fire in us and yet bloom like a rose. We satisfy the lust of men and protect the integrity of women. Just imagine. If there was no Kamathipura, this city would turn into a jungle! Women will be raped, families will fall apart, relationships will end, and our glorious Indian culture will turn to dust. And you will be responsible for this. We guard not only our dignity but also the dignity of this society. That's why I'm so proud of being a prostitute as you are being a doctor or an engineer..that you're still hell-bent on making us homeless.... if that's not enough, you also want to throw our children out of school. I want to ask you all something. Answer truthfully. Don't our children have the right to education? ... Aren't our children, like your children, the future of India? ...I won't let the women of Kamthipura be homeless. Our children will get the right to education, and we will get our right to live in society with dignity.

(Bhansali, 2022; 2:07:32-2:13:00)

Gangubai challenges the moral stigma that delegitimizes prostitution, framing it as a worker who deserves to be valued. This is a demand for the recognition of rights, in which she believes that sex workers and their children should not be excluded from education or civic participation, by achieving equality before the judiciary. With a proud declaration as a sex worker, just like a doctor and an engineer, she is trying to gain the self-esteem of sex workers as a woman who contributes to society. Her belief that sex workers never discriminate against people based on religion, caste, or social class, but those who are often discriminated against, shows the hypocrisy of a society that denies their existence but benefits from them. This is in accordance with Honneth's theory that social esteem is central to personal dignity and identity formation (Honneth, 1995). The discourse has transformed the spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) of sex workers into a claim to collective dignity, by suggesting that recognition is not a reward but a right to their role in society. Thus, Gangubai's rhetoric signifies how stigmatized individuals gain agency by reframing their identities through the language of recognition.

The third is solidarity that goes beyond love and institutional protection to emphasize the social esteem and value received by each individual or group in the community. Solidarity is achieved when society recognizes the contributions of its members and the value they have provided by enabling them to share in their dignity. For marginalized groups such as sex workers, solidarity is often rejected, as they are seen as immoral symbols rather than recognized for their resilience and social role. In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Gangubai's quest to gain respect for herself and the women of Kamathipura shows the struggle for solidarity, as she seeks to change the public perception of sex workers from a stigmatized group to an integrated member of society.

Gangubai's struggle to achieve dignity reached its peak in an effort to achieve social esteem or solidarity. For sex workers, this recognition of social esteem is often denied as they are considered immoral and unworthy of respect. Gangubai's journey reflects her determination to change this reality by gaining not only recognition of their rights but also societal respect for him and the sex workers in Kamathipura. Her speeches, alliances, and leadership illustrate her efforts to change the perception of sex workers from exclusion to respected members of society, thereby enabling them to gain solidarity as the highest form of recognition.

Gangubai and Karim Lala's relationship exemplifies a pivotal moment in her quest for social esteem. Initially, Liyaqat questioned her demand for justice with the stigmatizing sentence, "You expect him to settle scores for whores?", a phrase that reflected her spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963), where her social status as a sex worker was used to discredit her demands for justice. Gangubai framed her case not as a personal matter but as a matter of professional integrity; as with any business, she deserves respect. She challenged the double standards that devalued her work and still demanded the legitimacy of her profession.

Gangubai You worship your business, and so do we. What if someone disrespects it?

Karim Lala Those traitors will be punished by God.

Gangubai And that is why I'm here. Sahukat Abbas Khan . He works for you. ... He has wronged me. I've suffered great loss.

Liyaqat You expect him to settle scores for whores?

Gangubai Not to settle our scores, but to give me justice. It wouldn't hurt as much if this was another blow, but this has affected my business. And I'm sure you know what a loss in my business means.

Karim Lala Tell Bilaal to stand guard outside her brothel. If Shaukat returns, inform Bilaal. I'll take care the rest. Liyaqat, drop her home and give her money for treatment.

Gangubai No, sir. It's not about money

Karim Lala Accept it as a gift from your brother.

(Bhansali, 2022: 35:44-37:25)

Karim Lala's response showed recognition of solidarity. By ordering Liyaqat to protect her and calling her a sister, he acknowledged that Gangubai deserved to be recognized for her social esteem over her stigmatized identity. This act symbolized a recognition that elevated her from an ostracized woman to a respected member of society. Honneth (1995) states that solidarity is achieved when one's contribution is recognized by society: here Karim Lala acknowledges Gangubai's work and her dignity that deserves to be protected, regardless of her profession. This relationship shows his willingness to build mutual respect and esteem with Gangubai. From here, Gangubai began to regain her dignity by gaining recognition for her solidarity. The recognition of this influential figure not only improved her sense of self-esteem but also strengthened her social and political credibility, which led her to make Kamathipura dignified.

The recognition obtained from Karim Lala has a positive effect on her community. Gangubai's courage in seeking justice, her persistence in achieving dignity as a stigmatized profession, and her ability to negotiate with ruling figures are qualities that women in Kamathipura value. Against this background, the women of Kamathipura appointed her as the Madam of Kamathipura. This transition shows how the recognition of solidarity has increased from an external source to an internal validation, a collective affirmation of her leadership.

A sex worker Gangu, we want to talk to you.

Gangubai What is it? Everyone together in my room? Going on a strike?

A sex worker No. We have a gift for you.

Gangubai Gift? For what?

A sex worker You're the only person in Kamathipura who understand our plight, think of our welfare, fights for our rights. And only a good madam would do all this.

Gangubai You are making me a "madam" at 27, huh? If I wear a white sari in my youth, all my clients will run away.

A sex worker Gangu, you need to satisfy any client now. Just look after us. When you wear this sari, you will look like a politician.

Gangubai Right. Enough of all this politician, election, and praising. Go to work now.

(Bhansali, 2022; 46:49-47:48)

By electing her as the leader, sex workers not only fought against their spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) but also actively redefined their social values through Gangubai's leadership. In this collective recognition, the dignity of Gangubai can be regained. She is no longer a victim of stigma but a representative of the voice and face of the entire community. This solidarity turned her not only into a symbolic figure. However, it institutionalized her esteem in Kamathipura, which earned her the authority to represent sex workers in the political and public arenas.

The recognition of social esteem from Karim Lala made her rise as the President of Kamathipura. By acknowledging her as Karim Lala's sister, Gangubai was protected from violence and attempts to delegitimize his authority. This strengthens its social credibility in a society where power is closely related to networks of recognition and protection. As Honneth (1995) explains, solidarity allows a person to achieve her dignity by having a capacity that is valued in her community. In Gangubai's case, her resilience, leadership, and courage are no longer seen as a woman with a stigma but as a woman who is rewarded for her leadership qualities.

Gangubai You have made me the President of Kamathipura today. Thank you. You have given so much love. Thank you. Gangu will return your love with interest. It is my promise to everyone...to you, and you...Oh Rashmi! Will you be my secretary?

(Bansali, 2022: 1:37:57-1:38:22)

Her success in becoming the President of Kamathipura with the support of the women in Kamathipura was due to the recognition she got from Karim Lala of collective legitimacy. She became a representative who voiced her community, was good at negotiating with politicians, contesting social stigma, and advocating for their rights. In this way, Gangubai was able to embrace Karim Lala as the foundation of her broader leadership, which allowed her to regain her dignity, not only for herself but also for all the sex workers she represented.

Her encounter with Nehru marked the decisive moment of her journey from a stigmatized woman to a socially respected leader. With an audience with India's most powerful political figure, she has managed to transcend the boundaries of her stigma and gain legitimacy as a sex worker in the national political discourse. Nehru's willingness to listen to her and acknowledge her conscience gave Gangubai legal and political recognition, which cemented her credibility not only in Kamathipura but in Indian society at large.

Gangubai That's what I come for. Legalize prostitution.

Nehru That is impossible, Gangubai. Prostitution is not for the welfare of society.

Gangubai 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 the buyer should be punished, but who gets the punishment? That innocent girl.

Nehru I can understand your pain.

Gangubai No one can understand what we go through. Not even God Himself. All our rights have been taken away from us...Now, even our home is being taken away from us. They want us to vacate Kamathipura. They have even dragged us to court.... We're the victim and yet treated as a criminal. The daughter of Eve needs help..Those who are proud of this country, where are they?

Nehru I will set up a committee and discuss this matter. Can I ask you something, Gangubai? Don't you want to set up a home of your own away from this world?

Gangubai The truth is that the 4,000 women in Kamathipura are my family. I live in their hearts.

Nehru I will make sure your homes are not taken away.

Gangubai And our legal rights as well...

(Banshali, 2022, 2:20:26-2:22:55)

Gangubai asked for the legitimacy of prostitution. By asking for such legitimacy, she wanted to change sex work from stigmatized and marginalized job to gaining institutional legitimacy. This recognition signifies the extension of Honneth's sphere of rights into solidarity, as her leadership and advocacy have been noticed and appreciated at the highest levels of government. The symbolic effect of this meeting was the elevation of Gangubai from a local madam to a national figure, which further strengthened her ability to regain her dignity as a woman for herself and all the women she represented.

TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY

Gangubai's journey can be read as a gradual transformation from an identity marked by stigma, tied to social exclusion and discrimination, to someone who influences recognition and solidarity. This transformation occurred due to her tireless struggle against various social spheres. At first, Gangubai was burdened with the stigma of being a sex worker. She was dumped, sold into prostitution, and not respected for her dignity, both as an individual and as a member of society. Her spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) is a testament to how others degrade and exclude her. This early struggle reveals the severity of the humiliation she faces, but it also serves as the foundation for her subsequent resistance.

Gangubai's first step towards empowerment was when she demanded justice from Karim Lala. Instead of accepting the exploitation she experienced, she demanded her right to be treated fairly by gaining protection and recognition as a sister. This action transformed her position from a helpless victim to one of respect. The recognition she received from Karim Lala not only improved her self-esteem but also strengthened her esteem among sex workers, which later made her the Madam of Kamathipura.

With the support of the community she gained, Gangubai broadened her struggle in the public and political spheres. Through her speech at Azad Maidan and confrontations with political leaders, she framed sex workers not as a marginalized group but as citizens with inherent rights to justice. Her dialogue with Prime Minister Nehru shows her movement to achieve the rights of the people she fought for (Honneth, 1995), where she argued that sex workers were subjected to injustice in the form of discrimination, so that they were entitled to legal protection. By voicing that sex workers also deserve legal protection, she positions herself not only as a representative of her community but also as a moral agent demanding systemic change.

Gangubai's identity changes when she earns respect from both community leaders and political leaders. She is now not seen for her stigma but for her leadership and courage. Her persistence in considering the 4000 sex workers as her family shows her solidarity with the marginalized, turning her struggle into a collective one. According to Honneth's theory, this represents the acquisition of this social esteem, where recognition of her contributions allows her to regain her dignity and authority. Gangubai rises from a stigmatized figure to a leader whose identity is built on resilience, recognition, and solidarity.

Gangubai's life and speeches show a redefinition of femininity and dignity that challenges conventional morality. In the dominance of patriarchal systems, women's dignity is often bound by chastity, marriage, and adherence to social norms. A good woman can fulfill her duties as a mother, wife, and daughter, where her worth is judged from a man's point of view. Gangubai managed to disrupt this framework by earning her dignity not because she adhered to the role, but because of her integrity, manpower, and solidarity.

CONCLUSION

The study found that stigma served as a backdrop for Gangubai's struggles but did not directly define her identity. However, she managed to achieve her dignity through the process of recognition in Honneth's theory of love, rights, and solidarity. In the sphere of love, Gangubai cares for and protects the women of Kamathipura by championing emotional recognition that reinforces relational dignity. In the sphere of rights, she challenged legal and institutional exclusion, mainly through her fight for children's education and political recognition for sex workers. Lastly, in the sphere of solidarity, she gained her esteem from her community and political figures by changing her identity from stigmatized to empowered.

This study enriches the study of film by showing how recognition theory can illuminate the intersection between identity, stigma, and empowerment in cinematic stories. Socially, the study's findings challenge the moral hierarchy around sex workers in Indian society by offering an alternative understanding of dignity that goes beyond conventional notions of purity and honor.

For further studies, comparative studies with other films depicting sex workers can deepen the analysis of how dignity and recognition are represented across cultures and historical contexts. In addition, an application of recognition theory to South Asian cinema will help analyze how marginalized identities negotiate stigma and regain dignity in the form of different narratives.

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