

FICTIONALITY AS AUGMENTING AUTHENTICITY: A DEMONSTRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SANJAY LEELA BHANSALI'S *GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI*

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ABSTRACT

Biopics, re-enactment of true lives on screen, have emerged and evolved as early as cinema itself in alignment with the social and historical contexts of production. As they appeal to present lived experiences through a highly popular medium, they acquire historicising and commercialising tendencies which in turn influence their fictionality. So also does the director's creative agency that significantly determines their making. The resulting fictionality does not tamper with narratives of lived experience as many critics argue, but complements them. This article proposes and defines a new term, 'dilation technique' to analyse how fictionality complements biopics in particular, and life writing in general. To demonstrate the use of this technique, the article takes up for analysis, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali that narrates incidents from the life of the brothel Madam, Gangubai who lived in Kamathipura, Mumbai sometime between 1940 and 1980. In so doing, it establishes that fictionality in the film complements the life story of Gangubai with imagined perspectives of Gangubai, her subjectivity, extended authenticity and the status of a classic tale of a selfless leader together with the scope to view Gangubai's life as a journey towards the acceptance of sex workers in society. On the whole, it argues that fictionality in life writing enhances the narratives in such a way that it heightens the effect of the lived experience.

KEYWORDS: Biopic, Fictionality, Dilation, Imagined Perspectives, Subjectivity, Authenticity, Visual Aesthetics.

RESUMEN *Ficcionalidad como Autenticidad Aumentada: un Análisis Demostrativo de Gangubai Kathiawadi de Sanjay Leela Bhansali*

Las biopics, la recreación de vidas reales en la pantalla, surgieron y evolucionaron de manera tan pronta como el cine en sí mismo, en línea con los contextos sociales e históricos de la producción. Ya que evocan experiencias vividas reales a través de un medio extremadamente popular, se han ido adaptando a tendencias históricas y comerciales que, a su vez, afectan su ficcionalidad, de la misma manera que lo ha hecho la agencia creativa de los directores, esencial en su creación. La ficcionalidad resultante no manipula las narrativas de experiencias vividas, como argumentan muchos críticos, sino que las complementa. Este artículo propone y define un nuevo término, "técnica de dilatación", para analizar

cómo la ficcionalidad complementa las biopics en particular y las narrativas de vida en general. Para demostrar cómo se usa esta técnica, este artículo decide analizar *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), dirigida por Sanjay Leela Bhansali. La película narra incidentes en la vida de la Madame de un burdel, Gangubai, que vivió en Kamathipura, Bombay, entre los años 1940 y 1980. La ficcionalidad en la película complementa la historia de Gangubai con perspectivas imaginadas sobre la misma, su subjetividad, una autenticidad extendida y las convenciones de la narrativa clásica de una líder altruista que refleja la vida de Gangubai como parte de un viaje hacia la aceptación de las trabajadoras sexuales en la sociedad. En conjunto, se sostiene que la ficcionalidad en la narración biográfica mejora las narrativas al intensificar el efecto de la experiencia vivida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: biopic; ficcionalidad; dilatación; perspectivas imaginadas; subjetividad; autenticidad; estética visual

Biopic, which can be precisely defined as a re-enactment of true lives on screen, has been a well-received and a popular sub-genre of life writing since the inception of cinema both in global and Indian arenas. This sub-genre, beginning from as early as 1906 with *The Life of Christ* till 2025, has evolved primarily by means of its reception, and in alignment with the social and historical contexts of production. Hence, biopics proceeded from presenting life stories of mythical heroes, social leaders, businessmen and other renowned men, through life stories of high achievers such as sportsmen and artists to life stories of individuals from different strata of society. Particularly in the Indian arena, the production of biopics with a wide range of subjects is in a remarkably proliferating trend in very recent times. All through its evolution, the appeal to present real, lived experiences and dimensions of fictionality together have contributed to such a success of biopics as a popular sub-genre of life writing.

The commercialising and historicising tendencies of biopics and their directors' creative agency influence their fictionality. Biopics are no exception to cinema in aiming at commercial success. It is evident in the fact that "12 of the 20 Oscars awarded in the Best Actor and Best Actress categories between 2000 and 2009 went to actors playing real-life figures" (Vidal, 2014: 2). Therefore, commercial aspects such as actors' stardom, the chosen subject's acceptance in society, box office collection and viewership influence their making. Besides, a presupposition that the sub-genre encompasses the historical, cultural and social reality of the subject through its appeal to present real, lived experiences influence the same. Vidal notes in this context referring to Hollywood: "The first and most widely referenced work on the subject, *Bio/Pics* charts the corpus of nearly 300 biographical films that were produced by the major studios between 1927 and 1960, a minor but continuous strand of production that established

itself as a form of public history” (2014: 4). Thus, biopics have steadily emerged as popular form of historiography. Such commercialising and historicising tendencies necessitate ‘self-regulation’ - a term aptly used by Vidal instead of a broader term, fictionality – in content and approach (2014: 5). Self-regulation may include deliberate deletion or subtle representation of certain controversial events in the subject’s life, inclusion of fictional events or songs and a refinement of the space and the characters on screen. This self-regulation, in turn, influences fictionality. Apart from these factors, the director’s creative agency in biopics plays a vital role in influencing fictionality. Cinematography, choice of the actors, recreation of the setting, the choice and the ordering of events from the lives of the subject, invented additions among others are determined primarily by the director’s creative agency. Put together, self-regulation as necessitated by commercialising and historicising tendencies of biopics and the ingenuity of the director majorly influence their fictionality.

Fictionality, which is inseparable from biopic, does not tamper with but complements its classification as a sub-genre of life writing. Biopics are widely criticised by many film critics for their standardised narrativization and self-regulation, mainly for their ‘fictional’ aspects. Pramod Nayar (a senior professor of English at the University of Hyderabad) quotes Elizabeth Cowie (an emeritus professor of Film Studies at the University of Kent) in this context thus: “selection and ordering of the images and sounds of reality constitute an account of the world; however, it thereby becomes prey to a loss of the real in its narratives of reality” (2017: 609). Similarly, Vidal comments, “Studio production led to a standardization of the great-man narrative through the fit between stars’ roles, control of publicity, and very importantly, a strong self-regulation in content and approach to the famous figures portrayed” (2014: 5). However, the use of fictional aspects in biopics to recreate the real cannot be regarded as ‘standardisation’ or a cause for ‘loss of the real’. ‘Fictional’ is construed here as designating “conventions and practices one associates with creative writing - such as structure, poetic or literary descriptions of people and places, ordering of events to create certain effects - rather than simply things that are ‘made-up’” (Gudmundsdóttir, 2003: 4). In the case of biopics, it is the artistic audio-visual representation of people and places instead of poetic or literary descriptions of the same. Gudmundsdóttir argues in the light of this definition that fictionality is integral to autobiography which can be extended to life writing as well. Moreover, while sub-genres such as ‘autofiction’ that uses textual markers to “signal a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes (autobiography and fiction)” (2002: 5), and ‘autobiography in the third person’ in which ‘I’ is to be understood as an “implied narrator speaking as a ventriloquist through

“he,” or “she,” or “they” (2002: 4) are listed and defined by Smith and Watson in “Sixty Genres of Life Narrative”, ‘biopic’ can also be classified as a sub-genre of life writing. Therefore, fictionality does not tamper with real, lived experiences in life writing, but complements them.

This article proposes ‘dilation’ as a technique to analyse how the dimensions and implications of fictionality complement life writing texts. It draws inspiration from Jeyamohan (a Tamil writer) for this purpose. In the context of the form of *Stories of the True* (a short story collection comprising lived experiences of the author’s acquaintances), he acknowledges in his interview to *The Print* that it is half-history and half-fiction. He goes on to explain thus: “The fiction is used only to elevate the emotion, and to visualise the situation”. Taking a cue from this idea and the dictionary entry for the word ‘dilation’, that is, “the act of enlarging, expanding or widening” (*Merriam-Webster*, 2020), ‘dilation’ is defined as the technique in which the fictional elements in real life stories expand or widen certain parts of the narrative in such a way that they heighten the effect of the lived experiences, and allow to see through the intricacies of the same. This article attempts to demonstrate the use of this technique by analysing the biopic *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. This biopic presents the life story of a Mumbai-based brothel Madam, Gangubai who led her life in the infamous red-light area, Kamathipura for about four decades after independence. It is an adaptation of the section, “The Matriarch of Kamathipura” from Hussain Zaidi’s and Jane Borges’ *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* (2011), an anthology of life stories of thirteen Mafia women of Mumbai. Upholding the features of an adaptation as listed by Jeyamohan elsewhere, the film “expands the philosophical essence, the historical frame of reference and the characters in the original text” (my translation, 2022: 122).

While adhering to the current trend of Indian biopics, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) also deviates from it. In the larger context of contemporary Indian biopics that engages with varied subjects, such as, *Sardar Udham* (2021) – the life story of a Punjab Sikh revolutionary, *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012) – the life story of an Indian athlete turned dacoit, *Aligarh* (2015) – the life story of a gay, linguistic professor from an orthodox locale, *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015) – the life story of a man who carved roads on a mountain using only a chisel and a hammer and *Amaran* (2024) – the life story of Major Mukund Varadarajan, a martyr, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* fits in with the subject of a sex worker turned social leader of Kamathipura. Like many contemporary biopics, it also draws attention towards a personality whose popularity was restricted to a small region, Kamathipura. At the same time, it

distinguishes itself with its style of a classical cinema and a dramatic representation when the current trend of biopics is gearing towards realistic representations. In so doing, it historicises Gangubai's life, the Kamathipura of the 1960s and 70s and the classical tradition of Indian cinema itself. Before proceeding to the core discussion, the life story of Gangubai is summarised below.

Ganga Harjeevandas Kathiawadi aka Gangubai was born in Kathiawad, Gujarat to a barrister named, Harjeevandas (the birth year is not known). She eloped with her father's accountant, Ramnik Lal at the age of sixteen to what was then Bombay aspiring to become an actress. Deceived by him, she ended up in a brothel house. After all her protests, she realized that she had no other option but to accept the profession of a sex worker. Also, she changed her name as Gangu (the name that was given by her first client). Subsequently, she became the most-sought after sex worker over time. But her rise also brought with it a danger in the form of a violent Pathan who abused her continually. In order to protect herself from the troubling Pathan, she took the help of Karim Lala, a mafia gangster. She made the best use of the situation to forge a connection with him, thus initiating herself into illegal mafia businesses and electoral politics. Soon after, she became the brothel Madam, Gangubai – a Marathi suffix “of respectful compellation or mention for one's mother or an elderly female” (*Wisdom Library*, 2025) – following the death of Sheela Maasi, her precedent and won the local presidential election. On a later date, she also stood up against the demolition of brothels favouring the rise of schools in Kamathipura. Once, she was invited to give a speech on the promotion of literacy among sex workers in a women's conference at Azad Maidan, Mumbai, and is still remembered for her powerful speech at the event. Also, with the influence of her political connections, she is said to have met the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, to seek his help in saving the brothels from demolition, eventually succeeding in the attempt. Both the biopic and the above-mentioned section present all these events of Gangubai's life. A major fictional addition in the biopic is the romantic interlude between Gangubai and a tailor named, Afshaan whom Gangubai actually marries off to another girl towards the end of the film.

Fictionality in Characterisation

The fictionality involved in detailing the characterisation enhances the narrative by offering imagined perspectives of Gangubai, providing subjectivity to her lived experience as a sex worker and elevating her status as a selfless social leader. It is to be noted here that detailing in characterisation is the result of Bhansali's conscious attempts to make Gangubai

laugh, smile and dance (Desai, 2022). Thus, additions of a romantic interlude, songs, dances, fights and humour - the common components of any Indian commercial film - intensify Gangubai's persona beyond her resilient and invincible nature as inferred from Zaidi's text. In other words, an analysis using dilation technique helps discern that these fictional elements expand the original nature of Gangubai in such a way that they heighten the effect of her lived experiences.

Laughing is suggestive of Gangubai's and her fellow sex workers' perspectives in many instances. Gangubai's laughter when Afshaan brings a marriage proposal is very effective as it implies a mockery of the society in which marriage of a sex worker is unimaginable. Similarly, when Gangubai and her fellow sex workers contemplate how to address the gathering during Gangubai's speech at Azad Maidan, the entire group laughs at the thought of addressing the gathering as "brothers and sisters". It implies a mockery of the involvement of the men with the sex workers in a society which treats them as aberrant. Thus, the laughter of Gangubai and her fellow sex workers at such instances, along with the verbal comments on the assumed superiority of men in some scenes, offers the audience an imagined perspective on the society, of Gangubai and her fellow sex workers as a community.

The scenes that unfold the emotional longing for maternal and romantic love throws light on the subjective experience of a sex worker, an aspect that is almost absent in Zaidi's text. Unlike mere mentions in Zaidi's text that Gangubai shut away everything from her maternal home and that she made her clients open their purses without getting emotionally involved (Borges & Zaidi, 2011b: 73 & 74), Bhansali creatively explores her emotional experience and that of her fellow sex workers. For example, Gangubai does not allow Afshaan to make sexual advances, but only to caress her hair, and she seeks solace in his arms and lap. Also, when she desperately tries to talk to her parents after 12 years, she gets annoyed by the time limit of 30 seconds indicated by the telephone operator and yells helplessly. Yet another instance is when a fellow sex worker asks Gangu to help her write a letter to her father. This scene is very effective as every sex worker in the household contributes with phrases and sentences to the letter, and they all weep together. These fictional additions of individual and collective emotional experience enhance the narrative offering subjectivity to the life story of Gangubai.

Alia Bhatt's performance of the role of Gangubai showcases the Madam as an angry and an overpowering personality widening her original witty and invincible nature. It should

be noted here that Bhatt had a motive to dramatically perform the role modelled on 1970s heroines for a reason which shall be discussed later in this article. The dramatic performance has thus built upon Gangubai's original nature. Upon Zaidi's passing mention that she had the habit of visiting cinema halls once in a while (Borges & Zaidi, 2011b: 74), Bhansali improvises as she demands a day off every week for the sex workers and goes to cinema with her fellow sex workers. Though this improvisation is in keeping with her innate activist tendency for the welfare of sex workers, her attitude and conversation are audacious as she asks her brothel madam, Sheela, to engage the clients herself that day. She also doesn't seek Sheela's permission to go to the cinema. She does as she pleases and commandingly gestures others to do the same. In the very next scene at the cinema hall, she beats up a man who subtly calls on her to sleep with him. She further yells demanding to let them take a break from their work and enjoy the movie. Many other instances—such as compelling Shinde, a police constable, to kneel during a bribe negotiation and physically assaulting her rival Raziabai's henchman when summoned to a meeting—depict her as an angry and domineering figure comparable to heroes in contemporary commercial cinema, while simultaneously preserving her original sharp and indomitable spirit.

The enactment of Gangubai's role, whose popularity was confined to her locality for a longer period based on Zaidi's text that was written approximately 30 years after her death, has given an enhanced image to Gangubai to the extent that her life story acquires the quality of a classic tale, and shares a thematic commonality with life stories of the famous sociopolitical leaders of India. This enhancement is achieved by inventively filling in the gaps and poignantly articulating the silence in Zaidi's text. Considering the fact that Zaidi has significantly relied on undocumented oral anecdotes, that have been passed on as lores, to build the life narrative of Gangubai (Borges & Zaidi, 2011a: 234), it is clear that the text had provided Bhansali enough scope to improvise. It is interesting to note here that Bhansali, who had no visual references of Gangubai to replicate except for her old age picture (see figure 5), has consciously attempted to style Gangubai as any 1970s Indian heroine whose acting was more dramatic, far different from the contemporary realistic approach of Indian cinema. "Actor Alia Bhatt says she watched a lot of classic Hindi films, particularly those featuring Meena Kumari, to prepare for her role in Gangubai Kathiawadi as director Sanjay Leela Bhansali wanted her to channel the old world charm and grace that the heroines of that era had" (Anon, 2022).

Specific references had been taken from *Pakeezah* (1972), a film with the subject of a tawaif (female performers in Mughal courts). This film depicts the intriguing story of

Sahibjaan, a long-lost child of a tawaif and a forest officer who also takes up the profession of a tawaif and weds her paternal cousin after unexpected turn of events. Bhatt's dance, mannerism and dresses resemble those of Meena Kumari who had played the roles of both Sahibjaan and her mother in *Pakeezah*. Bhatt has said, "He (Bhansali) wanted me to watch Meena Kumari's work a lot, her expressions... the way she would sing a song, although I am not going all out singing songs in the movie. There is a certain sadness in her eyes, but there is a power to her face. He would say, 'See her face, which is so full'..." (Anon, 2022). Further, the ideas of a marriage in a brothel (between Afshaan and a sex worker's daughter) and a courtesan song (Shikayat) have been appropriated in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* most likely from Sahibjaan's marriage in *Pakeezah*. Although her drinking and smoking habits are shown as they are, this marriage and her mention that she wants to indulge in an illegal liquor business with Rahim Lala (originally Karim Lala) only to win the election and serve her fellow sex workers promote Gangubai's image as a selfless activist as political leaders in Indian history like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and K. Kamaraj whose life stories have a common theme of serving selflessly for the cause of the downtrodden people. Taking into account her original eminent work for the welfare of the sex workers and a social worker's (who was initially sheltered by Gangubai) statement, "Even today, framed pictures and statuettes of Gangubai are there in the brothels of Kamathipura. Ask anyone about Gangubai and they'll direct you to a framed picture of hers in their room. They may not have known her but they have surely heard of her" (Borges & Zaidi, 2011b: 85), it can be said that the above-mentioned fictional additions intensify, and even manifest the already existing idolatry image of Gangubai. Put together the trace of the classic film, *Pakeezah* of 1972 and a thematic commonality with political leaders' life stories, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* renders the life story of Gangubai with the status of 'a classic tale of a selfless leader'.

Fictionality in the Representation of Gangubai's Kamathipura

The fictionality involved in recreating Kamathipura and its culture in the film interestingly complements the story of Gangubai with an extended authenticity. While Zaidi's text relatively provides less information on the locality of Kamathipura in the due course of the narrative, Bhansali, using the audio-visual medium to a fuller extent, comes up with a detailed representation of the Kamathipura of Gangubai's period that roughly ranges from the 1950s to 1970s. For such a representation, he draws from his experience as a child in a neighbourhood near Kamathipura. He says in his interview with Anupama Chopra that he used to pass by those

lanes of brothels in Kamathipura while going to school and returning home. Though he had not seen or known Gangubai *per se*, he claims to have relied on his vivid memory of his school time experience to recreate the Kamathipura of that period. He recalls sights of oddly dressed sex workers continually doing make overs with small mirrors on roads, calling clients through a hand gesture of 20 rupees, abusing the men who do not comply and chatting with neighbours in a loud voice and a rough language from balconies in the midst of the sounds of the traffic in their narrow lanes. He further recalls the location of the cinema hall and the café (Desai, 2022). Besides these memories, he has majorly employed documentary style shooting that allows a panoramic view of the setting and the actors with minimal cuts and many single shots. His memory of the older Kamathipura and this style of shooting together have added a different dimension of authenticity to the life story of Gangubai.

The fictionality in artistic audio-visual representation of people and places that uses memory and documentary style shooting enlarges the landscape of Gangubai's life story, thereby providing a scope to precisely understand the space and culture of her life. For the representation of people and places in the film, Bhansali, rather than choosing location shooting at the present Kamathipura, recreates the set of the Kamathipura of Gangubai's period mostly relying on his memory. Fictionality thus involved here lies in the method that is chosen to retrieve the sense of the past (Gudmundsdóttir, 2003: 6). Recreating the set of the older Kamathipura allows Bhansali to bring in the elements of the past such as the old British architecture of Kamathipura, old cinema halls, cinema posters, café among others. Moreover, Kamathipura is shown to house a huge number of sex workers in the film as must have been the case in that period since prostitution flourished there from 1864 to 1992 (Anon, 2021) (see figure 4). Those sex workers along with Gangubai are depicted to have garishly dressed, doing make over (see figures 1&2), standing on the roads and signalling the clients. Besides, they speak in the pidgin Bumbaiya Hindi, that was specific to certain working-class regions of Mumbai at the time. They also speak with a bold and a rough modulation at many instances as Bhansali had witnessed in his childhood in the lanes of Kamathipura. Two of those instances are – Rashmibai, a brothel Madam abusing Gangubai in a loud voice for letting a young girl go home from the brothel and Gangubai fiercely abusing Raziabai's henchman at the top of her voice on the road. Yet another instance is when Gangubai chats with her neighbour in a loud voice from her balcony about sharing laddus and the future of the neighbour's girl child. The detailed representation of Kamathipura's original space and culture of Gangubai's period thus widens the landscape of her life story.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Encompassing all the above-mentioned mise en scènes is the documentary style shooting that covers in a frame many simultaneous acts occurring in the background (as can be seen in Figure 3). In principle, documentaries are “*unscripted content*, free from adhering to written lines for the principal characters at the time of filming. Everything that is captured by the cameras is inherently spontaneous and unrehearsed” (Mulholland, 2024). In accordance with this principle, during a non-verbal romance between Afshaan and Gangubai in the song ‘jab saiyan... (when my lover...)’, as Afshaan stands on the road and Gangubai sits in her balcony, many passersby and handcarts are seen. Only a few notice their romance, while others are busy with their business. Also, a passerby looking into his purse crashes into Afshaan and continues to walk. This kind of shooting hints at a life-likeness to the audience as it portrays an on-going life amidst the surrounding. The play between Bhansali’s memory and the ‘documentary style shooting’, therefore, commands attention to the life-like representation of the space and culture of the Kamathipura of that period.

The extended authenticity in the film’s representation of Kamathipura’s space and culture that this article seeks to explore is defined less in terms of factual correctness than in terms of memory and imagination. The space to use memory and imagination is partly provided

by the factual imprecision of Zaidi's text. This factual imprecision in Zaidi's text is due to the unavailability of documentary evidence and a major dependence on the oral anecdotes. Drawing on the latter, Zaidi roughly gives a timeline of Gangubai's life from the late 1940s to early 1970s, that is, from the time of her elopement to the time of her death. The only event with a clearly mentioned year is the agitation led by St. Anthony's Girls High School authorities and local residents, demanding the evacuation of certain brothels in Kamathipura, which took place in early 1960 (Borges & Zaidi, 2011b: 84). With this knowledge of Gangubai's period and his own memory of Kamathipura of the late 1960s and 1970s during his school days (he was born in 1963), Bhansali builds the space and culture of Gangubai's Kamathipura in the film. For instance, he imagines the presence of posters of released films at the time such as *Mughal e-Azam* (1960), *Jahazi Lootera* (1958) and *Chaudhvin ka Chand* (1960) in Kamathipura. The fictionality employed can be explained in Johnnie Graton's (an emeritus professor of French at Trinity College, Dublin) view: "fiction as making and not just making up; fiction as the corollary of imagination, fantasy and desire; fiction as the supplement of memory (a supplement probably always already in memory). In short, fiction is coextensive with the idea of a performative dimension" (quoted in Gudmundsdóttir, 2003: 4). This fictionality does not limit the scope of authenticity in the film as stated by Bhattacharya and Mehta thus: "He [Bhansali] is giving us representations that we recognize and therefore imagine being "authentic" (2022). Instead, it provides an extended authenticity by virtue of resulting from a combination of Bhansali's memory, historical knowledge and imagination. Thus, it calls for an informed imagination of Gangubai's Kamathipura, against the backdrop of which her life can be perceived.

Fictionality in Visual Aesthetics

The fictionality in the visual aesthetics of the film furthers the representation of Gangubai as a revolutionary and a selfless leader, and enhances her idolatry image. Moreover, it emphasises the life story of Gangubai as a journey towards acceptance of the sex workers in the society. The aesthetics typical of Bhansali's films in which "suffering becomes beautiful, an exquisite torture, framing tears and sorrow" (Dwyer, 2023) uses symbols and motifs for such a representation and an emphasis that is far different from a realistic representation that may showcase struggles as they are as does *Manjummel Boys* (2024), a Malayalam film that is based on the true story of a man's fall into a deadly hole and his subsequent rescue, for example. The symbols and motifs offered particularly by the lighting and colour in Bhansali's film both

signify the above-mentioned ideas and beautify the narrative, visually enhancing the effect of the life story.

The use of contrasting light and darkness during significant moments in the film aesthetically suggests Gangubai as a selfless leader. When Gangubai enters the brothel with her first client for her 'nath uthrana' ceremony, that is, traditionally her first night in the sex trade, the light goes off due to a power cut, and the sex workers from all the brothels in Kamathipura stand at their thresholds with a candle light. While the preceding darkness implies the end of Ganga's (her birth name) dreams and the symbolic death of Ganga herself, the spectacularly illuminated Kamathipura in the next frame signifies the symbolic birth of Gangubai, and metaphorically represents Gangubai herself as a new light to Kamathipura. Candle lights can also be interpreted as a symbol of Gangubai sacrificing herself for the welfare of Kamathipura. Similarly, during the wedding procession of Afshaan, Gangubai is shown to be watching it from her dimly lit home while the entire Kamathipura is well lit with the enchantment of celebration at the beginning of the song, 'Shikayat'. Considering Gangubai's love affair with Afshaan and her own subsequent arrangement of the wedding, the darkness at her home and the contrasting brightness at the wedding procession again signify Gangubai's sacrifice to illuminate the lives of her community. Instances of this kind aesthetically reiterate Gangubai as a selfless leader of Kamathipura.

The colour white is a leitmotif in the film as it strongly signifies Gangubai as a revolutionary and an idolatry figure, and her life story as a journey towards acceptance in society. Drawing from Zaidi's mention that Gangubai used to wear "gold-bordered white sarees" (Borges & Zaidi, 2011b: 85) and a picture of her that is available on websites in which she wears a white saree and smears a round kumkum on her forehead (see figure 5), the film expands the pertinence of white in the life story by attributing purity, revolution and acceptance. The first occurrence of white in the film marks the beginning of Gangubai's revolution for the rights and acceptance of sex workers in society when her fellow sex workers gift Gangubai a white saree to wear from then on and fight for their cause as a brothel madam. Another significant instance symbolising revolution is Gangubai's speech at Azad Maidan wherein a mix of white and light-coloured attire of the audience and an entirely white-themed background are shown. The enriching uniformity of white in this *mise en scène* reiterates Gangubai's argument that sex workers like her are one among the members of society, thereby demanding acceptance. Of all, the most important scene of white motif with multiple symbolisms is the

last scene after Gangubai's meeting with Nehru. Gangubai in her white saree with a jasmine garland is taken, in this scene, on a procession amidst all the people of Kamathipura who are also dressed in white (see figure 6). It is important to note here that till this scene, no sex worker or a brothel madam has been shown as being dressed in white except Gangubai. Therefore, the white mise en scène at this juncture marks the victorious beginning of gaining rights and acceptance by the community of sex workers in society since Gangubai succeeds in saving the brothels against demolition. In other words, it strongly reemphasises Gangubai's life story as a journey towards acceptance. Also, the picturesquely white-themed procession and the swan metaphor (Afshaan uses it to describe Gangubai in his introductory scene) raises Gangubai's status to a pure and an idolatry figure.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

The fictionality in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is influenced, as any biopic, by commercialising and historicising tendencies and, more importantly, by Bhansali's creative agency. While inclusion of songs, dances and a romantic interlude, casting Alia Bhatt, a Bollywood star and re-establishing Bhansali's visual grandeur together indicate the commercial character of the film, the recreation of historic Mumbai and the revival of the classicism of Indian cinema reveal its tendency to historicise both Kamathipura, the well-known red-light

district of Mumbai, and Indian cinema. In fact, these tendencies can be further substantiated with the following accolades that it received: it was first premiered at the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival on 16th February 2022 even before its release in India on the 25th of the same month; in the 69th National Film Awards, it won five awards that includes Best Actress for Alia Bhatt and Best Screenplay (Adapted) for Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Utkarshini Vashishta; in the 68th Filmfare Awards, it won 11 awards that included Best Film and Best Actress and many more. Also, the box office collection of the film after its theatrical release on 25th February, 2022 was 153.69 crore rupees in India, and 209.77 crore rupees globally. It further reached 50.6 million viewership hours on Netflix after its OTT release on 26 April 2022 (Anon, 2024). These accolades and reception firmly recognise it as a commercial success. Besides, Bhansali's authorial agency is well manifested in various aspects of the film, especially in fictional additions and visual aesthetics. All these factors have influenced fictionality in the film, hence the life story of Gangubai. Using 'dilation' as a technique, the fictionality in the film is found to have heightened the effect of the life story of Gangubai by offering it imagined perspectives of Gangubai, her subjectivity, extended authenticity, and the status of a classic tale of a selfless leader together with the scope to view Gangubai's life as a journey towards acceptance.

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