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Bollywood Beyond Borders: Gender, Agency, and the Global Reception of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of female agency and empowerment in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2022 film, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, and its transnational reception in Thailand. Adopting a qualitative interpretive approach, the study combines feminist textual analysis of the film with documentary analysis of published research, media coverage, and documented digital engagement concerning its Thai reception. Drawing on feminist perspectives on the male gaze, respectability, and agency under structural constraint, the article argues that the film challenges conventional representations of sex workers by portraying *Gangubai* as a politically influential figure who negotiates patriarchal authority and advocates for marginalised women. However, her empowerment remains contradictory, as her social legitimacy is partly constructed through maternalisation, desexualisation, and moral respectability, while the film's stylised narrative gives limited attention to caste and structural inequality. The analysis of Thai reception demonstrates how Netflix distribution, influencer adaptations, social media participation, and cultural discussions contributed to the film's circulation beyond India. *Gangubai*'s visual identity and commanding persona were selectively reinterpreted within Thai popular culture, acquiring meanings associated with confidence, entrepreneurship, and performative empowerment. The article concludes that transnational cinematic circulation involves more than the dissemination of cultural narratives; it entails their active negotiation and transformation within local contexts. By connecting feminist film analysis with transnational reception, the study highlights both the possibilities and limitations of Bollywood cinema as a medium of gendered representation and cross-cultural meaning-making.

Keywords: Bollywood; *Gangubai Kathiawadi*; Female Agency; Feminist Film Analysis; Transnational Reception; Thai Popular Culture; Thailand

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Introduction

Bollywood, based in Mumbai, India, stands as one of the largest and most influential film industries globally, shaping cultural narratives, societal norms, and perceptions of Indian society both domestically and internationally. Historically, Bollywood's portrayal of women often adhered to traditional patriarchal frameworks, reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting female agency (Tangtenglam, 2023). However, the 21st century has witnessed a significant transformation in the representation of women, reflecting the broader debates around gender equality and women's empowerment and changing social expectations in India (Sengupta & Ganjoo, 2021). The rising prominence of women-centred narratives challenges traditional representations by highlighting female independence, resilience, and the negotiation of power within socially restrictive environments. These transformations, however, remain complex since Bollywood films continue to negotiate tensions between modern representations of women and established cultural expectations surrounding femininity, morality, and respectability.

With this changing cinematic landscape, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2022 film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* offers a compelling case to examine the representation of female agency and empowerment. The film narrates the transformation of a young woman trafficked into prostitution and rising as an influential figure in Mumbai's red-light district of Kamathipura. The film does an excellent job in presenting Gangubai as a woman who exercises political authority, negotiates patriarchal structures and advocates for the dignity and rights of sex workers. Nevertheless, this representation also raises questions about the conditions under which marginalised women become socially accepted within mainstream cinema. Although Gangubai's political leadership challenges established stereotypes surrounding sex workers, her transformation into a maternal, morally respected, and politically influential figure reveals the limitations and contradictions of cinematic empowerment.

The significance of Gangubai Kathiawadi, however, extends beyond its representation of women in Indian cinema. Bollywood has long served as a medium of cultural circulation, helping to disseminate Indian cultural values, identities and social narratives across national borders (Balabantaray, 2020). More recently, with the expansion of global streaming platforms and digital media, new avenues for Indian films opened to reach international audiences. Streaming platforms like Netflix, as opposed to traditional theatrical distribution, enable films to circulate within and across geographical boundaries, whereas social media platforms enable audience participation, reinterpretation of the content and production of localised cultural content. Therefore, the international reception of Bollywood films is not simply about the transmission of Indian cultural narratives, but also about their reinterpretation within different social and cultural contexts.

The reception of Gangubai Kathiawadi in Thailand provides important insights into this process. Following its release on Netflix, the film generated considerable public interest through social media buzz, influencer adaptations, fashion trends, and conversations around gender, morality, and sex work. Thai audiences were not just passively consuming the film as an Indian cultural product but actively reinterpreting its characters, imagery and narratives through local cultural practices and digital media. Gangubai's distinctive visual trademarks – white saris, public speeches and a commanding persona – became recognisable symbols in Thai popular culture. These developments demonstrate how a cinematic narrative grounded in the specific social realities of India can acquire new cultural meanings when circulated across national boundaries.

Against this background, this article examines *Gangubai Kathiawadi* through two interconnected dimensions: its cinematic construction of female agency and empowerment, and its reception and cultural

reinterpretation in Thailand. Drawing on feminist film theory, particularly debates surrounding the male gaze, respectability, and agency under structural constraint, alongside perspectives on cultural soft power and transnational audience reception, the study investigates how the film simultaneously challenges and reproduces dominant representations of femininity, morality, and power. It further considers how these representations are appropriated, transformed, and circulated within Thai popular culture through digital media, influencer practices, and public discourse.

The article argues that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* represents a contradictory form of cinematic empowerment in which female agency is foregrounded while remaining mediated by conventional expectations of moral respectability and social legitimacy. Its reception in Thailand further demonstrates that the meanings attached to such representations are not fixed within their original cultural contexts but are actively reconstructed through transnational circulation and local audience participation. By bringing feminist film analysis into dialogue with the study of transnational media reception, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how Bollywood cinema functions simultaneously as a site of gendered representation, cultural negotiation, and cross-cultural meaning-making.

The article is organised as follows. The next section provides an overview of the evolving representation of women in Bollywood cinema, followed by an explanation of the study's qualitative methodology. The subsequent section examines *Gangubai Kathiawadi* through four interconnected themes: political agency, respectability and maternalisation, social dignity, and the contradictions of cinematic empowerment. The discussion then shifts to the film's reception in Thailand, focusing on its cultural influence, influencer adaptations, digital participation, and public discourse. Building on these findings, the following section considers how representations of female empowerment are reinterpreted through transnational cultural circulation. The article concludes by reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of Bollywood cinema in shaping gendered representations and cross-cultural meaning-making.

Background: Bollywood's Evolving Portrayal of Women

The representation of women in Bollywood has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader changes in Indian society and shifting debates surrounding gender, identity, and empowerment. Historically, mainstream Hindi cinema frequently confined female characters to conventional roles, including the dutiful wife, self-sacrificing mother, or object of male desire, reinforcing patriarchal expectations surrounding femininity and morality (Sharma & Srivastava, 2024). However, contemporary Bollywood has increasingly introduced women-centred narratives that challenge these conventions by portraying female characters as independent, assertive, and capable of negotiating their own identities and aspirations.

This transformation is reflected in several Bollywood films released between 2013 and 2016, including *Queen*, *Dangal*, *Piku*, and *Parched,* which foreground women's experiences, personal autonomy, and resistance to restrictive gender expectations (Ahad & Akgül, 2020; Sengupta & Ganjoo, 2021; Chawla, 2024). The growing contributions of female filmmakers and producers have also expanded the range of women's stories represented in mainstream and independent Hindi cinema (Kaur, 2024). Nevertheless, these developments do not necessarily indicate a complete departure from patriarchal conventions. Traditional gender stereotypes continue to shape cinematic narratives, while representations of female empowerment often remain conditioned by established expectations of morality, respectability, and social acceptance (Chen, 2024; Tholia & Singh, 2022).

Within this evolving landscape, Gangubai Kathiawadi occupies a particularly significant position because it places a socially marginalised woman at the centre of a narrative of political authority and collective advocacy. Unlike films that primarily explore women's empowerment

through education, family relationships, or personal independence, Gangubai Kathiawadi foregrounds a sex worker whose struggle for dignity challenges conventional distinctions between respectable and stigmatised femininity. The film therefore provides an opportunity to examine not only how Bollywood's representation of women has evolved but also the contradictions that emerge when female empowerment is constructed within existing moral and social hierarchies.

Beyond these representational changes, Bollywood's international circulation has contributed to the dissemination and reinterpretation of Indian cultural narratives across different societies (Balabantaray, 2020). The growing accessibility of Hindi cinema through streaming platforms and social media has further expanded opportunities for international audiences to engage with these narratives beyond conventional theatrical consumption. In this context, Gangubai Kathiawadi provides an opportunity to examine how representations of gender and empowerment travel across cultural boundaries and acquire meanings that may differ from those embedded within their original social contexts. Its reception in Thailand is particularly relevant to understanding how global cinematic narratives become incorporated into local popular culture and public discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach combining textual and thematic analysis of the 2022 film Gangubai Kathiawadi with documentary analysis of published materials concerning the film's reception in Thailand. It examines two interconnected dimensions: how the film creates representations of female agency, empowerment, and respectability within the Indian sociocultural context, and how these representations are circulated and reinterpreted within Thai popular culture. The emphasis is on understanding the construction and transformation of cultural meanings rather than measuring audience responses.

The film is examined through close reading informed by feminist film theory, focusing on narrative development, characterisation, dialogue, cinematography, and visual symbolism. Particular attention is given to Gangubai's transformation from a trafficked young woman into a politically influential leader, her interactions with male authority figures, and her public advocacy for the dignity and rights of sex workers. Recurring visual elements, including her white saris, bodily framing, and maternal representation, are analysed through feminist perspectives on the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), resilience and agency under structural constraint (McRobbie, 2020), and the intersections of gender, caste, and stigmatised labour (Kotiswaran, 2011; Paik, 2014; Rege, 1998).

The analysis of Thai reception draws on published academic research, Thai and international media coverage, documented social media trends, and publicly available influencer content. Sources were selected for their relevance to the film's cultural distribution and reinterpretation in Thailand, particularly examples involving visual adaptations, influencer performances, and public discussions of gender and sex work. These include Pimrypie's Gangubai-inspired parody, Tangtenglam's (2023) study of Thai viewers' perceptions of Indian culture, and Wisesight's social listening findings collected through ZOCIAL EYE between May 8 and 17, 2022, as reported by Tangtenglam (2023). The latter findings are used as contextual evidence of online engagement rather than independently analysed quantitative data.

The reception materials are synthesised thematically around three dimensions: digital distribution, cultural adaptation, and public discourse. These dimensions provide a framework for examining how Gangubai's cinematic identity and representations of female empowerment obtain new meanings within Thai popular culture. By integrating feminist textual analysis with documentary evidence of transnational reception, the study considers cultural distribution as a process of reinterpretation rather than passive consumption. As the reception analysis relies on

published secondary sources, its findings illustrate documented patterns of cultural engagement rather than representing the perspectives of all Thai audiences.

Analysis of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the 2022 film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is a biographical crime drama inspired by the life of Gangubai Harjeevandas, originally known as Ganga Harjeevandas Kathiawadi. Born into a relatively affluent family in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat, India, she reportedly left home as a teenager with her romantic partner, Ramnik Lal, who subsequently deceived her and sold her to a brothel in Mumbai's red-light district, Kamathipura (Zaidi & Borges, 2011). Despite these circumstances, she later emerged as a politically influential figure within the community.

Starring Alia Bhatt as Gangubai, the film traces her transformation from a young woman subjected to exploitation into a community leader who advocates for the rights and dignity of sex workers. Rather than presenting Gangubai solely through conventional narratives of victimhood, the film presents her as a complex figure whose authority emerges through negotiations with patriarchal structures, social stigma, and political power. The following analysis examines these tensions through four interconnected themes: political agency, respectability, social dignity, and the contradictions of cinematic empowerment.

From Victimhood to Political Agency

One of the film's most significant departures from conventional representations of sex workers in Bollywood lies in its emphasis on female agency. Earlier cinematic narratives frequently positioned sex workers as tragic figures awaiting rescue or moral redemption, as illustrated by films such as Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan. In contrast, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* presents its protagonist as an active participant in shaping her circumstances rather than a passive victim of exploitation. Following her betrayal and trafficking into prostitution, Ganga gradually reconstructs her identity as Gangu and subsequently *Gangubai*, consolidating her influence within Kamathipura. Her transformation is represented through her ability to negotiate with powerful men, mobilise community support, and establish herself as a political advocate for marginalised women.

This transformation can be understood through Angela McRobbie's (2020) discussion of resilience and contemporary constructions of female empowerment. McRobbie's work highlights how women are increasingly represented as self-governing subjects expected to demonstrate independence, adaptability, and responsibility for their own survival despite persistent structural inequalities. *Gangubai's* rise to authority reflects this tension. Her empowerment does not emerge through liberation from the patriarchal and exploitative structures surrounding her but through her ability to navigate and negotiate power within them. Her leadership, entrepreneurial capabilities, and strategic relationships enable her to secure influence, yet the conditions that initially produced her marginalisation remain largely intact. The film therefore constructs agency not as unrestricted freedom but as a form of negotiation within existing social hierarchies.

The representation of male characters further reinforces this narrative emphasis on female agency. Rahim Lala, a powerful underworld figure, becomes *Gangubai*'s ally and protector, while Afsaan, her romantic partner, offers emotional support without ultimately determining her political trajectory. Although these relationships demonstrate that Gangubai's authority is not entirely independent of male-dominated networks, the narrative positions her as the principal agent of her own transformation. Male characters function primarily as facilitators rather than conventional saviours, challenging the familiar cinematic expectation that marginalised women achieve security or redemption through male intervention. Nevertheless, the importance of these alliances also reveals the limits of individual empowerment within systems where access to protection and political legitimacy

remains mediated by masculine authority.

Alia Bhatt's performance reinforces this construction of female agency through her portrayal of Gangubai's emotional vulnerability and growing political authority. Her changing expressions, assertive dialogue delivery, and increasingly commanding physical presence communicate the protagonist's transformation without entirely erasing the experiences of exploitation and trauma that shape her identity. Bhansali's direction further emphasises this development through carefully composed scenes that position Gangubai as the central figure in negotiations and public confrontations. The relationship between performance and visual composition thus contributes to the film's representation of empowerment, presenting female authority as both an individual achievement and a response to persistent social constraints.

Respectability, Maternalisation, and the Female Body

While *Gangubai Kathiawadi* challenges conventional representations of sex workers by foregrounding female leadership, its construction of empowerment also depends upon the transformation of *Gangubai* into a socially respectable figure. This process is particularly evident in the film's treatment of her body, sexuality, costume, and public identity. Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze provides a useful framework for examining how mainstream cinema has historically positioned women as objects of visual pleasure. Mulvey argues that conventional cinematic representations often privilege a heterosexual male perspective, positioning women as objects to be looked at rather than as active subjects who control the narrative. Through camera techniques, visual framing, and narrative structures, female characters are frequently presented in ways that emphasise their physical appearance and sexual desirability, reinforcing unequal gender relations. In contrast to the eroticised representation frequently associated with sex workers in popular cinema, Bhansali's portrayal increasingly emphasises *Gangubai*'s authority, emotional restraint, and political influence rather than her sexual availability.

Gangubai's white saris, composed expressions, commanding posture, and carefully constructed public appearances become important visual markers of this transformation. Her identity is progressively associated with leadership, dignity, and moral authority, distancing her from the stereotypical image of the sexually transgressive or morally fallen woman. Scenes emphasising her negotiations, public speeches, and community responsibilities reposition her body as a symbol of political presence rather than primarily an object of sexual desire. However, this apparent departure from conventional cinematic objectification also introduces a contradiction: Gangubai's empowerment becomes more acceptable precisely as her sexuality is displaced by an image of discipline, sacrifice, and respectability.

The film further reinforces this transformation through *Gangubai*'s representation as a maternal protector of Kamathipura. Her authority is closely associated with her willingness to defend and care for other women, presenting her as a figure whose legitimacy derives not only from political influence but also from her capacity for collective responsibility. This maternalisation allows the film to reconcile her stigmatised social position with culturally recognisable ideals of feminine virtue. Rather than fully challenging the moral hierarchies that marginalise sex workers, the narrative partially negotiates these hierarchies by presenting Gangubai as an exceptional woman whose leadership and caregiving distinguish her from prevailing stereotypes.

Consequently, the film's feminist significance remains ambivalent. Although it creates space for a marginalised woman to occupy the centre of a narrative of political authority, it simultaneously suggests that such authority becomes socially legitimate when accompanied by conventional markers of respectable femininity. *Gangubai* is celebrated not simply because she exercises agency as a sex worker, but because her cinematic identity is reconstructed through maternal responsibility,

moral discipline, and political leadership. This tension between empowerment and respectability constitutes one of the film's central representational contradictions.

Reclaiming Dignity and Challenging Social Stigma

Beyond the transformation of its protagonist, Gangubai Kathiawadi challenges the social stigma surrounding sex work by presenting dignity and recognition as central political demands. Rather than constructing *Gangubai*'s journey as a search for moral purification or escape from her profession, the film emphasises her insistence that sex workers deserve respect, protection, and social acceptance. This position becomes particularly evident in her public advocacy, including her speech at Azad Maidan, where she challenges the hypocrisy of a society that simultaneously relies upon and condemns the labour of sex workers.

Through these public interventions, the film reframes sex work as a question of social recognition, labour, and political rights rather than solely one of individual morality. Gangubai's demands extend beyond her personal circumstances to address the collective marginalisation of women living and working in Kamathipura. Her advocacy therefore shifts the narrative from individual survival toward collective political representation, positioning her as a spokesperson for a community excluded from conventional structures of social legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the film's treatment of dignity remains closely connected to the exceptional status of its protagonist. *Gangubai*'s capacity to challenge social stigma derives partly from her personal charisma, political connections, and leadership qualities. While these characteristics make her an effective cinematic figure of resistance, they also raise questions about whether the narrative challenges the stigmatisation of sex workers more broadly or primarily legitimises an extraordinary individual who transcends the conventional boundaries of her profession. The film thus opens an important space for discussing the rights and dignity of marginalised women while leaving unresolved the relationship between individual recognition and collective structural change.

Contradictions of Cinematic Empowerment: Spectacle, Caste, and Structural Inequality

Despite its progressive representation of female agency, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* has also been criticised for its aestheticisation of prostitution and limited engagement with the structural inequalities shaping sex work in India. Bhansali's elaborate sets, striking cinematography, carefully designed costumes, and visually spectacular representation of Kamathipura contribute to the film's cinematic appeal. However, this aesthetic treatment risks romanticising a social environment historically associated with exploitation, poverty, violence, and marginalisation. The visual transformation of Kamathipura into a highly stylised cinematic space may consequently obscure the material conditions within which the lives of sex workers are situated.

A further limitation concerns the film's relatively limited engagement with caste-based marginalisation. Dalit feminist scholarship has consistently emphasised the intersections of caste, patriarchy, labour, and social exclusion in shaping the experiences of marginalised women in India. Rege (1998) demonstrates the importance of understanding women's experiences through the intersecting structures of caste and gender, while Paik (2014) highlights the historical processes through which Dalit women have experienced multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion. Similarly, Kotiswaran (2011) situates sex work within complex relationships involving labour, coercion, economic vulnerability, and legal regulation. These perspectives reveal the limitations of interpreting empowerment primarily through individual resilience without sufficient attention to the structural conditions that shape women's choices and opportunities.

Viewed through this critical lens, *Gangubai*'s transformation into a politically influential figure risks presenting individual success as a response to inequalities that are fundamentally collective and institutional. Although the film acknowledges exploitation and social stigma, its

emphasis on personal determination and exceptional leadership offers comparatively limited engagement with the broader caste and class hierarchies embedded within the social organization organisation of sex work. The narrative therefore illustrates the tension between celebrating marginalised women's agency and adequately representing the structural forces that constrain it.

These contradictions do not negate the film's contribution to contemporary representations of women in Bollywood. Rather, they demonstrate the complexity of constructing feminist narratives within commercially oriented popular cinema. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* simultaneously challenges conventional stereotypes of sex workers, foregrounds female political authority, and reproduces familiar expectations of respectability and individual resilience. Its significance lies not in offering an unambiguous narrative of emancipation but in revealing how female empowerment is negotiated through competing demands of social critique, cinematic spectacle, and mainstream cultural acceptability.

Thai Reception and Cultural Reinterpretation

A Cultural Bridge and a Popular Media Phenomenon

The reception of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* in Thailand illustrates how Bollywood cinema can transcend its original sociocultural context and acquire new meanings through transnational circulation. Following its availability on Netflix, the film attracted considerable attention among Thai audiences, generating widespread social media engagement, influencer adaptations, cultural discussions, and commercial interest. Although Bollywood has long circulated internationally, the growing accessibility of Indian cinema through global streaming platforms has created additional opportunities for audiences outside India to encounter and engage with its narratives. In the case of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Netflix facilitated access to the film, while Thai digital media and influencer culture played an important role in extending its visibility beyond conventional film viewership.

The film's reception is particularly significant because its narrative is rooted in the specific social circumstances of Mumbai's Kamathipura red-light district, including prostitution, gender inequality, and the struggle for social recognition. Despite this culturally specific setting, Gangubai Kathiawadi became recognisable within Thai popular culture through its distinctive visual imagery, dramatic storytelling, and representation of a powerful female protagonist. Its reception therefore raises questions about how audiences engage with cultural narratives originating outside their own societies and how particular aspects of those narratives become meaningful within local contexts.

Beyond its entertainment value, the film stimulated interest in Indian culture, history, and social issues. One example was Roundfinger Channel's (2022) approximately 90-minute special discussion examining the film's cultural and historical setting, including Indian language, social practices, and the representation of Kamathipura. The film also became the subject of academic discussion through the panel “Peeking Through the Cultural Veil: Exploring the Status of Women in India,” which brought together scholars from Thai universities to discuss women's empowerment, caste, prostitution, and the development of Bollywood in relation to the entertainment industries of India and Thailand. These examples demonstrate that the film's distribution was not confined to popular entertainment but also provided opportunities for cultural interpretation and critical engagement with Indian society.

Further insight into Thai audience reception is provided by Tangtenglam's (2023) study of 400 Thai viewers, which examined perceptions of Indian cultural elements represented in Gangubai Kathiawadi. The study explored audience responses to traditional attire, dance, festivals, cuisine, and everyday cultural practices. Its reported findings indicated positive perceptions of several cultural elements, particularly the film's visual and performative representations of Indian traditions, including

Navaratri[1] celebrations and the wearing of saris. These findings suggest that the film functioned as a point of cultural engagement through which Thai viewers encountered representations of Indian society. However, such responses should not be interpreted as demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of Indian culture or a broader transformation in public attitudes. Rather, they illustrate how popular cinema can generate interest in cultural practices and encourage further engagement with societies beyond the audience's immediate cultural environment.

The film's influence was also visible in Bangkok's Pahurat district, commonly associated with the city's Indian community and textile trade. Published media coverage described increased consumer interest in Indian clothing, particularly white saris resembling those worn by Gangubai, following the film's popularity in Thailand (Today 2022). Traders and local observers linked this demand to renewed interest in Indian fashion during the period of economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic (T. Das, 2022). As pandemic-related restrictions eased, the gradual reopening of markets, social gatherings, and commercial activities created opportunities for consumers to return to physical shopping and participate in fashion trends. Within this context, the popularity of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* provided an additional cultural stimulus, encouraging interest in Indian clothing and accessories at a time when local businesses were seeking to recover from the economic disruption caused by the pandemic. Such developments demonstrate how cinematic imagery can move beyond the screen and become incorporated into local consumer practices. Gangubai's white sari, originally part of the film's construction of her identity and authority, acquired an additional meaning as a recognisable fashion symbol through which Thai audiences could participate in the film's popularity.

These forms of engagement illustrate the potential of Bollywood cinema to contribute to India's cultural visibility abroad. However, the film's reception should not be understood simply as the successful transmission of Indian cultural values to Thai audiences. Its significance also lies in the ways Thai viewers and media producers selectively interpreted, adapted, and reproduced elements of the film according to local interests and practices. This distinction becomes particularly evident in the influencer-driven adaptations that contributed to the film's popularity.

Influencer Culture and the Localisation of *Gangubai*

One of the most distinctive features of *Gangubai Kathiawadi's* reception in Thailand was the widespread recreation of its characters, costumes, dialogue, and performances across social media platforms. Thai users and celebrities adapted Gangubai's recognisable appearance through white saris, makeup transformations, dance covers, and reproductions of her commanding gestures and expressions. These practices transformed the protagonist from a character embedded within a specific Indian narrative into a recognisable figure within Thai digital culture. The film's imagery became accessible to audiences who could participate in its popularity through performance, imitation, and creative reinterpretation.

Among the most prominent examples was the adaptation created by Thai influencer and entrepreneur Pimrypie. Her *Gangubai*-inspired parody did not simply reproduce the film's storyline but reinterpreted its visual style, dialogue, and characterisation within a distinctly Thai commercial and entertainment context. In the video, *Gangubai*'s commanding persona and recognisable mannerisms were adapted to promote Pimrypie's fermented fish sauce brand, Pha Ra Mae E Pim. By combining Bollywood-inspired costumes, cinematic staging, and dramatic performance with a familiar Thai food

[1] Navratri is a major Hindu festival celebrated over nine nights, typically in September or October, in honour of the divine feminine, particularly Goddess Durga. The festival commemorates Durga's victory over the demon Mahishasura, symbolising the triumph of good over evil. Celebrations include fasting, worship, feasting, and cultural festivities (Agarwal, 2022).

product, the parody transformed the film's protagonist into a figure associated with entrepreneurial confidence, humour, and digital celebrity culture.

The approximately six-minute video attracted substantial public attention, reportedly generating more than 2.2 million views, over 100,000 likes, and more than 4,000 comments. Its production drew attention to the recreation of *Gangubai*'s costume, speech patterns, and visual presentation, while Thai entertainment coverage highlighted Pimrypie's resemblance to Alia Bhatt. The adaptation also attracted attention beyond Thailand when Bhatt reportedly shared the video through her social media account. This movement of a locally produced adaptation back into the wider circulation of the original film illustrates how transnational media exchange can operate in multiple directions. Rather than merely receiving an Indian cinematic product, Thai creators contributed new content that became part of the film's broader digital visibility.

Pimrypie's adaptation is particularly revealing when considered alongside the film's representation of female empowerment. Within *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the protagonist's authority emerges through her struggle against exploitation, social stigma, and political marginalisation. In the Thai parody, however, her commanding appearance and public confidence are detached from this narrative and incorporated into a performance of entrepreneurial success. *Gangubai*'s authority is thus reinterpreted through the persona of a successful female influencer whose commercial activities and public visibility are central to her digital identity. This transformation does not necessarily reproduce the film's feminist politics, but it demonstrates how the imagery of female power can be adapted to communicate locally recognisable forms of confidence, independence, and success. The adaptation also highlights the relationship between transnational popular culture and digital entrepreneurship. Pimrypie's performance combined entertainment and commercial promotion, demonstrating how recognisable cinematic imagery can be incorporated into influencer marketing. In this context, *Gangubai* became not only a character associated with resilience and leadership but also a cultural reference through which a Thai entrepreneur could communicate her own public identity. The resulting reinterpretation illustrates how global media narratives can be transformed through local commercial practices rather than reproduced in their original form.

Digital Participation and the Scale of Cultural Circulation

The extent of the film's digital visibility is further illustrated by published social listening findings from Wisesight (Thailand) Co., Ltd. Using its ZOCIAL EYE platform, Wisesight examined online activity associated with *Gangubai Kathiawadi* between May 8 and May 17, 2022. The analysis reported more than 11.9 million engagements generated by 8,017 accounts, with approximately 1,800 mentions per day. Facebook accounted for 47.74% of reported mentions, followed by Twitter (35.86%), Instagram (12.5%), and other platforms (3.9%). Women represented 68.04% of the participants identified in the published findings.

These figures provide evidence of the film's substantial visibility within Thai digital media during the period examined. However, their analytical significance extends beyond the overall volume of online engagement. The reported prominence of content recreating the film's imagery suggests that participation was an important dimension of its circulation. According to the published findings, such “covering” activities generated more than 4.6 million engagements, reflecting the popularity of costume recreations, makeup transformations, and performances inspired by the film's dance sequences and visual style. Several Thai celebrities and influencers contributed to this circulation, including Pimrypie, Ja Rsiam, Pinky Savika, Mewky Priya, and Kratae Rsiam. Their participation helped bring Gangubai-inspired imagery into different areas of Thai entertainment and digital culture. The involvement of recognisable public figures also illustrates how the film's popularity was

amplified through existing influencer networks, enabling cinematic imagery to circulate among audiences who may have encountered the adaptations independently of the original film.

These patterns of participation help explain the visibility of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* in Thailand. The film offered a combination of recognisable visual characteristics, emotionally expressive performances, and a compelling central character whose appearance and mannerisms could be reproduced in short-form digital content. Its distinctive white saris, dramatic dialogue, and choreographed sequences provided accessible elements for adaptation, while influencer participation further expanded their circulation. These characteristics offer a plausible explanation for the film's popularity within Thai digital culture, although the available secondary evidence does not establish that they were the sole or primary causes of its success relative to other Bollywood films.

The published figures also require careful interpretation. High engagement levels demonstrate visibility and participation, but they do not independently establish audience motivations or agreement with the film's social and political messages. Similarly, the reported proportion of female participants cannot by itself demonstrate identification with Gangubai's feminist struggle. The value of these findings lies in contextualising the scale of cultural circulation and identifying the forms of digital participation through which the film became prominent in Thailand.

From Popular Culture to Social Discourse

Although much of the film's visible reception in Thailand centred on fashion, performance, and influencer adaptations, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* also entered public discussions concerning gender, morality, and the legal status of sex work. The film's representation of a woman who challenges social stigma and demands dignity for sex workers provided a reference point for examining related issues within Thai society.

A Bangkok Post (2022) opinion article, for example, drew upon the film to discuss the legalisation of prostitution in Thailand, emphasising the importance of labour protections, social welfare, and the vulnerabilities associated with existing legal arrangements. The discussion connected *Gangubai*'s advocacy for sex workers with broader concerns about gender inequality, economic insecurity, and the treatment of marginalised women. This example demonstrates how a cinematic narrative originating in India could become relevant to debates situated within Thailand's own social and legal context. Such engagement is particularly important because it illustrates a different form of cultural reinterpretation from the fashion trends and influencer performances discussed earlier. Whereas popular adaptations frequently emphasised *Gangubai*'s appearance, confidence, and commanding personality, discussions of sex work drew more directly upon the political and social dimensions of the film's narrative. The film therefore circulated simultaneously as a source of entertainment, a recognisable cultural image, and a reference point for public debate.

Nevertheless, the presence of such discussions should not be taken as evidence that the film produced measurable changes in Thai attitudes toward sex work or gender equality. The available published sources document instances of engagement with these issues rather than systematic changes in public opinion. Their significance lies in demonstrating that the film's meanings were not confined to its visual appeal and that aspects of its social critique could be reinterpreted in relation to local concerns.

Transnational Reception and the Reinterpretation of Female Empowerment

Taken together, the Thai reception of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* reveals how transnational cinematic narratives can acquire multiple meanings as they circulate through different cultural environments. The film's availability through Netflix created opportunities for international viewing, while Thai influencers, social media users, cultural commentators, and commercial actors contributed to its wider circulation. These processes transformed *Gangubai* from a protagonist rooted in the social realities of

Kamathipura into a recognisable figure within Thai popular culture.

This transformation also reveals a tension between the film's feminist narrative and the meanings emphasised through its international reception. As discussed in the preceding analysis, *Gangubai*'s cinematic authority is constructed through her resistance to social stigma and her transformation into a politically influential and morally respectable figure. Her white saris, commanding gestures, and public speeches function within the film as visual expressions of this transformation. In Thai popular culture, however, these same elements became resources for fashion, entertainment, humour, and entrepreneurial self-presentation. The visual markers of *Gangubai*'s authority were reproduced even when the social circumstances underlying that authority were less visible.

The Thai case therefore suggests that the international circulation of feminist cinematic narratives does not necessarily result in the straightforward transmission of their political meanings. Instead, audiences and media producers selectively engage with elements that are recognisable, adaptable, or meaningful within their own cultural settings. *Gangubai*'s image could signify female confidence and independence within influencer culture while also providing an entry point for discussions about Indian society, gender inequality, and sex workers' rights. These interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they demonstrate the varied ways in which a cinematic representation can be appropriated and reconstructed.

From the perspective of cultural soft power, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* illustrates how Bollywood can generate international interest in Indian cultural practices, visual traditions, and social narratives. Yet its reception also demonstrates that cultural influence is not simply exercised through the export of cinematic content. It emerges through interactions between globally circulating media and locally situated forms of participation, interpretation, and adaptation. Thai audiences and creators were therefore not merely recipients of Bollywood culture but active contributors to the meanings associated with the film. Ultimately, the reception of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* in Thailand demonstrates both the reach and the interpretive flexibility of contemporary Bollywood cinema. Its transformation into a digital and cultural phenomenon reflects the combined influence of streaming distribution, recognisable cinematic imagery, influencer participation, and local cultural engagement. More importantly, it reveals how representations of female empowerment can be reconstructed across national boundaries, acquiring meanings that may extend beyond, coexist with, or diverge from those embedded within the original narrative. The Thai experience thus provides a valuable case for understanding transnational media reception as an active process of cultural negotiation and meaning-making.

Conclusion

Gangubai Kathiawadi reflects the changing representation of women in contemporary Bollywood cinema while revealing the contradictions that continue to shape cinematic narratives of female empowerment. Through its portrayal of a trafficked young woman who emerges as a politically influential advocate for sex workers, the film challenges conventional representations of marginalised women as passive victims, objects of desire, or figures requiring moral redemption. *Gangubai*'s transformation highlights female agency, resilience, and the possibility of negotiating power within restrictive patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, this empowerment remains conditional. The film's construction of *Gangubai* as a maternal, morally respectable, and politically authoritative figure suggests that social legitimacy is achieved partly through the distancing of her identity from the sexuality and stigma associated with sex work. Furthermore, Bhansali's highly stylised representation of Kamathipura and the limited attention given to caste and structural inequality reveal the tensions between celebrating individual agency and confronting the broader conditions of marginalisation.

The film's reception in Thailand adds another

dimension to these contradictions by demonstrating how representations of female empowerment acquire new meanings through transnational circulation. The availability of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* on Netflix, together with its amplification through Thai social media and influencer culture, enabled its characters and imagery to circulate beyond their original cinematic context. *Gangubai*'s distinctive appearance, commanding persona, and visual expressions of authority were reinterpreted through fashion, digital performances, and commercial adaptations, while the film also provided opportunities for cultural discussions concerning Indian society, gender, and sex work. These varied responses demonstrate that international audiences do not simply reproduce the meanings embedded within cinematic narratives but selectively adapt them according to local cultural practices and interests.

By examining the relationship between the film's representation of female agency and its reinterpretation in Thailand, this article contributes to feminist film studies and transnational media scholarship in two interconnected ways. First, it demonstrates that cinematic empowerment must be understood not only through the visibility of strong female protagonists but also through the moral, aesthetic, and structural conditions under which their authority becomes recognisable and acceptable. Second, it highlights how the circulation of feminist imagery across national boundaries can generate forms of cultural participation that both extend and transform the political meanings of the original narrative. The Thai reception proves the possibilities of Bollywood as a medium of cultural influence while also revealing the limitations of equating international popularity with the transmission of particular social or feminist values.

The study's qualitative approach, drawing on textual analysis and published secondary materials concerning Thai reception, provides an interpretive account of these processes rather than a representative assessment of audience attitudes. Future research could extend this analysis through interviews, comparative audience studies, or investigations of how different cultural contexts interpret the gender politics of contemporary Bollywood cinema. Ultimately, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* demonstrates that the significance of transnational cinema lies not only in its capacity to cross geographical boundaries but also in the ways its representations of gender, agency, and power are continually negotiated and reconstructed through encounters with different audiences and cultural environments.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

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Use of AI-Assisted Technology

ChatGPT (GPT-6) was used to assist with drafting and editing during manuscript development. The authors reviewed and revised the material and accept full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and citations in the submitted work.

Author Contributions

The corresponding author led the conceptualisation, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and drafting. The co-author contributed to refining the research direction and methodology, reviewing the data and findings, engaging with relevant literature, and critically revising the manuscript.

Both authors approved the final version and accept responsibility for its integrity and accuracy.