



**REPRESENTASI POLITIK DAN CITRA KEPEMIMPINAN PEREMPUAN
DALAM FILM GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI : ANALISIS
SEMIOTIKA ROLAND BARTHES**

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana kepemimpinan perempuan direpresentasikan secara visual dan naratif dalam film Gangubai Kathiawadi serta bagaimana representasi tersebut menantang ideologi patriarki dalam konteks sosial di India. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif, penelitian ini menerapkan analisis semiotika Roland Barthes untuk menelaah makna denotatif, konotatif dan mitologis dari adegan-adegan kunci yang menampilkan transformasi tokoh utama dari perempuan termarginalkan menjadi pemimpin komunitas. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan perempuan dikonstruksi melalui sistem tanda visual seperti busana berwarna putih, gestur tubuh yang tegas, penguasaan ruang publik, relasi empatik serta interaksi dengan kaum laki-laki dalam arena kekuasaan formal. Pada tingkat konotasi, tanda-tanda tersebut merepresentasikan legitimasi moral, keberanian, dan otoritas sosial yang tidak bergantung pada status sosial maupun institusi formal. Sementara itu, pada tingkat mitos, film ini membangun narasi alternatif tentang kepemimpinan perempuan sebagai kekuatan kolektif yang berakar pada solidaritas, kepedulian, dan pengalaman hidup kelompok marginal. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Gangubai Kathiawadi digambarkan sebagai medium kultural yang mendekonstruksi mitos patriarki dan memperluas pemaknaan kepemimpinan perempuan dalam ranah sosial-politik kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Representasi Politik, Kepemimpinan Perempuan, Semiotika Roland Barthes, Film India, Patriarki.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in Indian cinema shows how patriarchal culture shapes visual narratives and the position of women in social life. For years, Indian films have tended to place women in domestic and subordinate roles, thereby limiting them within the framework of traditional morality. However, the emergence of contemporary works has begun to offer a more complex picture, one example being the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Such representations are important because cinema has ideological power in shaping public perceptions of women's social position in patriarchal societies (Singh & Singh, 2025).

In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the main character is portrayed as a woman who rises from the traumatic experience of human trafficking and succeeds in becoming a leader in her community. This narrative presents women as resilient and strategic figures, challenging stereotypes of women as passive and weak objects. This portrayal opens up new interpretations of gender politics, as the film not only highlights structural injustice, but also shows women's capacity to take over public spaces and influence social policy (Mukhopadhyay, 2025).

The importance of this representation becomes even more relevant when linked to the context of gender politics in societies that are still influenced by patriarchal values. Films that feature female leadership can serve as a symbolic arena that encourages changes in society's views on women's participation in politics and leadership. Several studies show that positive representations of women in the media can increase public awareness of gender equality issues and expand the space for social legitimacy for women in public office and organisations (Paunksnis, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2025).

Empirical data supports the relationship between representation, participation, and broader social change. Globally, research shows that increased female political participation correlates with the strengthening of women's roles in the labour market and a decrease in structural gender gaps (Lv & Yang, 2018). In India alone, the number of women in parliament increased from 9% in 1999 to 14.4% in 2019, reflecting a shift towards political inclusivity (Sharma & Behera, 2023). However, various studies also confirm that cultural barriers, discrimination, and institutional resistance remain significant challenges for women politicians in Asian countries, including India and Malaysia (Tamizi & Pero, 2025). Thus, strong representations of women in films such as *Gangubai Kathiawadi* can help drive symbolic change while opening up space for advocacy for broader female political participation.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Judith Butler's gender performativity provide an important conceptual foundation for interpreting images of leadership, particularly when such leadership is analysed in the context of female representation. Barthes explains that every sign has a literal denotative meaning as well as a connotative meaning that carries ideological weight, and these two layers of meaning can form social 'myths' that normalise certain constructions of power or leadership (Zhang, 2017). Through this framework, the visualisation of a leader, from their clothing and gestures to their setting, can be read as a system of signs that conveys hidden messages about who is considered worthy of authority, including how gender is framed in the narrative (Attri & Chander, 2019; Gakahu, 2024). In the context of female leader imagery, Barthes' semiotics allows researchers to uncover

how certain visuals reproduce or challenge patriarchal myths in society.

Meanwhile, in theory of gender performativity, Butler asserts that gender is not an essential identity, but rather the result of actions, language, and performances that are continuously repeated in a social context (Khodayari & Nojournian, 2020). This concept opens up space for understanding leadership as a form of social performance: a leader demonstrates authority, assertiveness, or empathy through actions shaped by cultural expectations, including gender expectations. Butler also emphasises that performativity provides opportunities for resistance, as individuals can perform actions that contradict dominant norms and thus subvert gender boundaries that are considered 'natural' (Awinpoka Akurugu, 2021; Nájera, 2020). When applied to images of female leadership, this approach allows for analysis of how women perform or destabilise the norms of masculinity often associated with leadership.

The integration of these two theories allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the image of female leadership. Barthes' semiotics helps map the structure of signs and myths inherent in the visual representation of a female leader, while Butler's performativity opens up space for analysis of how that leadership is exercised, negotiated, or even subverted through action. In visual analyses of leadership, for example in political posters, campaign photos, or film scenes, these two approaches reveal how gender performance and visual sign systems reinforce certain constructions of female leadership, while also demonstrating the potential of such representations to challenge patriarchal biases in the public sphere (Toni, 2025). Thus, the combination of Barthes' and Butler's perspectives provides a strong theoretical framework for critiquing how

images of female leaders are constructed, perceived, and politicised in a cultural context that remains rife with gender inequality.

A literature review of Indian film analysis using a semiotic approach shows that Bollywood has become a rich space for reading signs, symbols, and cultural meaning constructions. Early research has highlighted how visual elements such as film poster design function as a system of signs that convey thematic messages, cultural values, and developments in visual technology. Shahid et al., 2015, show that the composition, typography, and colours used in Bollywood film posters form semiotic codes that reflect the social dynamics and aesthetic tastes of urban communities. Furthermore, semiotics is also applied to understand how design in films functions as a narrative device that conveys meaning indirectly. Additionally, Chandran and Jagadisan, 2024, found that design often uses visual symbols embedded in cultural memory to reinforce the atmosphere of the story and the identity of the characters.

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* represents female leadership as a form of subversion against patriarchal structures through the processing of visual and narrative signs that create connotative and mythological meanings. Visually, the film presents women's bodies located in marginal spaces as figures with moral and political authority, thereby subverting the dominant myth of women as subordinate beings. Pathak (2025) shows that this film humanises women from marginalised social classes and positions them as empowered subjects who challenge the language of stigma and structural violence in patriarchal societies. This representation is in line with the findings of Mazid,(2018) and Sumarsono (2025), who assert that cinema can be an important arena for

portraying women as agents who disrupt the masculine order through resistance, control of public space, and the capacity to make strategic decisions. Through predominantly white costumes, a determined gaze, and scene compositions that place Gangubai at the centre, the film constructs a new myth about women as legitimate leaders—not because of biological or domestic relations, but because of their capacity, empathy, and political courage.

From a narrative perspective, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* affirms female agency through the character's journey from subordination to publicly recognised leadership. This narrative of transformation shows how women can claim power within misogynistic structures, a pattern similar to the findings of Bell and Sinclair (2016) regarding how female leaders in popular culture are often portrayed as subjects who simultaneously negotiate their bodies, sexuality, and leadership. In this film, Gangubai not only fights against oppressive men, but challenges the social system that structurally marginalises women. This narrative pattern reflects a resistance-based leadership model, as highlighted by Ernanda (2023), in which female leaders become symbols of rebellion against the established patriarchal culture. Through dialogue, public rhetoric, and collective action, this film shows a construction of leadership that affirms women's voices as the centre of social change.

Barthes' semiotic approach reinforces this reading by revealing how visual and narrative signs work to create new myths about female leadership. Elements such as lighting, body movement, and spatial composition can be read as signs that affirm the protagonist's symbolic power, as explained by Ahmadgoli and Yazdanjoo (2020) in their multimodal analysis of social representation in film. At the mythical level, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

deconstructs the naturalisation of patriarchy by presenting women who dominate public spaces, lead communities, and negotiate directly with political structures. Such representations reflect a broader pattern in Indian cinema which, according to Swamy (2022), negotiates women's bodies as an arena of resistance against gender norms. Thus, this film not only tells an individual story, but also conveys social criticism of patriarchal structures through a complex system of signs.

Thus, *Gangubai's* representation as a subversive female leader shows how cinema can be a symbolic political medium that challenges gender hierarchies. Through visual, narrative, and symbolic codes, this film portrays women as agents of social change who are capable of entering and transforming spaces of power that were previously monopolised by men. This pattern of representation also reflects the contemporary reality of female leaders facing similar challenges in patriarchal social and political contexts, as described by Gallardo Lastra *et al.*, (2025) in a study on the political representation of women in Latin America. Thus, Barthes' semiotic analysis opens up space to understand how *Gangubai Kathiawadi* constructs an image of female leadership that challenges, subverts, and redefines patriarchal norms through the power of signs and myths.

METHODS

This research is qualitative interpretative approach, using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method. Qualitative interpretative research seeks to understand the meaning behind symbolic phenomena in depth through the researcher's interpretation of signs, cultural codes, and representations that appear in visual texts. This approach is consistent with the nature of semiotics, which views meaning as a social construct that is never neutral but is

influenced by ideology, cultural values, and power relations at work within media texts.

1. Signifier (penanda)	2. Signified (petanda)
3. Denotative sign (tanda denotatif) (first system)	
4. Connotative Signifier (penanda konotasi)	5. Connotative Signified (petanda konotasi)
6. Connotative Sign (tanda konotasi) (second system)	

Figure 1. Roland Barthes's Sign Map

Source: www.dictio.id

Roland Barthes semiotic method is used to read the two main systems of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth, which operate in films. Barthes' analysis chart, attached, serves as a structural guide in the analysis process, beginning with the identification of signifiers and signifieds that produce denotative meaning, then developing into connotative signifiers and signifieds, until they form connotative signs as a second system. In the final stage, connotation is analysed to reveal myth, namely social ideology that is naturalised through visual representation. This framework enables research to map how symbols in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* construct the image of female leadership and negotiate the politics of gender representation in the public sphere.

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* was chosen as a case study because it has strong relevance to the theme of female leadership in the Indian social context, which is still heavily influenced by patriarchal values. Adapted from *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, the story depicts

Gangubai's transformation from an exploited woman to a respected leader in a social space that has long been dominated by men. Lestari *et al.*, (2025) assert that this film is not only a creative adaptation, but also a historical reconstruction that provides space for women's narratives to appear as agents of change in the power structures of Indian society. This makes the film relevant as a semiotic object for understanding how cinema shapes representations of female leadership in spaces rife with gender inequality.

Analysis of key scenes and main dialogues in the film are crucial because these elements reinforce Gangubai's symbolic journey towards leadership. Denotatively, scenes such as Gangubai's speech in front of the *Kamathipura* community, her meeting with government officials, and her interactions with sex workers illustrate the social space she occupies and her process of gaining authority. Visual representations such as her consistent white costume, camera compositions that place her in a central position, and assertive body language are literal signs

that directly construct her character as a leader. Meanwhile, on a connotative level, these visuals hint at symbols of purity, courage, and moral legitimacy, a form of resistance against patriarchal constructs that tend to stigmatise women in public spaces.

Within the framework of Roland Barthes' semiotics, the visual and narrative elements of this film work on two layers of meaning, namely denotation and connotation, which together form the myth of female leadership. Denotation is present as a realistic depiction of Gangubai's life in the prostitution district and the concrete steps that led her to a position of power. However, the connotation that emerges from visual symbols and dialogue produces a deeper meaning about resistance to patriarchy and the strengthening of female identity as leaders. This connotative meaning creates a new myth that leadership does not have to be masculine, but can grow from experiences of marginalisation,

empathy, and solidarity. Syed and Tariq (2017) show that Indian films increasingly feature women who transcend gender stereotypes, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is one such representation that reinforces.

Thus, choosing *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as the object of analysis is not only thematically appropriate, but also strategically significant from a semiotic perspective because it provides a rich sign structure for examining how cinema constructs images of female leadership. Through a reading of the denotation and connotation of key scenes and dialogues, this study explores how the film shapes the narrative of female resistance to patriarchal norms, as well as how this representation reflects the shift in the discourse of female leadership in contemporary India.

Results And Discussion

Finding 1 - Visual Symbolism of Leadership



Figure 1. Representation of Strength and Courage

Source: *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film

Table 1 Analysis of the Representation of Strength and Courage in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth

Description	Woman wearing a white saree	Traditional white clothing	Woman wearing a white saree represents purity, sadness or atonement	Myth or reinterpretation of the meaning of "white" as a symbol of the moral strength of women who dare to fight the stigma
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Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

In the scene showing Gangubai wearing a white sari, the denotative meaning that emerges is the presence of traditional Indian clothing that is directly visible on the character's body. At this first level of meaning, the white sari is understood only as a visual object, namely a piece of light-coloured fabric worn by a woman without implying any symbolic value. This literal interpretation becomes the basis before moving on to a more complex process of interpreting meaning, in accordance with Roland Barthes' view that every connotation is based on a stable denotative sign.

At the second level of analysis (connotative), the white saree begins to take on additional meanings related to cultural norms and emotional experiences in Indian society. In Hindu tradition, the colour white is often associated with purity, grief or sadness, and the process of self-purification, so the presence of a white saree on Gangubai reflects a life full of suffering as ***Finding 2 - Politics of Space and Public Narrative***

well as an attempt to redefine her identity. At this level, the garment, which initially appeared simple, becomes a symbol that affirms the moral fortitude and emotional resilience she has built amid the various forms of oppression she has experienced.

At the mythical level, the white saree takes on a broader ideological function by positioning Gangubai as a female figure from a marginalised group who possesses extraordinary moral strength. White no longer speaks only of purity or grief, but becomes a grand narrative about women's courage to challenge the social boundaries and stigma that bind them. Through this myth, the film presents Gangubai as a leader who is able to change society's perception of women living in marginalised environments, affirming that they have the capacity to lead, fight, and strive for justice. Thus, the white saree functions as an ideological sign that reinforces the message of liberation and resistance in the film.



Figure 2. Speech in Public Space

Source: *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film

Table 2 Analysis of the Representation of Women as Leaders

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth
Description	A woman standing on a podium, speaking in front of an audience	Hand gestures, stage, and crowd	Women as agents of social change, courage to express opinions in public	Deconstruction of patriarchy: women can become political and social leaders.

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

This scene shows a woman standing on a small podium and speaking in front of a crowd, depicting a shift in the public sphere, which was previously dominated by men, towards a more inclusive space. At the denotative level, this image simply shows a woman giving a speech in the midst of a crowd. Visual elements such as her body position, the simple stage, and the crowd surrounding her show a real public communication situation, namely a woman appearing as a central figure in a social space.

At the level of signs or forms, open hand gestures, an upright body posture, and the crowd paying attention to her symbolise women's emergence as active actors in the public sphere. The stage she stands on signifies an elevation of social position, a visual form that marks authority and legitimacy. The crowd listening to her shows that women's voices are given space to be responded to, not merely considered as marginal figures.

In terms of connotation, this scene affirms the construction of women
Finding 3 - Scenes of Care and Empathy

as agents of social change who have the courage to express their opinions openly. In the context of Indian culture, which is still steeped in patriarchal values, the appearance of women as public speakers carries symbolic meanings of empowerment, resistance, and social transformation. She not only speaks, but also positions herself as a representation of moral and social leadership capable of mobilising public support.

The myth presented in this scene is a deconstruction of the patriarchal view that leadership is the domain of men. This image constructs a narrative that women can be influential, respected, and heard political and social figures. The myth created is not only about women as leaders, but also as symbols of inclusivity in public spaces that are beginning to accept diversity of actors and voices. Thus, this scene reinforces the idea that women's leadership is not an exception, but rather a legitimate and necessary part of social dynamics.



Figure 3. Scene of Gangubai stroking the forehead of a young woman in a room.

Source: *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film

Table 3 Analysis of the Representation of Women as Healers and Moral Leaders

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth
Description	A woman wearing traditional white clothing cares for or strokes the forehead of a young woman who appears sad or ill in a simple room.	Clean white clothing, acts of affection or care, attentive and gentle expressions.	Symbolises the role of women as healers, carers, and protectors in the community; the empathetic and morally powerful aspects of women.	The myth of women as loving mothers and moral leaders in society, figures who restore and provide hope and support.

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

Denotatively, this image shows a woman dressed in white stroking the forehead of a sad-looking young woman in a simple room. This scene depicts an intimate and caring interpersonal relationship, without any formal symbols of power such as a podium, stage, or explicit political elements. The visual focus is on the gentle touch on the forehead and the emotional expression of the young woman, so that the basic meaning that emerges is one of soothing, comforting and caring. This denotation forms the basis for the creation of a broader meaning when these visual elements are interpreted in the context of the film's culture and narrative.

At the level of signs or forms, the act of touching the forehead is not merely a physical gesture, but serves as a symbol of care, attention, and empathy that is often attached to relationships between women. The white clothing worn by the main character presents a strong visual image as a figure who is clean, sincere, and non-threatening. The simple, unadorned style of the room reinforces the message that this interaction is personal and intimate, rather than performative or directly political. These elements present visual signs that emphasise the touch of humanity as the core of the leadership relationship depicted.

In terms of connotation, the colour white is an important marker that conveys purity, sincerity, and peace in Indian culture. In the context of the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, this colour is often associated with self-transformation, moral fortitude, and the identity of a leader who prioritises human values. Meanwhile, the act of stroking the forehead connotes nurturing, healing, and protection. This is a traditional representation often attached to feminine roles as guardians of emotional well-being. Thus, this scene not only shows affection between women, but also constructs a form of leadership based on empathy and social solidarity. Leadership is not portrayed as formal authority, but as the capacity to nurture and foster the emotional resilience of the community.

At the mythical level, this scene reinforces the image of women as mother figures and moral leaders who nurture, protect, and inspire hope in their communities. The myth of female leadership in Bollywood cinema is often associated with characters who bring warmth, fortitude, and a calming presence to marginalised groups. This film revives the narrative of women as guardians of ethical and social values, where moral power is more important than structural power. This scene builds the myth that the ideal female leader is not only strong and courageous, but also capable of being a source of emotional comfort and solidarity, a form of leadership that combines strength and gentleness in one figure.

Finding 4 - Solidarity among Women



Figure 4. Women as central figures surrounded by a community of women, symbolising solidarity and leadership legitimacy in the social sphere.

Source : *Gangubai Kathiawadi* Film

Table 4 Analysis of the symbols of solidarity and moral authority of women in the community through visual composition.

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth
Description	A woman sits in the middle of a room surrounded by many other women, some sitting and some standing.	The atmosphere is serious and focused on the woman in the centre. Central composition, placement of female characters in the centre, striking colours of clothing in the centre (red)	Representation of solidarity and female power in the community; the central figure is considered a spiritual or social leader.	The myth of female leadership as the mother and protector of the community, bringing about social change through collective power and female solidarity.

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

The scene denotatively shows a woman sitting in a central position, surrounded by many other women who are watching her intently in a simple room. This visual composition emphasises the presence of the main figure who is the centre of social gravity in the group. The positioning of the characters, the direction of their gaze, and the distance between them indicate that the central figure occupies an important position and is perceived as a leader or respected figure.

At the connotative level, the presence of a group of women surrounding the central figure reflects strong solidarity and togetherness. This collective representation not only depicts ordinary social relationships, but also conveys the meaning of a community of women who support each other within a social structure that often marginalises them. The red colour worn by the woman in the centre reinforces this meaning; red as a symbol of strength,

Finding 5 - Meeting with Male Elites

courage, determination, as well as authority that distinguishes her from other members of the group. Thus, this visual constructs an image of women not only as part of the community, but as holders of moral and social authority within it.

The myth formed from this scene is a construction of female leadership that is collective in nature, not hierarchical as in the traditional image of masculine leadership. The central female figure is positioned as a mother figure who protects, guides, and is a source of strength for her community. This myth emphasises that female leadership arises from emotional closeness, warm social relations, and the ability to maintain group unity. In the framework of political representation, this visual affirms that female leadership is not only possible but is based on values of solidarity, care, and social change that stem from the collective strength of women.



Figure 5. Scene of Gangubai discussing with male elites as a representation of women entering the patriarchal sphere of power.

Source: *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film

Table 5 Analysis of visual meanings regarding women's legitimacy in formal discussion and political spaces.

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth
Description	A woman sits at a round table with three men in a colonial-style public space. They appear to be discussing something, with drinks on the table and natural lighting from large windows.	The woman is wearing a white blouse, the round table is the centre of interaction, her expression is calm but firm, the men are wearing formal attire, and the room has a classic atmosphere with pillars and chandeliers.	Women are entering formal discussion spaces that are usually dominated by men; a symbol of integrity and morality (the colour white); hierarchical male relationships that now make room for female figures; the legitimacy of women in the public sphere.	The narrative that women have leadership capacity in patriarchal spaces; a new myth about women as legitimate political actors; the representation that moral power can override traditional social structures; the image of female leaders who are capable of negotiating power.

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

The scene showing Gangubai sitting in discussion with elite men presents a visual reality that denotatively shows a woman entering a formal space usually dominated by men. On the surface, this image only shows interactions at a round table in a colonial-style room. However, the visual composition, including seating positions, body gestures, natural lighting, and clothing, subtly offers a sign structure that serves to produce deeper meaning. Gangubai's presence in this space is a starting point for a new representation of

female authority in the context of patriarchal Indian society.

At the connotative level, elements such as white sari, non-defensive expressions, and round tables as symbols of egalitarianism, demonstrate moral legitimacy and integrity-based leadership. In Indian culture, white is often associated with purity, honesty, and spiritual strength, so Gangubai's presence in this colour reinforces her image as a leader who gains power through morality, not violence. Meanwhile, the gaze and body language of the men listening indicate a

shift in power relations: women are no longer merely marginalised objects, but subjects capable of speaking on behalf of their community and negotiating on equal terms with the male elite.

At the mythical level, this scene reinforces the grand narrative of women as legitimate and effective political actors in the public sphere. The modern myth constructed by this film presents the idea that women can enter the centre of decision-making even if they come from an oppressed social class. *Gangubai's Finding 6. Parade After Electoral Victory*

representation challenges the old myth of Indian women as passive and confined to domesticity. She is portrayed as a leader who changes the social reality of her community through a combination of empathy, courage, and negotiating skills. Thus, this scene does not merely show a meeting, but also a symbolic production that affirms the politics of female representation in Bollywood cinema, where female leadership is beginning to be portrayed as something normal, legitimate, and influential.



Figure 6. Scene of Gangubai's parade after being elected as chairperson of the Kamathipura district, as a symbol of public legitimacy.

Source : *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film

Table 6 Semiotic analysis of colours, expressions and traditional symbols in the representation of female leaders who are respected by society.

Level of Analysis	Level I Analysis		Level II Analysis	
	Reality / Denotation	Sign / Form	Culture / Connotation	Myth
Description	A woman wearing traditional Indian clothing in white with red accents, adorned with flowers and simple jewellery.	She waves her hand while smiling. Traditional white and red clothing, flowers, friendly facial expression, waving hand gesture.	Symbol of purity and chastity (white), glory and courage (red). Symbolises a figure who is respected and revered in traditional Indian society.	An image of strong and dignified female leadership, while upholding traditional values as a protector and social leader.

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2026)

At the denotative level, the scene depicts a woman wearing white traditional Indian clothing, complete with a red cloth on her shoulders and a

flower necklace adorning her body. She waves her hand with a warm and friendly expression, so that visually this figure appears as someone who is liked and

respected by the people around her. Visual elements such as distinctive clothing, body language, and smiles are easily recognisable signs that indicate the socio-cultural context of the scene.

At the connotative level, the white colour worn by women signifies purity, innocence and sincerity. These are values often associated with female leaders in Indian society. Meanwhile, the red fabric as a contrasting element signifies courage, determination, and moral strength. The combination of these two colours forms a symbol of leadership that is not only gentle and empathetic but also firm and courageous in fighting for the interests of the group.

The myth formed from this visual composition is a construction of a strong female leader who remains rooted in traditional values. Women are depicted as figures capable of maintaining harmony between strength and modesty, between authority and warmth. This myth emphasises that female leadership does not conflict with culture, but rather arises from a reinterpretation of traditional values. This representation shows how female leaders can appear dignified, respected, and morally legitimate in a social space previously dominated by men.

Discussion

1. Representation of Women as Political Subjects

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* emphasises the presence of women as active political agents, not merely objects of narrative. This representation is evident in various scenes depicting Gangubai speaking in public spaces, negotiating with officials, and influencing policy directions that impact the Kamathipura community. Within Stuart Hall's framework of representation, these visuals demonstrate how meanings about women and power are produced through a system of signs that aims to shift traditional understandings of

gender roles. Women are no longer positioned as parties waiting to be saved, but appear as strategic actors who articulate the political interests of marginalised groups.

In Barthes' analysis, Gangubai's gestures of speaking in public spaces, her firm gaze, and her body posture become connotations of political subjectivity. These signs debunk the myth that the public and political spheres belong to men. By placing Gangubai as the leader of the community, the film reconstructs the meaning of women as figures who have the ability to determine the direction of social change. This representation not only presents a strong female figure, but also repositions women as the centre of authority and decision-makers.

The naturalised meaning of the film further shows that female leadership is not an exception, but something that is legitimate and acceptable. At the same time, this representation challenges the patriarchal structure that confines women to the domestic sphere. Thus, the film constructs a narrative that positions women as full political subjects, who have the moral and social legitimacy to lead.

2. Symbolisation of Power Through Costumes and Gestures

Visual choices such as all-white costumes, upright body positions, open hand gestures, or straight-ahead gazes are semiotic devices that depict authority. The colour white in the context of the film connotes purity, integrity, and morality. Barthes argues that such visual signs work to naturalise certain ideas; in this case, the image of a clean and authoritative leader. Thus, the white costume serves not only as aesthetics but also as a communication device that constructs Gangubai's leadership legitimacy.

Gestures are another important aspect. When Gangubai stands on the podium, moves her hands to emphasise

her arguments, or looks directly at her audience, each element carries a meaning of power. In a semiotic framework, these gestures represent connotations of confidence and the ability to control space. This visual narrative shapes the perception that Gangubai has competent political capacity, even in a sphere of power dominated by men and the feudal elite.

This symbolisation of power reinforces the construction of female leaders who do not depend on formal institutions, but on moral strength, charisma, and the courage to face injustice. The film shows how visual symbols can replace the absence of formal education and social status. Thus, the power represented is alternative, but still has strong social legitimacy.

3. Reversing the Myth of Patriarchy in Film Narratives

The myth of patriarchy in Indian culture, which depicts women as submissive, confined to the domestic sphere, and unfit to be leaders, is consistently dismantled through the representation of Gangubai. Barthes explains that myths function as ideologies that are made to appear natural, when in fact they are social constructs. This film challenges this myth by presenting visuals that explicitly reject traditional ideas about female weakness. Scenes in which Gangubai speaks defiantly to state officials, stands on top of a car during a campaign, or leads a crowd of female sex workers show how this film reveals and reverses patriarchal structures of meaning.

This reversal of the myth is important because the film not only depicts strong women, but also shows how power can be produced by groups that are not usually considered to have bargaining power. In other words, the film not only criticises patriarchy, but destabilises the myths that support it,

such as the myths of 'emotional women', 'women incapable of making decisions', or 'lower class groups unfit to lead'.

Through this representation, the film creates a new symbolic space for women within the Indian social structure. The politics of representation presented creates a new meaning, that power can emerge from marginal experiences, female solidarity, and the ability to organise communities. Thus, the film functions as a counter-discourse to patriarchal ideology.

4. The Meaning of Leadership in Marginalised Social Classes

The image of leadership constructed in the film is closely related to the context of social class. Gangubai comes from a marginalised group: women, sex workers, and part of a stigmatised community. However, the film shows that authority can arise from collective experience, not class status. This representation opens up an alternative understanding that leadership is not always tied to elitism, but can grow from steadfastness in the face of injustice.

From Barthes' perspective, the experiences of poverty, oppression, and solidarity among women become signs that are then symbolised as moral legitimacy. The connotation of leadership that emerges is not based on wealth or education, but on the courage to protect vulnerable groups. From this point, the film broadens the horizon of female leadership by showing that strength can be built from collective identity and harsh life experiences.

This narrative also reveals the politics of class representation: it shows how women in the lowest social class can influence political decisions and the public agenda. By elevating leaders from marginalised classes, the film challenges the myth that power is only legitimate when it comes from the elite. This

reinforces the idea that women's leadership is transformative, not merely symbolic.

CONCLUSION

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* presents a representation that positions women as significant political actors, particularly through the figure of Gangubai, who appears as the leader of the marginalised Kamathipura community. This representation did not arise by chance, but through deliberate visual choices that present women in spaces that have traditionally been controlled by men. Thus, this film shows how popular media can function as an arena for the production of meaning that challenges patriarchal domination and opens up new spaces for social imagination about women and power.

Through Roland Barthes semiotic analysis, the film shows how signs work on the denotative, connotative, and mythical levels. On the denotative level, scenes showing Gangubai speaking to the public, leading her community, and engaging in dialogue with powerful figures present a literal image of leadership. However, at the connotative level, symbols such as white costumes, assertive gestures, and visual compositions that focus attention on Gangubai articulate moral values, assertiveness, and legitimacy. At the mythical level, this film shifts the traditional narrative that places women as subordinates to individuals who have political capacity and social responsibility.

The main strengths of this film come from how it reverses the patriarchal myth by positioning the marginalised women as authoritative figures, the film rejects the idea that leadership is only for men or elite groups. Instead, leadership is portrayed as a form of moral commitment that grows out of life experience, social solidarity, and the will to fight injustice. This representation

becomes an important counter-discourse in the Indian cultural context, where women, especially those at the bottom of the social structure, are often marginalised from decision-making spaces.

Thus, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* not only tells the story of a woman's struggle, but also produces cultural knowledge about the meaning of female leadership. The film serves as a medium that affirms that women can be powerful agents of social change, even when they find themselves in situations fraught with stigma. With its richly meaningful visual construction and narrative that challenges dominant ideologies, this film contributes to expanding public understanding of women's roles in the political and social spheres. Through all of this, the film positions female leadership not as an exception, but as a legitimate part of the contemporary power landscape.

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