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GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI: AN AMBIVALENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper is based on the life of Ganga Harjivandas who actually hailed from Kathiawad and later on came to be known as Gangubai Kothewali. This article examines character of Gangubai from an ambivalent perspective. An ambivalent characters in fiction is one who induce empathy and feelings of caring as well as of disapproval or even disgust. Although Gangubai was a victim of human trafficking and man - made circumstances. Still, she decided to not live as a victim. Gradually, she got adjusted with the circumstances and her work she builds friendships with other inmates. Towards the end of the film, Gangubai Kathiawadi finds its way into a fight for survival. Her journey from Ganga to Gangu, then to Gangubai and finally to the 'Madam' of Kamathipura is exciting and full of ambivalent moments. Ambivalently Gangubai is a prostitute but a moral character. Gangubai's virtue is characterized by main features living life with a purpose, Sacrifice, and Portrayal of empathy and friendship. 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 wellbeing of her people.

Keywords: *Ambivalence, Empowerment, Resistance, Identity, Friendship, etc.*

Based on author and journalist Hussain S. Zaidi's 2011 book, 'Mafia Queens of Mumbai', Gangubai Kathiawadi is captivating story. Hussain Zaidi has written about the life of Ganga Harjivandas who actually hailed from Kathiawad and later on came to be known as Gangubai Kothewali, Gangubai Kathiawadi and Madam of Kamathipura. Hussain Zaidi has also written books like *Byculla to Bangkok*, *Dongri To Dubai* and *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* is a masterpiece which tries to capture the realities of Mumbai which have been obscured. Films are the mirrors of reality. It frequently assumes responsibility for addressing significant societal challenges. The films are analyzed from a socio-cultural point of view. This article examines character of Gangubai from an ambivalent perspective. Director S.L. Bhansali mounts lead actress Alia Bhatt in the character of Gangubai and her acting skills on the screen is very enticing. 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. The film, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, has been widely viewed on Netflix and garnered global attention set in the red-light district of Kamathipura in the 1950s and 60s, Gangubai opens up on a violent and lurid note. "Ambivalence," developed in psychoanalysis, means fluctuation between one thing and the other. It is adapted into colonial discourse by Bhabha who describes it as attraction and repulsion between the colonized and the colonizer. He sees this relationship in three ways: First, some colonized subjects are complicit and some of them are resistant, so fluctuation between resistance and complicity exists within colonial subjects; second, the colonial discourse is exploitive and nurturing



simultaneously; third, ambivalence is fluctuating between mimicry and mockery which is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance. The problem with colonizer is that he wants to “create compliant subjects who regenerate his assumptions, values, or habits that is, mimic the colonizer, it introduces ambivalent subjects whose mimicry is never very far from mockery” (Ashcroft, 10). In this way colonizer’s superiority is disrupted both by ambivalent nature of colonial relationship and consequent resistance. The implications of positive and negative thinking maintain that ambivalence represents thought which on one side is positive and on the other is negative, and affects people at the same time.

Bhabha’s appraisal of Lacan accords well with ambivalence which he traces in numerous writers. Lacan’s mirror stage is central to Bhabha’s readings, “the mirror stage encapsulates what happens in colonial discourse’s stereotyping productions,” the mirror stage is a good model for the colonial situation. He suggests that like the mirror phase, “the fullness” of the stereotype - its image as identity - is always vulnerable by lack. In the mirror stage, egocentrism and antagonism are amalgamated and for him this intermingling typifies the colonial situation. The egocentrism is acknowledged with the metaphoric and the hostility with the metonymic. This doubling is the way of shaping colonial knowledge’s ambivalence. It is inimical expression of domination over the other and appearance of egocentric anxiety about the self. The colonizer viciously enforces his superiority over the colonized but is anxiously preoccupied with his own identity.

David Huddart posits that for Bhabha there is “always both an aggressive expression of domination over the other and evidence of narcissistic anxiety about the self. The colonizer aggressively imposes his superiority over the colonized, but is always anxiously contemplating his own identity, which is never ... stable” (David, 29). Furthermore, Fanon envisions the notion of ambivalence in the will of the nationalist parties in the newly independent countries, he writes “inside the nationalist parties, the will to break colonialism is linked with ... coming to a friendly agreement with it. The two processes will sometimes continue side by side” (Ashcroft, 98). Such ambivalence is there amongst writers of postcolonial discourse, thus, Fanon’s illustration of the ambivalent corresponds with Ashcroft, et al’s definition of ambivalence which is “wanting something and wanting its opposite” (Ashcroft, 12).

According to John and Cacioppo, “ambivalence is assumed as one implication that is better to think of positive and negative as separate dimensions rather than opposite end so dimension ranging from positive to negative” (Encyclopedia of Social Psychology, 57). The implications of positive and negative thinking maintain that ambivalence represents thought which on one side is positive and on the other is negative, and affects people at the same time. It can be inferred that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is ambivalent. Therefore, this ambivalent relationship between the two can be related to hybridity because ambivalence decenters authority from its position of power, the authority becomes hybridized when it is placed in colonial context and finds itself inflected by other cultures.

The potency of ambivalence gives the colonial stereotype its currency, ensures its repeatability in fluctuating historical and rambling conjunctures, and enlightens its strategies of individuation and downgrading. Hence ambivalence is a strategy of discriminatory power and is the otherness which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. ‘Blacks are savage brutes,’ is one such difference that is produced by discourse. It is through the discursive invention of differences, “the other” is fashioned. In this respect, colonial discourse appears to be not ambivalent at all. This discourse aims to institute cultural and racial hierarchy, which is achieved through articulation and organization of differences. The colonial discourse establishes the colonized as a social reality which works smoothly.

Ambivalence enters because this discourse depends on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. The colonized are constructed as the other, and the colonized is



something that is produced through the colonizer's discourse for controlling the other: In this sense, the colonized (the other) is completely identifiable and visible, which means that a fundamental difference of the other is disavowed. The implication of his argument is that one can never fully know another person, let alone whole people; there is always something that exceeds what you think the other is or how you construe the other.

An ambivalent character in fiction is one who induce empathy and feelings of caring as well as of disapproval or even disgust. Characters like Shylock, Phèdre, or Countess Orsina seem to belong into this group: We disapprove of their deeds, but we nonetheless understand their motives and feelings and maybe even feel compassion for them. The term ambivalence basically refers to a mental, social, cultural or behavioural state of people. Bhabha clarifies that the hybridization of any culture creates the ambivalent condition. It creates such a condition in which individuals feel their culture and behaviours belonging to 'no one's land.'

When the movie opens it reveals that the main character is Ganga Jagjivandas Kathiawadi born as the daughter of a barrister to an aristocratic family. It is a story of 14 years old girl who is sold to brothel by her lover. When the story opens Ganga is shown as an innocent characters who dreams of becoming an actress in Bollywood so her lover also her father's clerk lures her and she elopes with this character named Ramnik Lal. This lover sells her in the brother for 1000 Rs. Initially Gangu is forced into the profession but later on she decides to empower her position from a sex worker to team lead and she becomes the leader of the group of her brothel. The movie depicts the scene where Gangu demands leave from her madam and along with other girls goes out to watch Deva Anand' Movie.

Although Gangubai was a victim of human trafficking and man-made circumstances. Still, she decided to not live as a victim. Gradually, she got adjusted with the circumstances and her work she builds friendships with other inmates. Owards the end of the film, Gangubai Kathiawadi finds its way into a fight for survival. Her journey from Ganga to Gangu, then to Gangubai and finally to the 'Madam' of Kamathipura is exciting and full of ambivalent moments.

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.

In order to prevent her daughter Roshni from being seen by the lustful customers, Kusum, a colleague of Gangu, is seen enclosing Roshni in a cage and placing it in the damaged corner of the terrace. The reason is that Kusum would be rejected and Roshni would be used for the business if Roshni were to catch the clients' attention. Kusum ambivalently wishes that her daughter should die because rather than seeing her as prostitute she wants to she her physically dead which ultimately will save Roshni from inner death. Although our culture does not provide sex workers with a decent and dignified existence, a prostitute mother always wishes her daughter to lead a dignified life. Another ambivalent scene in the movie is when Gangu wants her lover Afsaan to marry Roshni so that she could live a dignified life. Afsaan's mother is first reluctant to approve the union because Roshni is the daughter of a prostitute. However, after that, when Gangu presented the family with priceless gifts and gold necklaces, the marriage proposal was accepted without hesitation. In the movie Gangu 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 and Rahim Lala's business partner and started the trade of alcohol in her Kotha and that added extra money.

Gangubai is the symbol of courage and resistance. She is survivors who fought against all their odds and struggles. Sheela Mausi's rule in Kamathipura came to an end finally. Gangubai defeated Raziabai in election. Karim Lala, the gangster had his own ethics, he helped Gangu as her brother. Gangubai rescued girls in prostitution who were forced to be prostitutes against their will. Ganga's friends requested her to take charge of the 'Kothi' and to be their 'Gangubai'. Gangubai proved herself as a shrewd Politician. She became the president of Kamathipura for wellbeing of the prostitutes. Again she proved and underlined the facts that a prostitute is a human being, she has self-respect, mind and heart. Ganga raised her voice of justice for children of the prostitutes. Towards the end of the movie Gangubai delivered a speech at Azad Maidan and torn out the masks of hypocrites.

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 buyers should be punished, but who gets the punishment? That innocent girl" (Bhansali, 28).

Gangubai and her journalist friend, Faizi bhai fought for the rights of the prostitutes as the human beings. Gangubai addressed Faizi bhai and said, "Faizi bhai, write it in tomorrow's newspaper, while delivering speech in Azad maidan, Gangubai didn't tilt her eyes but she looked in the eyes of the audience and spoke about rights of the prostitutes." Although Gangubai was compelled to opt for the prostitution trade she later tried to give this trade a respectful position which is quite ambivalent. Ambivalently Gangu very soon became a leader of the girls and started empathizing with each other's problems. The speech of Gangubai can be assessed as voice of protest for decolonization and the masculinized society of India. While Gangu is presented as a confident woman who educates people about the need to legalize sex work, she repeatedly self-identifies as a woman who resides in badnam gali — a phrase that loosely translates to "disreputable street. While associating the brothel with a sense of gloom (depicted through the film's extensive use of the colour grey) it simultaneously presents it as a space which fosters care giving relationships among sex workers who foster sisterhood and camaraderie. Months after the release of Gangubai Kathiawadi, the Indian Supreme Court passed a ruling that recognized sex work as a profession. Prostitution is legal in India, but sex workers are marginalized and face violence. Although Gangu was forcefully pushed into the profession but she ambivalently made this profession a way to express her power and leads her journey from Gangu to Gangubai queen of mafia. Her white sari is also depiction of ambivalence. Prostitution ambivalently became her identity. 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, 40)

Ambivalently Gangubai is a prostitute but a moral character. Gangubai's virtue is characterized by main features Living life with a purpose, Sacrifice, and Portrayal of empathy and friendship. 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.

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 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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