



Research Article

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Revisiting “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: Mediated Empowerment and the Limits of the Subaltern Female Voice in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the seminal question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, through the lens of the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, contending that although contemporary Hindi films have become more inclined to represent marginal women, their voices too are thoroughly conditioned by the very filmic discourses that frame them. In the process, this paper takes recourse to ideas of subaltern studies, feminist film criticism, and adaptation theory to analyze how the film frames its protagonist’s voice. The qualitative research method entails the textual and visual analysis of selected scenes portraying public speeches, negotiations, and authoritative claims using cinematic elements such as camera angle, editing, music, costumes, and performances. The paper reveals that *Gangubai*’s power and agency are not solely derived from dialogue but rather created via cinematic representations that influence how she is perceived as an authoritative figure. This paper also examines the similarities and differences between the film and the source material titled *Mafia Queen of Mumbai* in order to illustrate the impact of adaptation in creating visibility and normalization of subaltern voices. It is asserted that what happens in this case is “mediated empowerment,” where, although the woman seems to speak and lead, the intelligibility of her voice is possible solely within the representational practices defined by dominant cultural and aesthetic codes. The distinction between visibility and autonomy suggests that the film cannot be understood as an uncomplicated example of feminist representation. The main contribution of this study to the discussion of feminist film criticism and subalternity theory concerns the necessity for examining not only whether or not the marginalized voices are visible, but also how they are articulated, mediated, and manipulated. Unlike existing studies that primarily interpret the film through empowerment or oppression frameworks, this article develops the concept of mediated empowerment to explain how cinematic form simultaneously enables and constrains subaltern speech.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian film industry is one such cultural form through which Indian society has been and continues to be shaped through the representation of different issues like gender, marginalization, and power relations. Throughout the history of Hindi cinema, the depiction of women has shifted from passive and sacrificial to empowered. But despite this shift towards empowerment of the female figure in films, it can never be assured that female empowerment exists in reality too, because visibility within cultural practices

does not ensure that a woman is actually empowered or that her agency is recognized by anyone else.

In this larger context, the rise of films dealing with women who belong to marginalized communities, specifically women whose lives are not included within the boundaries of proper social behavior (for instance, sex workers), is a very interesting development in Indian cinema. Previously, these women were represented in terms of their moral failings, which only further

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Figure 1: *Gangubai Kathiawadi* ((*Bombay HC Dismisses Pleas Against Movie "Gangubai Kathiawadi,"* 2022)

marginalized them. Modern cinema, nevertheless, continues to try and recast these women as resisters and leaders. One such effort that usually earns high praise is "*Gangubai Kathiawadi*," directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. In this movie, one sees a woman who hails from the fringes of society cast in a role as a person who wields considerable authority and makes her demands for respect known. Both critical and popular reviews of the film have predominantly focused on presenting it as a story of empowerment in terms of the portrayal of a female character who is able to overcome oppression through gaining control over her own life and her surroundings. This way of looking at the movie corresponds to general feminist criticism that sees modern cinematography as paying more attention to the issues of women's subjectivity and agency. Yet, such a celebration brings up a rather crucial point: whether the filmic depiction of a subaltern woman who speaks her mind means that she has gained an independent voice (Spivak, 1988).

The following question becomes highly pertinent due to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, wherein the focus moves from the activity of speech itself to its conditions of production, recognition, and legitimization (Spivak, 1988). Under such an approach, the issue at hand is not simply about the act of speaking, but the possibility of speech independent of the structures of its production.

In relation to films, however, this issue becomes especially intricate. Films can be seen as an inherently

mediated art form, wherein narrative construction, acting, cinematographic strategies, editing, and audio play a role in constructing meaning. It follows that, in the process of making the speech of subalterns visible in film, there are always going to be levels of mediation and construction involved. The speech of marginalized individuals, then, will not be completely autonomous but will exist in a networked system that constructs the conditions of its production. This, in turn, leads to the important question of the difference between being visible and speaking.

In this paper, I revisit Spivak's question, arguing that even though *Gangubai Kathiawadi* provides a platform for the subaltern feminine voice to be articulated, the process remains highly mediated. In contrast with empowerment discourses, this paper takes into account that, along with providing a space to express oneself, cinema constrains the voice to fit certain dominant cultural criteria. Through analysis of selected scenes from the movie, where the character gives her public speeches, confrontations, or negotiates with others, I show how cinematic tools help both empower and constrain the subaltern voice.

By doing so, the paper locates itself at the juncture between subaltern studies, feminist film criticism, and adaptation studies, and deals with both the literary and the cinematic forms of representation. The paper proposes that even though *Gangubai Kathiawadi* extends the reach of marginal women and destabilizes the stereotypes that have been created against them, it, at the same time, mediates their voice through means of storytelling and aesthetics so that it becomes comprehensible and palatable to the audience at large. Consequently, the paper asserts that representations of subaltern women on celluloid cannot simply be seen as empowering but also as mediated.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Subaltern Theory and the Question of Voice

The idea of the "subaltern" was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci as a way to refer to people who do not have any influence within the hegemonic structure of power and who lack representation within the institution (Gramsci, 1971). The theory of subalterns was later developed in postcolonial theory by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous article *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. According to Spivak, the subaltern is not only oppressed but is also placed in such a position that his/her voice either cannot be heard at all or is distorted due to hegemonic representations. Thus, even the speech of the subaltern can be mediated by some kind of translation through hegemonic discourse.

In Spivak's analysis, representation (*Vertretung*) and re-presentation (*Darstellung*) become especially important when considering the way in which intellectual and cultural practices may seek to "give voice" to the subaltern while also speaking on behalf of such a subject. In

doing so, the process of empowerment that can be assumed from the act of articulation becomes more complicated. The problems of subaltern voices being used in dominant discourses without challenging power dynamics have been elaborated on in further scholarly discussion (Chatterjee, 1993). These issues provide the basis of the theoretical discussion regarding cultural texts, particularly films.

Feminist Film Theory and Gendered Representation

Feminist theories of film have been preoccupied for decades now with the way that cinema constructs gender roles and exercises control over them. One early intervention, for example, was made by Laura Mulvey with her “male gaze” notion, which claims that cinema constructs the image of a woman not as an agent but as an object of visual delight (Mulvey, 1975). Later developments within feminist thought have left this approach behind, but the issue of agency remains relevant nonetheless.

Within Indian cinema, academic studies by scholars like Ghosh (2009) and Menon (2012) highlight the tendency to represent women within limited binary oppositions, either as characters embodying virtues and values of family and morality or as rebellious characters defined by their social deviance. In this binary system, women who belong to marginalized communities, such as prostitutes, have been depicted in terms of pity, morality, and performance.

Yet the current Hindi cinema seems to have taken a turn toward representing the idea of female agency in more complex terms, showing the woman as one who negotiates her power as opposed to a passive recipient of subjugation. It is believed by feminist theorists that the concept of agency needs to take into account more than just resistance, but also includes the processes of negotiation and adaptation in order to survive (Mohanty, 2003).

Representing Marginalized Women and Sex Workers in Cinema

Historically, representations of sex workers in Indian films have been either victims or romanticized objects. Older movies portrayed such individuals as victims of circumstances without affording them any agency. Such representations contributed to the stigmatizing of sex workers by making them the “other” category in society, that is, a different category altogether from the rest of society.

However, current research shows the evolution of narrative approaches to marginal women in the attempt to dignify and politicize their position by showing them not merely as victims but also as characters with the ability to exercise agency and act as leaders. The discussion of the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* in this regard is widespread.

While doing so, however, critics warn against blindly praising such representations. By elevating the oppressed characters to the level of heroes, there could be a danger of reducing the complex socio-economic issues or glorifying

the hardships experienced by the oppressed masses for consumption by the elite mainstream society (Mazumdar, 2007).

On the other hand, the literature on the topic has been supplemented by another body of work focusing on discursive analysis of oppression. Today’s Bollywood movies portray the lives of female sex workers through multiple layers of stigma via linguistic means, which establish a hierarchy of respectability. Therefore, although some scholars regard the movie as an example of “empowering resistance” (Pongpan, 2023), others emphasize the discursive reproduction of oppression.

This division within the literature reveals an unresolved tension between visibility and autonomy. While one body of scholarship interprets the increased visibility of marginalized women as evidence of feminist empowerment, another argues that such visibility may remain conditioned by dominant representational structures. It is this tension that the present study seeks to examine through the concept of mediated empowerment.

Recent scholarship also cautions against new research about the uncritical glorification of such representations. While the movie creates a story about women’s leadership and confronts patriarchal ideologies, it achieves this by using semiotics and narration that influence the perception of leadership in the film. Therefore, the necessity of analyzing not only the manifestation of leadership but also its construction cannot be ignored.

Adaptation, Mediation, and Cinematic Transformation

In addition to that, the act of transitioning literary text into a cinematic portrayal adds another level of intricacy to the subaltern voice construction. According to Hutcheon, the adaptation is not an act of replicating literary texts, but rather interpreting and transforming them in order to adapt them to new circumstances (Hutcheon, 2006). In a similar manner, Stam explains that film adaptations are intrinsically intertextual as a result of multiple cultural, aesthetic, and ideological considerations (Stam, 2005).

While in the case of *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, written by Hussain Zaidi, the narration is based on realism, in its adaptation to the cinema screen, it involves a high degree of emotions, showmanship, and dramatization; hence, the protagonist’s portrayal changes. The use of different cinematic tools in filmmaking raises an interesting discussion concerning the way in which voice and agency are mediated through such techniques as *mise en scène* and music performance.

Research Gap

Previous research on *Gangubai Kathiawadi* has been primarily conducted along three major lines. First, previous research has viewed the film as an empowering narrative for women resisting patriarchal oppression (Pongpan, 2023). Second, previous research has analyzed



the issue of stigma and hierarchies of respectability in the portrayal of sex workers. Third, previous work has also explored the issue of adapting literary narrative into cinematic forms. Nevertheless, all previous efforts at analysis appear rather isolated from each other. While existing studies have examined empowerment, stigma, and adaptation independently, relatively limited attention has been paid to how cinematic form itself participates in constructing the appearance of subaltern agency through framing, performance, sound, costume, and narrative restructuring.

Further, relatively little scholarship has brought Spivak's critical perspective on representation into dialogue with feminist film theory and adaptation studies to examine whether the visibility of the subaltern woman creates conditions for autonomous speech. More importantly, existing scholarship has not conceptualized the relationship between visibility and agency through the lens of cinematic mediation. To address this limitation, the present study develops the concept of *mediated empowerment* to explain how contemporary cinema simultaneously enables and constrains the subaltern female voice.

For the purpose of this study, mediated empowerment refers to a representational condition in which marginalized women appear to acquire visibility, authority, and agency within cinematic narratives, while the intelligibility and legitimacy of that agency remain dependent upon narrative, visual, and ideological structures that regulate its expression. Unlike conventional notions of empowerment that emphasize autonomy, mediated empowerment highlights the simultaneous enabling and constraining functions of cinematic representation.

Theoretical Framework

This research project is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective that combines subaltern studies, feminist theories, and film theories to investigate the process of voice production and mediation in films. Instead of viewing these theoretical perspectives as independent frameworks for analyzing voice, the current project brings together all three theoretical perspectives to discuss the issue of subaltern women's voices in films.

Subalternity and the Problem of Speech

The major theoretical framework of this research is based on the writing by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, especially the essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In her writing, Spivak (1988) questions how dominant intellectual and cultural discourses claim to speak for the subordinate subject without actually giving him or her a chance to express his or her own voice. This is because subalterns, who are always excluded from the system of power, do not have immediate access to speech.

The differentiation between representation as "speaking for" (*Vertretung*) and "re-presenting"

(*Darstellung*) by Spivak becomes especially pertinent for the current research. Though cultural representations might be regarded as a means that allows giving voice to the subaltern, they still rely on translating subaltern speech into a form of language that can be understood by the dominating power structure. Consequently, the question of subaltern speech should not only be addressed from the perspective of speaking itself, but also in terms of autonomy.

This notion is based on Antonio Gramsci's earlier theoretical contributions, where he defined subalterns as individuals who are denied participation in politics and society at large (Gramsci, 1971). Although Gramsci focused on exclusion through structure, Spivak took his concept further into the realm of the epistemological and showed how even systems of knowledge are responsible for silencing the subalterns. Taken together, both these theories suggest that subalternity is a state not just of oppression but also of mediation.

Feminist Conceptions of Agency and Voice

Feminism offers an important perspective to help analyze the relationship between voice and agency within constrained circumstances. Conventional interpretations of agency tend to focus on its role in resistance and liberation from power structures; yet, feminists have questioned such narrow interpretations by arguing that agency may also be expressed via negotiation and accommodation (Mohanty, 2003). In other words, agency need not entail a subversion of dominant power systems.

This idea of agency becomes especially relevant in the case of films. According to Menon (2012), the portrayal of women in any form of cultural discourse depends on the social and political structures that dictate the construction of femininity, morality, and respectability. Ghosh (2009) also points out that women in Indian cinema are generally cast into stereotypical roles that deny them any freedom as independent individuals. This even applies to female characters who seem to have agency, but it might just be an illusion because of the cinematic structure.

In this case, the feminist approach will be taken into consideration, and in this case, voice cannot be regarded merely as an action, that is, speaking, but as the ability to speak oneself out without being absorbed in other structures. Hence, it becomes crucial to consider both the fact that the character speaks and how it does it.

Cinematic Mediation and the Construction of Meaning

The nature of cinema, being a combination of sound and images, is inevitably a mediated form, utilizing various forms of mediation for its creation. According to the work of film theorists like Robert Stam, films are never impartial but are constructed due to various ideological, aesthetic, and institutional elements that define their interpretation (Stam, 2005). Linda Hutcheon claims that adaptations are

forms of interpretation that alter the source to fit the needs of another form of narration (Hutcheon, 2006).

Mediation becomes a key aspect within this theory. Hall (1997) argues that representation actively produces meaning rather than simply reflecting reality. Thus, in film, the use of such aspects as camera shots, editing, lighting, acting, and music not only tells a story but also creates the appearance and sounds of the characters. The camera shot can create an aura of power for the character, and music helps to establish the context of emotion within which audiences can understand what is being said or done.

As far as *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is concerned, the voice of the main character is created via the use of dialogue, acting, and camera framing. Though the film makes the main character a forceful speaker, this forcefulness gets augmented by the cinematic methods employed. Hence, the voice of the woman cannot simply be seen as one generated within herself.

Integrating Theory: From Speech to Mediated Voice

Through the combination of subaltern theory, feminist theory, and film theory, this work conceptualizes the subaltern voice as a mediated concept. The critical perspective offered by Spivak brings out the inherent limitations of the subaltern discourse, while feminist theory extends the scope of what agency under constraints may entail. Film theory, on its part, sheds light on how cinema constructs representations. The three theoretical traditions are integrated in the following manner. Adaptation theory provides reasons for why there has been a need for transformation of the narrative because of commercial requirements, using the concept of fictionality to augment authenticity; feminist film theory explains how visual and emotional structures simultaneously enable and regulate the agency of the protagonist; and Spivakian theory provides insight into the philosophical consequences that follow from the process.

This theoretical perspective allows one to interpret *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as more than an empowering story but rather as a space of cinema where the subaltern voice is created and controlled. From the theoretical perspective above, the next part explains the methodological process used in applying the concepts to the film's analysis.

Research Methodology and Design

The research method used in this study is qualitative in

nature. The reason for choosing a qualitative research approach is that qualitative research focuses more on the interpretation of meanings and representations of cultural texts and does not depend on numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the research question addresses issues such as voice, mediation, and agency, the approach focuses on interpreting meaning based on theoretical considerations.

Research Design: Textual and Visual Analysis

The study employs textual and visual analysis of the film. The textural analysis includes an intensive examination of dialogues, storylines, and characters, while visual analysis encompasses components like camera angles, setting, lighting, costume, and acting. According to Rose (2016), visual methodology gives researchers the ability to analyze the ways that images and audiovisual components generate meanings within their cultural contexts.

This two-pronged strategy is necessary because, first, the cinematic voice is not communicated simply through speech. On the contrary, it is created through the relationship between the visual and audio aspects of cinema. In this sense, for example, a character's speech might gain its authority from his or her placement in the frame, the musical score in the background, and the editing process.

Sampling Logic

Scenes were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria:

- Explicit public articulation of voice,
- Negotiation of authority within patriarchal institutions,
- Moments where cinematic form visibly amplifies agency.

Based on these criteria, six key sequences were selected for detailed analysis: the Azad Maidan speech, the Shaukat Khan confrontation, the Rahim Lala alliance, leadership sequences in Kamathipura, the Afshaan subplot, and the Raziabai rivalry.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, scenes were transcribed and coded for speech acts and narrative function. Second, visual elements, including framing, costume, lighting, editing, and sound, were examined. Third, findings were interpreted through the combined framework of subaltern theory, feminist film theory, and adaptation studies.

Table 1: Integration of Theoretical Frameworks and Analytical Application

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Key Concept</i>	<i>Analytical Application</i>
Spivak	Vertretung / Darstellung	Whether Gangubai speaks or is spoken for
Feminist Film Theory	Agency, Gaze, Respectability	How authority is visually produced
Adaptation Theory	Transformation and Re-authoring	How source material becomes cinematic myth

Analytical Focus and Selection of Scenes

This study was confined to scenes that emphasize speech, authority, and negotiation, particularly those in which the protagonist publicly articulates demands, challenges power, or asserts leadership. They include instances of:

- **Public Articulation:** The Azad Maidan speech, which explicitly tests Spivak's boundaries of audibility and the discursive construction of civic inclusion.
- **Patriarchal Authority:** The violent encounter with Shaukat Khan and the alliance with mafia don Rahim Lala, chosen to analyze how female agency is permitted and circumscribed within male-dominated power structures.
- **Cinematic Fictional Elements:** The romantic subplot with Afshaan and the political rivalry with Raziabai were selected to explore how screen adaptation necessitates synthetic narrative elements to manipulate audience allegiance.

It is precisely these kinds of scenes that are chosen since they best address the problem of whether the subaltern woman is capable of "speaking." The emphasis here goes beyond just considering what is spoken by analyzing how it is spoken and the context in which it is spoken.

Cinematic Techniques as Sites of Mediation

The analysis of mediation is carried out with emphasis on particular filmic devices such as:

- Camera angle and placement (for example, a low angle indicating authority)
- Film editing and rhythm, which frame the delivery of speech
- Music and sound, which influence the emotional reaction
- Performance and physicality, which add to the image of power

According to film scholars, "such devices are not simply questions of aesthetic preference but are essential aspects of the process by which meanings and ideologies are produced in cinema" (Stam, 2005). It is in this context that the study analyzes the elements to show how the voice of the hero is constructed in the cinematic process.

Comparative Dimension: Text and Adaptation

Apart from examining the movie itself, another important aspect of this research is its comparative aspect, as it involves discussing *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* by Hussain Zaidi, which is the source of the movie being examined. The reason for this comparative discussion is not to assess its faithfulness, but rather how it has changed its representation of the subaltern voice.

Adaptation scholars highlight that filmic adaptation entails a selection, exaggeration, and transformation of stories, shaped by medium-related factors and audience considerations (Hutcheon, 2006). As compared to Zaidi's text, which tells Gangubai's story in a news-oriented, fairly muted way, the film transforms her voice via drama

and visuality. Thus, the comparative aspect enables an exploration of the ways filmic mediation modifies the context in which subaltern voices are produced.

Scope and Limitations

This study was confined to the analysis of a single film and its source text, with particular emphasis on the construction of the subaltern female voice. The selection of a single case was intentional because *Gangubai Kathiawadi* represents one of the most visible contemporary cinematic representations of a marginalized female subject in Hindi cinema and therefore provides a suitable site for theory-building rather than statistical generalization. The research does not seek to present a comprehensive history of the real-life individual, nor does it seek generalization beyond this one film.

Moreover, it is recognized that the process of interpretation is subjective and is influenced by the theoretical background of the researcher. Nevertheless, such a drawback has been mitigated to some extent through the application of established theoretical concepts, including the theories of subalternity, feminism, and film studies.

Methodological Contribution

Through the combination of textual, visual, and adaptation studies, this methodological approach can be considered to have multiple levels for the investigation of cinematic representations. It goes beyond the surface-level analysis of empowerment and delves deeper into the construction of voice through the process of mediation. This approach shares similarities with qualitative research methods, where depth and contextualization play an important role (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the construction of the subaltern female voice in the film through an analysis of dialogue, performance, and cinematic style. The subaltern theories, feminist theories, and film theories will all be brought together in order to show that although the film allows for the voice of the subaltern to be heard, it does so by controlling its expression.

Constructing Subaltern Voice: Speech and Assertion

On the levels of storytelling and dialogue, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* portrays the story's heroine as someone who not only makes clear demands but also exerts herself as an active force within an oppressive and exploitative society. While most films about sex workers have portrayed their subjects as passive participants in the plot, *Gangubai* herself is often seen performing the act of speaking to the masses and making her voice heard.

Through these acts, she acquires agency through her placement as a speaking subject, not just as a silent character in the film (Mohanty, 2003). Not only does she

speak, but does so not behind closed doors, which makes her acts a symbolic defiance against the marginalization of women from the political process. The trend is reflective of the broader movement towards placing women in more dynamic roles within contemporary Hindi films (Menon, 2012).

But from the point of view of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one needs to tread carefully before making any statements about the instances where articulation occurs. According to Spivak (1988), subaltern discourse tends to be filtered through mechanisms that dictate the form of articulation. As such, although Gangubai appears to speak independently, her discourse is filtered through the cinematic medium.

In this regard, one could consider the Azad Maidan speech where Gangubai asserts her right to claim legitimate rights from within the capitalist framework and says, 'We sell our bodies...it is our business (dhandra)'. By framing sex work as a capitalist enterprise equivalent to any other, her voice becomes audible precisely because it mirrors the ideological contours of bourgeois morality, effectively neutralizing the radical threat of the subaltern. (Spivak, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993)

The sequence is further reinforced through cinematic construction. The visual organization of the scene is equally important to the political force of the speech. The speech is made from an elevated podium to an audience, while the editing keeps alternating between shots of Gangubai and reactions of the people around her. Cinematic representation does not just provide evidence for an actual public address; it gives her speech political credibility. This is a key difference from the Spivakian approach, since Gangubai's speech is neither seen nor heard without being validated in the context of an identifiable public sphere. It is also important to remember feminist film theory when discussing the agency in the sequence. Far from simply enacting agency in her words, Gangubai produces it visually in the frame by performing it for a collective of spectators.

Performing Authority: Language, Body, and Space

Gangubai's voice does not solely rest on speech, but it can be constructed through performance, body language, and space control. Her voice is expressed by body language in the form of posture and movement. In this way, Gangubai is redefined by using a "white saree," which acts as a sign of morality and legitimacy of her actions. The recurrence of the white sari is a visual technique of respectability. The filmmakers do not show Gangubai using the usual imagery used to depict prostitutes; instead, they show her in images of morality, discipline, and leadership. This image invokes the traditional image of the tragedy of the courtesans in Hindi films, along with the usual imagery associated with political leaders in Indian films. This transformation de-emphasizes sexuality in favour of political legitimacy.

According to feminist film theory, this is an important technique since it shows how oppressed women become legitimate for audiences within mainstream culture. Gangubai becomes respectable as a leader because she conforms to certain cultural norms rather than being independent of them. (Pongpan, 2023) Similar observations regarding the symbolic association between whiteness, moral legitimacy, and feminine authority in the film have been noted by Pongpan (2023), who argues that visual symbolism plays a crucial role in constructing Gangubai's public image.

From a spatial perspective, the movie situates Gangubai right at the heart of Kamathipura, thus turning a disadvantaged urban area into an arena for power and governance. The way she moves around within the space is one characterized by confidence and control as she takes charge of places where exploitation usually takes place. This portrayal is consistent with feminist claims that agency may also be achieved through spatial strategies. (Ghosh, 2009; Mohanty, 2003)

On the other hand, this act of exercising power is also consciously crafted to fit into the conventions of acceptable forms of leadership. The speeches of Gangubai, for example, frequently make reference to morality and ethics as well, in a manner that would resonate with the general public and affirm her power. Hence, her voice may not be fully subversive.

Patriarchal Validation

It becomes painfully clear what the extent of her power and freedom is when she comes face-to-face with the gangster Shaukat Khan. After a brutal assault by Shaukat Khan, she circumvents the state and appeals directly to Rahim Lala, an underworld patriarch governed by a strict moral code. The rise to power of Gangubai does not stem from actual self-realization but rather through authorization by a patriarchal benefactor who brutally beats her assailant and declares her his sworn sister. Her empowerment is made palatable to mainstream audiences specifically because it is underwritten by hegemonic masculinity. (Chatterjee, 1993; Menon, 2012)

This sequence is particularly revealing when analyzed according to Spivak's discussion on speaking versus being spoken for. When Gangubai asks Rahim Lala for help, it is not the assertion of any form of autonomy and exercise of justice on her own behalf; rather, it is a call for aid from an alternate patriarchal power structure. Rahim Lala is often placed within shots in a position of visual dominance by the camera, whereas the transformation of Gangubai takes place after she gets recognition from him as his sister. Thus, her authority does not emerge independently but is produced through recognition by existing patriarchal structures. (Spivak, 1988)

In the context of feminist film theory, this shot reveals that the process of empowerment shown in the



film is restricted. Even though the woman fights against patriarchy, her success lies in acceptance within its realm. Thus, the sequence demonstrates that female agency in the film emerges not outside patriarchy but through negotiated incorporation into patriarchal structures.

Cinematic Mediation: Camera, Sound, and Narrative Framing

This complexity manifests itself clearly by virtue of cinematic mediation used in the film. Cinema theoreticians state that there are two ways through which meaning is created in cinema. These include the narrative elements of the film itself as well as how the film is filmed, edited, and produced through sound (Stam, 2005). Likewise, Hall (1997) contends that representation creates meaning rather than mirroring it. Cinematic mediation takes center stage in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as an important element in constructing the character's power.

Gangubai, who figures prominently in the Azad Maidan scene and various leadership moments in Kamathipura, is often depicted from a low-angle point of view, which physically elevates her from among other characters. These shots often coincide with orchestral score buildup, as well as reaction shots from her followers. Film scholars argue that framing, camera angle, editing rhythm and sound design actively shape audience interpretation rather than merely recording events (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). These are not just passive depictions but also constructions of authority. Viewers are led to see Gangubai as charismatic, authoritative, and political before even hearing what she says in her speech. (Stam, 2005) This may be understood with the help of adaptation theory where authority, which is presented more in terms of narration in the source text, becomes audiovisual authority in cinema. (Hutcheon, 2006)

Although this method aids in the empowerment process, it also highlights the fact that her voice is mediated. Her voice does not come across to the audience in an unmediated way, but rather it has been carefully crafted via filmmaking methods that give it a certain meaning. This makes the voice of Gangubai not merely expressed, but rather produced in the context of cinema.

Symbolic and stylistic construction is another key theme that recent studies have focused on in regards to the construction of meaning within this film. According to such studies, the visual representation used to denote moral legitimacy in this film involves symbolism and, more specifically, the use of the color white, implying that cinema contributes significantly to the establishment of the authority of the protagonist (Pongpan, 2023). Taken together, these cinematic strategies illustrate the process of mediated empowerment, whereby authority is produced through representational techniques rather than emerging as an unmediated expression of subaltern agency.

Visibility versus Autonomy: Revisiting Spivak

Visibility and autonomy are some of the essential factors in examining the limitations of the subaltern discourse within films. One film where the visibility and significance of the marginalized person can be witnessed is *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. As pointed out by Spivak (1988), however, the visibility of the marginalized individual does not necessarily entail representation.

The voice of Gangubai is important, but it is rooted in a system that dictates the manner in which it can be heard and understood. Her speeches are made in such a way as to evoke the sense of morality and emotional appeal, rendering it relevant and acceptable for a large audience.

In this regard, the movie can be viewed as allowing the possibility of a subaltern speech that is not only forceful but also restrained. In this case, the heroine's ability to speak is facilitated, although within an environment that guarantees that her speech would always make sense and poses no threat to the status quo.

Adaptation and Amplification: From Text to Screen

Comparing the film to the chapter 'The Matriarch of Kamathipura' in Hussain Zaidi and Jane Borges' source text, *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, mediation's effect becomes apparent. The journalistic source maintains an objective distance, whereas the cinematic adaptation introduces significant fictional elements to execute what scholars term 'fictionality as augmenting authenticity'. For instance, the subplot not present in Zaidi's source text involving the tailor Afshaan humanizes her through maternal sacrifice, while the creation of Raziabai, a fierce transgender rival played by cisgender actor Vijay Raaz, artificially elevates Gangubai's moral standing through contrast. These additions reroute the subaltern voice through the rigid conventions of Bombay melodrama.

By comparing the source text with the film, we can notice many significant narrative shifts. First of all, Gangubai in *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* is mostly a historical figure presented as part of a journalistic story about criminality, struggle for survival, and civic leadership. It remains quite distant and provides very little insight into the heroine's inner life. The movie, on the other hand, transforms the narrative to focus on the issues of emotional identification and heroic character. Some fictional elements, such as the story of Afshaan help viewers view Gangubai as a motherly character who makes sacrifices for others and cares emotionally. The creation of Raziabai, in turn, introduces a morally clear-cut distinction to simplify political complexity into virtuousness vs. corruption. These shifts are not accidental; they show what elements are highlighted in the process of adaptation. (Hutcheon, 2006; Stam, 2005)

According to adaptation theorists, this is one of the essential features of adaptation since each medium has its own requirements aesthetically and narratively

Table 2: Comparison Between Mafia Queens of Mumbai and Gangubai Kathiawadi

Source text (Zaidi)	Film adaptation
Journalistic narration	Melodramatic narration
Historical account	Heroic myth
Limited emotional access	Emotional identification
No Afshaan subplot	Maternal sacrifice narrative
No Raziabai conflict	Moral binary conflict
Documentary tone	Spectacle and emotional excess

(Hutcheon, 2006). In this instance, the movie amplifies the presence and emotive power of Gangubai's voice but also makes it more stylized to meet the needs of cinema.

Amplification serves to show how cinematic mediation can both extend and constrict the voices of the subaltern. While the film amplifies Gangubai's story, giving it greater visibility and centering on her voice, it does so while simultaneously altering her voice to conform to the conventions of popular cinema. (Hutcheon, 2006)

Synthesis: Mediated Empowerment

All of the above analyses lead to the conclusion that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* gives rise to a phenomenon called mediated empowerment. It is about the creation of a plot wherein a disadvantaged woman talks, leads, and wields power. However, it is important to note that such empowerment is mediated rather than independent.

By bringing Spivak's question back into this discussion, the thesis shows that not only can the subaltern woman "speak" in cinema, but her speaking is necessarily mediated. Through this thesis, the film is shown to have an ambivalent role in both making subalterns visible and controlling subaltern voices. This interpretation resonates with recent scholarship that cautions against equating cinematic visibility with autonomous political agency, particularly in representations of marginalized women (Pongpan, 2023).

DISCUSSION

From the above findings, it is clear that the binary opposites of empowerment and oppression are inadequate in analyzing the present-day portrayal of disempowered women on screen. In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, visibility and empowerment of the protagonist coexist alongside ideological confinement. Empowerment exists within the film as a form of narrative visibility; however, such empowerment is always subject to mediation by respectability, patriarchy, and adaptation. The notion of mediated empowerment thus presents a more sophisticated approach to the study of contemporary feminist cinema. Unlike conventional empowerment frameworks that evaluate whether female characters resist oppression, mediated empowerment focuses on the

representational processes through which authority itself is produced, legitimized, and constrained.

More broadly, the findings indicate a significant transformation in contemporary Hindi cinema, where marginalized women are increasingly granted narrative centrality and political visibility. However, such visibility often remains dependent upon culturally recognizable forms of morality, leadership, and respectability. Consequently, inclusion within cinematic narratives may operate less through liberation from dominant structures than through negotiated incorporation into them.

Firstly, this paper builds on previous research regarding *Gangubai Kathiawadi* in that it moves away from studies that focus on the empowerment/rebellion paradigms used to understand this particular work of cinema (Pongpan, 2023). Secondly, this paper contributes to Spivak's approach in that it recognizes that, rather than being silenced, subaltern speech is reorganized and made intelligible through the process of contemporary cinema.

This duality takes on added significance when placed in the context of subaltern studies. According to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the act of speaking by the subaltern is always conditioned by representational systems that define how the subaltern speaks (Spivak, 1988). In this regard, the results from this study have proven this claim, since despite the emphasis of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* on the "subaltern female subject," her speech is rendered comprehensible through certain narrative performances and aesthetics.

Furthermore, the use of visuals and dramatic emotion in the film draws attention to the function of the movies as both an art form and a business venture. As Mazumdar (2007) points out, Bombay films are characterized by a balance between reality and spectacle, where social commentary is balanced with viewer appeal. In this regard, the stylization of Gangubai's voice may be considered a way of making her voice more accessible while at the same time altering its meaning.

The analysis further emphasizes the significance of making a distinction between visibility and autonomy. Even though Gangubai occupies the place of prominence in the film narrative and gains considerable authority within it, her speech is mediated in such a way that it conforms to the moral and cultural codes of the mainstream society, thus remaining comprehensible and appealing to the latter. As noted by Chatterjee (1993), this practice corresponds to the assimilation of marginalized subjects into the mainstream discourse without changing anything in power relations.

It is not, however, reductive to claim that the movie does offer some value as far as the representation of feminists goes, since it breaks down many stereotypes that have existed for decades while giving visibility to stories that have never been represented in mainstream cinema. According to Ghosh (2009), representations in media may have an influence on public discourse in terms of creating new narratives and perspectives.

The findings suggest that contemporary feminist cinema may increasingly operate through forms of mediated empowerment in which marginalized women become visible without fully escaping dominant representational structures. This conceptual category may prove useful beyond *Gangubai Kathiawadi* for analyzing other contemporary cinematic portrayals of marginalized female subjects. (Pongpan, 2023)

CONCLUSION

The present study was undertaken with the aim of re-examining the query raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak?” through the prism of modern Hindi cinema and, in particular, with regard to the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. By adopting a theoretical approach based on subaltern studies, feminism, and film studies, it has been demonstrated that despite giving the subaltern woman a voice, it remains essentially framed by the cinema.

Through its focus on mediation, this paper makes a contribution to current discussions in feminist film theory and subaltern studies that stresses the importance of analyzing the process of subaltern speech-making. It refutes accounts that celebrate subaltern empowerment by revealing the role played by filmic and narrative conventions in mediating the speech of the subaltern.

Nevertheless, cinema remains an important cultural site through which marginalized experiences can enter public discourse, even when such representations remain mediated by dominant narrative and aesthetic conventions. Even if such cinematic discourses do not completely elude the mediation process, they still serve the important function of increasing subaltern visibility.

The study’s broader theoretical implication lies in demonstrating how cinematic visibility and political autonomy may diverge, even within narratives commonly celebrated as empowering. The concept contributes to ongoing debates in feminist film studies and subaltern theory by providing a framework for analyzing representations that simultaneously expand visibility while preserving the conditions through which that visibility becomes culturally intelligible. Future research may apply the concept of mediated empowerment to other contemporary cinematic representations of marginalized women in order to assess its broader analytical applicability. Instead of focusing on whether marginalized representations of women in films are empowering or repressive, the analysis in this study

has shown that contemporary cinema both facilitates and constrains the visibility of subalterns. Combining the theories of representation proposed by Spivak with feminist film studies and adaptation studies, the article proposes an approach through which we can see how the marginal voices can be articulated in filmic texts without becoming totally subsumed into dominant cultural and aesthetic codes. In this sense, the question is no longer whether the subaltern can speak, but under what representational conditions that speech becomes audible.

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