

DECONSTRUCTING STIGMA AND AGENCY OF FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN *GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI*: A DERRIDEAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji dekonstruksi stigma dan agensi pekerja seks perempuan dalam film Gangubai Kathiawadi melalui perspektif dekonstruksi Jacques Derrida. Dalam sinema populer, pekerja seks perempuan kerap direpresentasikan dalam bingkai moral yang menstabilkan oposisi biner bermoral/tidak bermoral, sehingga subjektivitas dan kapasitas agensial mereka direduksi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, penelitian ini menganalisis adegan-adegan kunci, dialog, dan konfigurasi visual film sebagai teks diskursif yang memproduksi sekaligus menegosiasikan makna. Analisis dekonstruktif difokuskan pada pengungkapan mekanisme naturalisasi stigma, oposisi biner hierarkis, penghapusan subjektivitas, serta kontradiksi internal yang mengganggu klaim makna dominan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Gangubai Kathiawadi mereproduksi stigma melalui wacana moral yang menormalkan subordinasi dan internalisasi label sosial terhadap pekerja seks perempuan, namun secara bersamaan menghadirkan kontradiksi naratif dan diskursif yang menyingkap kemunafikan moral serta ketergantungan laten institusi sosial, politik, dan ekonomi terhadap komunitas marjinal. Film ini selanjutnya membangun ulang agensi sebagai proses transformasi yang bertahap dan relasional, yang mencakup pembentukan kesadaran reflektif, produksi wacana tandingan, negosiasi strategis dalam ruang-ruang institusional, serta orientasi lintas generasi melalui perjuangan atas hak pendidikan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa agensi tidak direpresentasikan sebagai pembebasan individual atau perlawanan radikal, melainkan sebagai praksis sosial-politik yang strategis dan kontekstual dalam batasan struktural. Dengan demikian, Gangubai Kathiawadi menampilkan perempuan marjinal sebagai subjek politis yang mampu memproduksi makna dan menegosiasikan relasi kuasa secara realistis.

Kata kunci: Dekonstruksi, Stigma, Agensi, Gangubai Kathiawadi, Derrida.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the deconstruction of stigma and the agency of female sex workers in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* through Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. In popular cinema, female sex workers are often represented through moral discourses that reinforce hierarchical binary oppositions, reducing their subjectivity and agency. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, this study analyses key scenes, dialogues, and visual representations as discursive texts that produce and negotiate meaning. The analysis focuses on the naturalization of

stigma, hierarchical binaries, the erasure of subjectivity, and the contradictions that destabilize dominant meanings. The findings reveal that the film reproduces stigma by normalizing the subordination of female sex workers while simultaneously exposing the moral hypocrisy and structural dependence of social, political, and economic institutions on the marginalized community they exclude. The film also reconstructs agency as a gradual process of negotiating power through self-awareness, institutional engagement, and the struggle for educational rights. Rather than portraying agency as individual liberation, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* presents it as a strategic practice shaped by structural constraints. This study shows that the film challenges dominant representations by positioning marginalized women as political subjects capable of negotiating meaning and power.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Stigma, Agency, Gangubai Kathiawadi, Derrida.

A. INTRODUCTION

In literature, particularly in the study of popular films across cultural contexts, female sex workers are rarely represented neutrally. Their representations are generally framed through a moral lens, either as figures deemed "right" or "wrong," often serving to define the boundaries between what is moral and what is immoral. Within this framework, women's bodies and sexuality are not understood as personal experiences, but rather as symbolic means for demonstrating and maintaining social power. Thus, representations of female sex workers speak not only of individual characters but also reflect how society constructs and reproduces moral norms through language, imagery, and narrative structure. Studies across literary and film traditions demonstrate that this pattern of representation recurs over time, with sex workers often portrayed as figures who elicit sympathy through their suffering, alienation, or the destruction of their lives.

The recognition of the humanity of female sex workers in these representations often occurs alongside the erasure of their autonomy and dignity. Sex worker characters are deemed "worthy" of sympathy only when portrayed as victims who sacrifice and lack choice. This pattern indirectly reinforces stigma because the character's humanity is measured by their adherence to the narrative of suffering constructed textually and visually. In feminist and cultural studies, this mechanism is understood as a form of objectification, namely when the experiences, desires, and subjectivities of the characters are reduced or ignored (Nussbaum, 1999; Overall, 1987). In the context of film, this objectification can emerge through dialogue, storyline, and the way the camera and visual symbols position the female body within particular power relations.

Efforts to challenge these representational patterns have increasingly emerged in contemporary literary and cinematic narratives. Rather than portraying marginalized women solely as passive victims or moral transgressors, many texts attempt to represent them as subjects capable of negotiating dignity, authority, and social recognition. Nevertheless, such representations rarely escape dominant moral frameworks. Even when women are depicted as empowered, their agency often remains conditioned by prevailing social norms, institutional constraints, and patriarchal expectations. This tension between stigma and agency provides an important point of departure for examining how cultural texts construct, stabilize, and simultaneously destabilize dominant meanings surrounding female sex workers.

The mainstream Indian film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (Bhansali, 2022) offers a particularly compelling case for examining this tension. Based on the life of Gangga Jagjivandas Kathiawadi, the film portrays the transformation of a marginalized female sex worker into an influential leader

within the Kamathipura community. Beyond its commercial success and critical acclaim, the film has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of its broad cultural reach and its potential to shape public understandings of female sex workers. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of either victimhood or empowerment, the film depicts agency as emerging through continuous negotiations with moral, legal, and social structures. Consequently, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* provides a productive site for investigating how representations of stigma and agency are simultaneously produced, contested, and reconfigured within popular cinema.

Several previous studies have examined *Gangubai Kathiawadi* from various perspectives, particularly regarding empowerment, resistance, and gender representation. Pongpan (2023) shows that *Gangubai* is represented as a subject with social influence and capable of fighting for the rights of her community. Meanwhile, Sumarsono and Masofa (2022) emphasize that women's identities in the film are framed through narrative structures and dominant social norms. However, these studies tend to view empowerment as a relatively stable and coherent position. Other studies focus on resistance strategies through language and social interaction. Liru et al. (2025) show that dialogue is used by the main character to negotiate his social position, while Afandi et al. (2025) emphasize the role of social interaction as a medium for bargaining over power. From a linguistic perspective, Shabbir et al. (2024) highlight dialogue as a tool for negotiating meaning. However, this focus on linguistic aspects is often not read in parallel with the visual structures that contribute to shaping meaning and power relations in films. While these studies make important contributions, the internal contradictions, binary oppositions, and instability of meaning that shape representations of female sex workers have received relatively limited in-depth study. In particular, the use of a deconstructive approach to examine how stigma, morality, and agency are produced and negotiated in popular films has been limited.

To examine this gap, this study uses Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, which starts from the assumption that meaning is never fixed, but always in tension and in shift. This approach allows for a reading of binary oppositions such as moral/immoral, victim/empowered, or stigmatized/emancipated, which shape the representation of female sex workers. Through language analysis, such as dialogue between characters and monologues, deconstruction is used as a reading strategy to explore how dominant meanings are maintained and simultaneously shaken (Beöang, 2007).

Several studies have shown that deconstruction is effective in uncovering contradictions and ambivalence of meaning in cultural texts. Batubara et al. (2020) assert that this approach helps dismantle binary oppositions that limit characters' agency. Indriana and Wiyatmi (2022) and Aker (2022) demonstrate that deconstruction opens up space to question dominant meanings and present the experiences of marginalized groups more critically, without assuming meaning is final.

In this context, this study focuses on *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as a discursive text. The analysis is limited to key scenes and the main dialogue that explicitly establishes the relationship between stigma and agency, so that the deconstructive reading remains analytically focused and controlled.

This study does not aim to justify or normalize the practice of prostitution; rather, it offers a critical reading of how the representation of female sex workers is constructed and negotiated in popular film. Based on this premise, the study formulates two research questions: (1) how is stigma of female sex workers deconstructed through dialogue and narrative structures in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*? and (2) how does the film portray binary oppositions and discursive contradictions that simultaneously constrain and shape the agency of female sex workers?

This research is expected to enrich popular film studies by analytically demonstrating how stigma and agency do not exist as separate categories, but rather as interdependent and negotiate meaning. By mapping the binary oppositions and internal tensions in the representation of female sex workers, this study offers theoretical and analytical contributions to film studies, feminism, and cultural studies, particularly in reading popular films as spaces of production and shifting social meanings.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Stigma as a Discursive Mechanism in the Production of Social Meaning

In cultural studies, stigma is understood as a discursive mechanism that shapes social identity through repeated labelling and value hierarchies, rather than as a neutral fact. Through symbolic practices in language, discourse, and cultural representation, certain groups or individuals are placed within evaluative categories, so that their identities are read as the result of a construction of meaning laden with interests (Tyler & Slater, 2018). Stigma establishes boundaries between normative subjects and stigmatized subjects, simultaneously forming a framework for public meaning that is both productive and limiting. Contemporary approaches emphasize that stigma is not simply a negative stereotype but also a device that regulates how subjects are understood, discussed, and represented in social and cultural spaces. This process creates a hierarchy of values that appears natural, but is actually shaped by historical conditions, power relations, and specific ideological interests (Benoit et al., 2021).

2. Derrida's Deconstruction and the Instability of the Structure of Meaning

Deconstruction, as formulated by Jacques Derrida, is a critical approach to the way meaning is produced, understood, and legitimized in language and discourse. Deconstruction is not intended as a method of destroying meaning, but rather as a way of reading that reveals the hidden assumptions that allow meaning to appear stable and natural. Derrida rejects the view that meaning is fixed, coherent, and ultimately determinable. Instead, meaning is always relational and produced through a network of constantly shifting and interdependent differences, which he calls *différance* (Derrida, 1976).

Within this framework, the meaning of a concept never exists fully or independently, but rather depends on its relationship to other concepts within the language system. These relationships are generally structured in hierarchical binary oppositions, such as centre/periphery, normal/deviant, or moral/immoral. These oppositions allow for clarity of meaning, but simultaneously conceal the power relations that underpin them. One pole is positioned as the legitimate and normative centre, while the other is subordinate and dependent. However, deconstruction shows that this hierarchy is never completely solid, as the meaning of the dominant pole requires the existence of the excluded pole to maintain its position.

Deconstruction does not aim to replace one dominant meaning with an alternative meaning deemed more correct or more moral. This approach rejects the logic of such closure of meaning by exploring the internal contradictions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies at work within the text. Through a careful reading of language and discourse structures, deconstruction reveals that meaning is always in a state of uncertainty or undecidability, so that claims of truth and morality are never completely final (Lawlor, 2002).

In the context of cultural representation, deconstruction opens up the possibility of critical analysis of how identities and moral claims are constructed and legitimized through language

and symbols. By revealing the fragile and interdependent foundations of meaning, this approach allows for readings that are not subject to established hierarchies of meaning. Representation is no longer understood as a neutral reflection of reality, but rather as an arena in which meaning is produced, negotiated, and always open to rereading. Thus, deconstruction provides a theoretical foundation for questioning representations that normalize stigma and subordination, and opens up space for more complex and non-singular articulations of meaning.

3. Agency as a Discursive Effect in Power Structures

Agency in contemporary feminist studies is understood as the subject's capacity to act and make meaning within the normative constraints that shape their identity, rather than as a total rejection of social structures (Mahmood, 2005). Agency emerges through a complex interplay of adherence to, negotiation with, and resistance to prevailing norms. From a deconstructive perspective, the instability of meaning allows agency to emerge, as stigma is never fully coherent and always contains internal contradictions.

In cultural representations, agency is seen when subjects negotiate their positions within contradictory power structures: they are neither fully oppressed nor fully free. For example, female sex workers in cultural texts navigate their moral, social, and professional identities through practices of negotiating the stigmas and norms that frame their bodies and work (Showden & Majic, 2014; Joni, Dewi P, & Erviantono, 2019). This approach goes beyond the simple dichotomy of victim versus agent or subordination versus liberation.

4. Film as a Field of Production and Negotiation of Meaning

In popular culture studies, film is understood as a medium of representation that produces meaning through the interconnected arrangement of cinematic elements. Meaning is shaped not only by the storyline, but also by the way images are arranged, spaces are arranged, and bodies are depicted within the visual frame. The choice of camera angle, lighting, and editing rhythm play a role in determining what is emphasized, what is hidden, and how the audience is guided to understand the events and subjects depicted. In this way, film functions as a cultural practice that shapes social meaning indirectly yet systematically (Barker, 2012).

The production of meaning in film is not always consistent. The relationship between dialogue, character actions, and visuals often exhibits tension, resulting in multiple meanings. Verbal statements within the narrative can contradict information conveyed through images or visual settings, opening up a multifaceted interpretation. This incongruity between elements makes film a text that is not entirely closed, but rather open to diverse and contextual readings.

This situation positions film as a space for negotiating meaning, where representation does not operate in a final way, but rather continues to shape and frame the audience's understanding through specific aesthetic choices. Social meaning is not conveyed as a complete message, but is generated through an interpretive process involving the relationship between visual and narrative elements. Therefore, film can be understood as a productive analytical field for examining how meaning is constructed, maintained, or shaken through practices of cultural representation, without reducing it to a single, fixed ideological position.

This study positions the film text *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as an object of analysis, read through the internal relationships of its representational elements. The focus is directed at how the film organizes meaning through narrative and visual structures, as well as how the characters' positions are framed within the overall text. Deconstruction is used to explore

internal tensions, especially in parts where the narrative, dialogue, and visuals are not fully aligned, so that claims of meaning appear ambiguous but still form partial coherence.

The analysis is conducted systematically through three operational aspects:

1. Speech and dialogue patterns that form the narrative's value framework;
2. Characters' positions through conflict and the flow of events;
3. Identification of moments of ambiguity that disrupt the order of meaning.

This framework allows the analysis to move from textual description to a critical reading of the mechanisms of representation, while also providing a basis for selecting relevant scenes and research questions.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as a cultural text that constructs, negotiates, and destabilizes meanings of stigma and agency toward female sex workers. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth interpretation of dialogues and their accompanying visual contexts, viewing meaning as a discursive construction that remains multiple and unstable rather than fixed (Creswell, 2014). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* was chosen because it presents a female sex worker who simultaneously occupies the position of a stigmatized subject and an agent negotiating patriarchal power, making it a relevant case for examining the deconstruction of stigma and agency in popular cinema.

The research employed both primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of dialogues related to social stigma, patriarchal power relations, and female agency, accompanied by screenshots of the corresponding scenes. The screenshots were not analyzed as independent cinematic elements but served to preserve the narrative context in which the dialogues were delivered. Data were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives. Secondary data included scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies on stigma, agency, feminism, deconstruction, and the representation of female sex workers, which were used to strengthen the theoretical framework and support interpretation through theoretical triangulation (Rahma et al., 2023; Setiyani & Adiprabowo, 2024; Woda Liru et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted through repeated viewing of the film to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and character development. Relevant dialogues were identified, transcribed, and paired with screenshots from the corresponding scenes before being organized into an analytical matrix based on the theoretical categories of social stigma, patriarchal power relations, and female agency. In this study, dialogue served as the primary unit of analysis, while screenshots functioned as contextual evidence supporting the interpretation of the dialogues.

Data were analyzed using Derrida's deconstructive approach, focusing on the instability of meaning, binary oppositions, and internal textual contradictions. The analysis began by identifying dialogues that represent stigma and agency, followed by examining dominant binary oppositions, such as stigma versus dignity, patriarchal domination versus female agency, victimhood versus empowerment, and marginalization versus power. These oppositions were subsequently interpreted through Derridean concepts, including *trace*, *différance*, *supplement*, *pharmakon*, and *undecidability*, to reveal how meanings are continuously negotiated and destabilized. Rather than treating stigma and agency as fixed or

opposing categories, the analysis demonstrates their interdependence and the fluidity of meaning within the film's narrative.

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through theoretical triangulation by comparing textual interpretations with relevant literature and previous studies. Interpretations were developed through iterative readings of the dialogues and consistently supported by textual evidence and contextual screenshots. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the analysis by explicitly grounding every interpretation in Derrida's theoretical framework. This study is limited to the analysis of dialogues and their narrative visual context within the film and does not address audience reception or filmmaker intention. Consequently, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of how stigma and agency are constructed, negotiated, and deconstructed in the cinematic representation of female sex workers rather than to produce generalizable conclusions.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings based on the analysis of dialogues in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, with selected screenshots serving as contextual evidence for the dialogues under examination. Rather than functioning as independent visual objects, the screenshots are used to situate each dialogue within its narrative context, allowing the analysis to examine how verbal expressions construct, negotiate, and deconstruct the meanings of stigma and female sex workers' agency.

1. Deconstructing the Representation of Stigma towards Female Sex Workers in the Film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

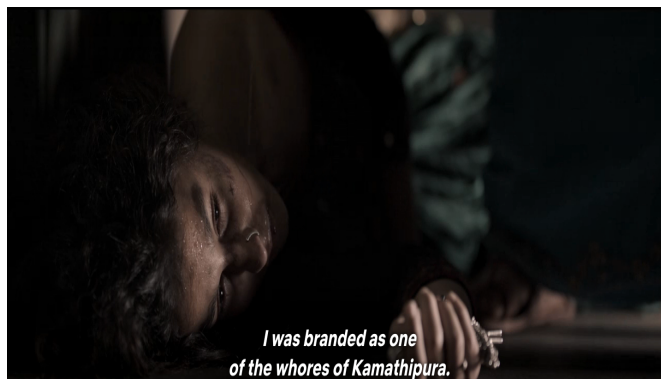
In this study, deconstruction is understood not merely as an attempt to reverse binary oppositions or expose contradictions within a text, but as a mode of reading that examines the instability of meaning through Jacques Derrida's key concepts, including *différance*, *trace*, *supplement*, *iterability*, *undecidability*, and the critique of the *metaphysics of presence*. These concepts are employed to investigate how meanings surrounding female sex workers are never present as complete or final truths but are continuously constituted through their relations to other meanings that are excluded, deferred, repeated, or concealed. Accordingly, stigma is not treated as a fixed representation but as a discursive construction that is constantly dependent upon processes of differentiation and deferral through which meaning is produced.

Within this framework, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* demonstrates that the representation of female sex workers is constructed through multiple discursive mechanisms that seek to establish prostitution as a permanent and immutable identity. However, as Derrida argues, no meaning is ever fully present because every sign inevitably bears the *trace* of other meanings that can never be entirely erased. Consequently, the representation of stigma in the film not only reveals how society produces meanings about prostitution but also exposes how those meanings are continually disrupted by their own internal contradictions, preventing them from ever achieving complete stability.



"Madhu... once you enter Kamathipura, there's no going back" (00:09:24)

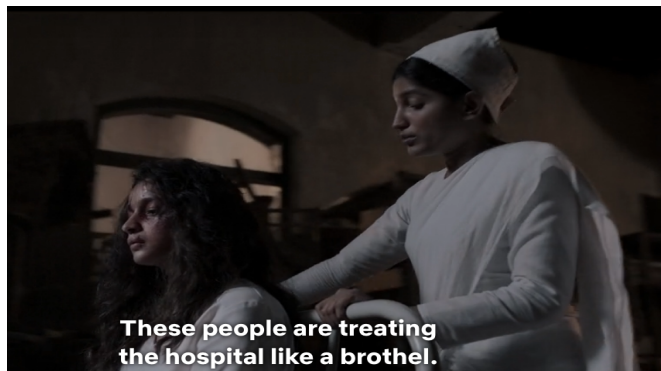
On the surface level, Gangga's utterance frames Kamathipura as a space with no possibility of escape, thereby presenting prostitution as a permanent and irreversible condition. The dialogue constructs the assumption that entering prostitution signifies the end of all other possible identities, making stigma appear as a final and unquestionable truth. However, through the concept of *différance*, Derrida argues that meaning is never fully present or complete because it is always produced through the simultaneous processes of difference and deferral (Derrida, 1976). In this context, the statement, *"there's no going back,"* functions as an attempt to fix the meaning of prostitution as the definitive endpoint of a woman's life. Yet the film's subsequent narrative continually defers that certainty. Kamathipura, initially represented as a space of entrapment, gradually becomes a site of solidarity, political agency, and Gangubai's leadership. This transformation demonstrates that the meaning of prostitution is never exhausted at the moment the utterance is spoken but remains open to reinterpretation as the narrative unfolds. Consequently, the stigma articulated through this dialogue operates by claiming a meaning that appears final, yet it ultimately fails to sustain that certainty. Through the logic of *différance*, the film reveals that the identity of female sex workers is not a fixed or stable category but a continually shifting construction whose meaning changes in response to evolving social relations and the progression of the narrative.



"I was branded as one of the whores of Kamathipura. How could I go back home? The brothel was my new home, and I was a prostitute," (00:19:08)

This dialogue illustrates how stigma operates through labeling that attempts to reduce the entirety of Gangga's identity to a single signifier: *prostitute*. At first glance, her acknowledgment appears to affirm that her former identity has been completely replaced by a new one. However, through the concept of *trace*, Derrida argues that no identity is ever fully present because every presence inevitably carries the traces of what is presumed to have disappeared. This trace becomes evident in the question, "*How could I go back home?*" Although Gangga declares that the brothel has become her new home, the idea of *home* as her original place of belonging continues to persist and haunt her newly assumed identity. Consequently, the identity of *prostitute* never entirely erases Gangga's identity as a woman with a family, a personal history, and a life beyond Kamathipura. The stigmatizing label appears coherent only because it attempts to suppress these traces; yet those traces continually disrupt its claim that the identity of a sex worker is singular, complete, and all-encompassing.

Through the logic of *trace*, the film demonstrates that stigma can never fully erase the subject's history. The identity of a female sex worker always retains residual experiences and prior meanings that cannot be completely eliminated. As a result, the label *prostitute* can never function as a complete or exhaustive representation of the woman's identity, since it remains haunted by traces of meanings that exceed and destabilize the boundaries imposed by stigma.



"These people are treating the hospital like a brothel... This dump is the right place for them" (00:33:05)

The nurse's dialogue not only expresses contempt toward female sex workers but also reveals how institutional practices regulate the boundary between bodies considered worthy and unworthy of occupying public space. From a Derridean perspective, this practice reflects the logic of the *metaphysics of presence*, namely the tendency to privilege one category as the legitimate centre (*presence*) while defining other categories through exclusion and marginalization. Within the hospital, patients regarded as "respectable" are granted legitimacy to occupy spaces of care, whereas female sex workers are relocated to a storage room, as though their presence were unworthy of recognition within the institutional order.

Accordingly, stigma operates not only through language but also through the spatial organization of institutional settings, which determines who is entitled to recognition and equal treatment. The film demonstrates that the marginalization of female sex workers

extends beyond moral judgment and becomes institutionalized through practices that separate bodies deemed "worthy of presence" from those considered expendable or out of place. From a Derridean perspective, this exclusion is not merely a consequence of institutional norms but the very condition that enables the institution to sustain its claims to moral purity, legitimacy, and social order. The apparent coherence of the institutional order thus depends upon the exclusion of those whose presence threatens its normative boundaries, revealing that such claims are always constituted through what they seek to suppress.



"It wouldn't hurt as much if this was just another blow. But this has affected my business, and I'm sure you know what a loss in my business means." (36:45)

This dialogue shifts attention from physical injury to economic loss, revealing how the value of the female sex worker's body is measured according to its productivity. From a Derridean perspective, this relationship can be interpreted through the concept of *pharmakon*, which denotes something that simultaneously functions as both remedy and poison (Derrida, 1981). The body of the female sex worker becomes "valuable" because it generates profit within the economy of prostitution; yet it is precisely this value that renders it vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The same body that sustains the system economically is also the body most readily exposed to harm.

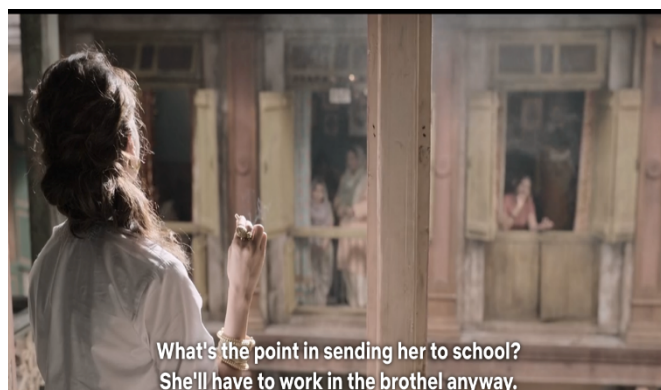
Consequently, the female body occupies a fundamentally paradoxical position. It is preserved only insofar as it continues to support economic production, while at the same time it remains disposable whenever violence serves to maintain the structures of power upon which that economy depends. Gangga's dialogue suggests that the central concern is not merely the injury she has suffered, but the disruption of an economic system that relies upon her body as a source of profit. Through the logic of *pharmakon*, the film demonstrates that stigma against female sex workers operates not only by degrading them morally but also by constructing their bodies as inherently ambivalent objects that are simultaneously indispensable and expendable, protected and sacrificed. This paradox reveals that the value assigned to the female sex worker's body is never stable in itself; rather, it is produced through the very tension between preservation and destruction that *pharmakon* embodies.



“No matter how pristine your clothes are, you’ll always be a prostitute!” (00:50:18)

This dialogue demonstrates that stigma is sustained through the repeated invocation of the signifier *prostitute*, which continues to be attached to the woman regardless of changes in her appearance, behaviour, or life circumstances. From a Derridean perspective, this mechanism can be understood through the concept of *iterability*, whereby a sign acquires its authority because it can be repeated across different contexts, yet it never carries the same meaning in each repetition (Derrida, 1988).

In this dialogue, the word *prostitute* is repeatedly invoked as a label that seeks to fix the woman's identity and foreclose the possibility of self-redefinition. Yet precisely because the meaning of this label depends upon continual repetition, stigma cannot exist as a natural or self-evident truth. Its authority must be constantly reproduced through repeated utterances that reaffirm and legitimize the identity they claim merely to describe. Consequently, the film reveals that the power of stigma does not derive from any inherent essence of female sex workers but from discursive practices that repeatedly circulate, reinforce, and authorize the label within social life. Through the logic of *iterability*, each repetition simultaneously preserves and alters the meaning of the signifier, demonstrating that the apparent stability of stigma is itself an effect of repetition rather than evidence of a fixed identity.



“What’s the point in sending her to school? She’ll have to work in the brothel anyway,” (00:51:43)

This dialogue demonstrates how stigma operates by foreclosing a girl's future through a statement presented as an unquestionable truth. Her future is determined even before she has the opportunity to choose or articulate her own aspirations. From a Derridean perspective, this mechanism reflects the logic of **logocentrism**, namely the privileging of a single authoritative voice that claims the exclusive power to determine meaning and truth.

The statement does not merely predict the girl's future; rather, it functions as a discursive authority that suppresses alternative interpretations of her life. Education is rendered meaningless because the identity of *sex worker* has already been constructed as her inevitable destiny. In doing so, the dialogue naturalizes a particular understanding of female identity while excluding other possible futures. Consequently, the film demonstrates that stigma not only restricts women's access to education but also denies their right to define their own futures. What is silenced is not merely the individual's voice but also the possibility of alternative narratives capable of challenging the dominant "truth" about who these women are and who they may become. Through Derrida's critique of logocentrism, the film exposes how such claims to certainty rely upon the exclusion of other voices and meanings, revealing that the authority of this discourse is sustained not by an objective truth but by the suppression of interpretive plurality.



"Do you know what the oldest profession in the world is? Prostitution. Without us, even heaven is incomplete" (2:09:17)

This dialogue does not merely reverse the stigma surrounding female sex workers by asserting that prostitution is an important profession. Such a reading would remain within the logic of binary opposition, simply replacing the position of the "inferior" with that of the "superior." Instead, through the concept of *undecidability*, Derrida argues that deconstruction does not seek to invert hierarchical oppositions but to render them incapable of being sustained as final or definitive judgments.

Gangubai's statement positions prostitution within a fundamentally paradoxical framework. On the one hand, prostitution continues to be regarded as a morally reprehensible practice; on the other hand, it is described as the oldest profession, one whose absence would leave even "heaven" incomplete. These two meanings neither cancel one another nor resolve into a new synthesis. Rather, the film sustains both simultaneously, preventing the audience from arriving at a definitive judgment as to whether prostitution should be understood solely as a moral transgression or as an inseparable part of social life.

Through the logic of *undecidability*, the film demonstrates that stigma loses the moral certainty upon which it has long depended. This is not because prostitution is unequivocally justified, but because the moral categories through which it has traditionally been judged can no longer produce a singular, stable, and final meaning. Instead, the film exposes the inherent instability of those categories themselves, revealing that the opposition between moral and immoral, respectable and deviant, cannot ultimately sustain the fixed distinctions on which stigma relies.



"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." (2:11:04)

This dialogue demonstrates that female sex workers are positioned as a group that is morally excluded from society while simultaneously being continuously exploited for social and political purposes. From a Derridean perspective, this paradoxical relationship can be understood through the concept of *supplement*. Derrida argues that the supplement is initially regarded as something secondary, additional, or external to the primary structure. Yet the very existence of the supplement reveals that what is assumed to be the "centre" is never self-sufficient or complete but always depends upon what lies outside it.

Through *Gangubai's* statement, the film demonstrates that female sex workers are not merely a marginalized group existing at the periphery of society. Rather, they become a source of political support for politicians, a source of financial gain for state authorities, and providers of needs that society itself quietly sustains. Consequently, the group that is morally constructed as the "other" emerges as a necessary condition for the functioning of institutions that present themselves as embodiments of morality and social order.

Read through the logic of *supplement*, the film reveals a fundamental contradiction within the stigma directed at female sex workers. Society attempts to preserve its image as the moral centre by excluding sex workers; yet that very centre depends upon the group it excludes for its own coherence and continued operation. Female sex workers, therefore, do not exist outside the social order but constitute one of the conditions that make that order possible. Stigma consequently ceases to appear as an objective moral truth and is instead exposed as a discursive mechanism that conceals this relationship of dependence.

Overall, the representation of stigma in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is not constructed as a unified or stable structure of meaning. Through a deconstructive reading, the film demonstrates that stigma is produced through multiple discursive mechanisms that seek to fix the identity of female sex workers, yet each of these mechanisms simultaneously

contains the conditions of its own instability. By operationalizing Derrida's concepts of *différance*, *trace*, *metaphysics of presence*, *pharmakon*, *iterability*, *logocentrism*, *undecidability*, and *supplement*, this analysis demonstrates that the meaning of stigma is never present as a final or self-evident truth. Instead, it is continually deferred, haunted by traces of excluded meanings, reproduced through language, institutionalized through authoritative discourse, and sustained by what it simultaneously seeks to exclude. In doing so, the film not only represents the stigma surrounding female sex workers but also exposes the fragility of the discursive foundations upon which that stigma depends.

2. Deconstructing Female Sex Workers' Agency in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

This subsection examines the reconstruction of female sex workers' agency as a process through which marginalized subjects negotiate identity, power, and social legitimacy within oppressive structures. Unlike the previous subsection, which focused on the deconstruction of stigma, this section explores how the film reconstructs female sex workers as political subjects capable of producing meaning, negotiating institutions, and reshaping social relations. Accordingly, agency is understood not as an expression of unrestricted individual freedom but as a relational and historically situated practice emerging from continuous engagement with structures of power.

Narratively, the reconstruction of agency begins from a condition of profound subordination in which Gangga loses authority over her body, social position, and voice. Rather than portraying suffering merely as victimhood, the film represents it as the condition through which political consciousness gradually develops. Repeated experiences of exploitation, exclusion, and violence enable Gangga to recognize that her oppression is not the result of individual failure but of broader social and institutional arrangements. Agency therefore emerges through an increasing awareness of the mechanisms that sustain domination.

This transformation becomes visible through Gangga's appropriation of language as a political resource. From a Foucauldian perspective, her public speeches function as counter-discourse, namely discursive practices through which marginalized subjects challenge dominant regimes of truth that define them as immoral, deviant, and socially inferior (Foucault, 1980). Rather than merely rejecting these representations, Gangga articulates an alternative discourse that reclaims dignity, collective identity, and political legitimacy for the women of Kamathipura. Language thus becomes a medium through which marginalized subjects contest the authority of dominant discourse and assert their own social visibility.

However, the emergence of this counter-discourse can be further understood through Derridean deconstruction. Counter-discourse does not simply replace one stable meaning with another. Instead, it becomes possible because the dominant discourse itself is never fully coherent or complete. As demonstrated in the previous subsection, the categories through which female sex workers are stigmatized such as respectable/deviant, moral/immoral, and purity/shame are internally unstable and dependent upon what they exclude. Gangga's speeches therefore do not establish an absolute counter-truth; rather, they expose the contradictions already embedded within dominant discourse. In this sense, Foucault explains how resistance is articulated through discourse, whereas Derrida explains why such resistance is possible in the first place: because no discourse can permanently stabilize meaning.

Agency subsequently extends beyond discursive intervention into the institutional sphere. The film portrays Gangga's leadership in Kamathipura as a form of strategic negotiation through which marginalized women participate in structures of power rather than remaining passive objects of regulation. Through negotiations with police officers, politicians, and local elites, Gangga secures protection, resolves conflicts, and strengthens the collective position of sex workers within the community. Agency therefore materializes not through the rejection of institutions but through the ability to navigate, negotiate, and strategically reposition oneself within existing power relations.

This representation corresponds with recent scholarship suggesting that the agency of female sex workers is often expressed through adaptive negotiation rather than revolutionary emancipation (Maulana, Komariah, & Wulandari, 2023). Instead of depicting liberation as complete escape from oppressive systems, the film presents agency as the capacity to expand spaces of action within structural constraints. Such representation avoids romanticizing resistance while emphasizing the practical strategies through which marginalized women improve their collective conditions.

The most transformative dimension of this reconstructed agency appears in Gangga's struggle to secure educational opportunities for the children of sex workers. Here, agency shifts beyond immediate survival toward long-term social transformation. Education is represented not as a moral reward but as a structural intervention capable of interrupting the intergenerational reproduction of stigma. By demanding educational access, Gangga reorients political struggle toward the future, transforming individual resistance into a collective project of social change.

Importantly, the film does not portray agency as absolute autonomy. Gangga does not abolish prostitution or completely dismantle patriarchal structures. Instead, she continually negotiates with those structures while expanding the scope of collective action available to her community. Agency therefore operates through pragmatic strategies that recognize structural limitations while refusing complete submission to them. Such representation offers a more realistic understanding of marginalized women's political struggles within unequal social systems.

Ultimately, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* reconstructs female sex workers' agency through an interconnected process consisting of reflective political consciousness, the production of counter-discourse, institutional negotiation, and long-term social transformation. While Foucault's concept of counter-discourse explains the discursive practices through which marginalized subjects contest dominant regimes of truth, Derridean deconstruction reveals that these practices succeed because dominant meanings are never fully fixed or self-sufficient. The film therefore represents agency not simply as resistance to power, but as an ongoing process of negotiating and reconstructing meaning within unstable structures of social domination.

E. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* not only reproduces stigma against female sex workers but simultaneously deconstructs the dominant moral constructions that position them as inferior, immoral, and socially undignified subjects. Stigma operates through the naturalization of oppression, hierarchical binary oppositions, the erasure of subjectivity,

and the internalization of stigmatizing identities. However, these dominant meanings are never fully stable. Through a Derridean perspective, the film reveals that the binaries sustaining stigma are internally contradictory and dependent upon the very subjects they seek to exclude, thereby exposing the instability of patriarchal moral discourse.

Furthermore, the film reconstructs the agency of female sex workers through an interconnected process involving the development of reflective political consciousness, the production of counter-discourse, the strategic repositioning of institutional power relations, and a long-term transformative commitment to educational rights. While Foucault's notion of counter-discourse explains how marginalized subjects challenge dominant regimes of truth through alternative discursive practices, Derridean deconstruction demonstrates why such resistance becomes possible: dominant meanings can never achieve complete closure because they remain contingent, relational, and internally unstable. Consequently, agency is understood not as absolute individual freedom but as a strategic, relational, and contextually situated socio-political practice that continuously negotiates the instability of existing structures of power.

The findings contribute both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, the study demonstrates that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* represents female sex workers not as passive victims or idealized heroines, but as political subjects capable of negotiating social legitimacy and reconstructing collective identity within oppressive patriarchal systems. Theoretically, the study bridges Foucauldian counter-discourse and Derridean deconstruction by showing that discursive resistance is effective precisely because dominant meanings are never fully fixed or self-sufficient. This integrated perspective extends the application of deconstruction beyond textual instability toward an understanding of how marginalized subjects reconstruct agency through the continuous negotiation of meaning and power. Future studies are encouraged to comparatively investigate similar representations across different cinematic traditions and cultural contexts in order to further develop cross-cultural understandings of stigma, discourse, and women's agency.

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