



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

A Mythic Woman in a Modern World: Archetypal Reclamation in Gangubai Kathiawadi

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Abstract

This article explores the protagonist of Gangubai Kathiawadi, the matruarch of Kamathipura, through the lens of archetypal framework put forward by Jean Shinoda Bolen's in her book *Goddesses in Everywoman*. By applying Carl Jung's theory of archetypes to the character of Gangubai, the study argues that she embodies an amalgamation of the seven major goddess archetypes: Persephone, Demeter, Athena, Artemis, Hera, Aphrodite, and the Wise Woman. The film Gangubai Kathiawadi and the book "Mafia Queens" picture Gangubai's transformation from a vulnerable victim of betrayal to a powerful leader and protector aligns with the process of individuation which is considered as a central concept in Jungian psychology. It signifies the collaboration of the conscious and unconscious parts of the individual self. The evolution of Gangubai is not linear but fluid, as she simultaneously navigates and inhabits multiple archetypes, each reflecting distinct facets of feminine power and identity. Her journey reflects the cyclical nature of mythology and archetypal storytelling, wherein the heroines must confront societal constraints and personal trauma to achieve self-realization.

The article further examines how the traditional portrayal of women in the Indian cinema being challenged by Gangubai's character. It challenges the a nuanced portrayal of female characters. The film depicts the trajectory of Ganga Harjeevandas (Gangubai) from an innocent girl who blindly believes her lover to the most powerful matriarch of Kamathipura. The traits in Gangubai throughout her journey can be seen and analyzed as an amalgamation of the archetypes of goddesses.

Keywords: Gangubai Kathiawadi, goddess archetypes, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Carl Jung, individuation, feminist narrative, archetypal psychology, Indian cinema, feminine power, mythology

Introduction

Women are often portrayed as victims or minor characters throughout the history of cinema. Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, depicts a strong female character who is strong, self-sufficient and bold. She breaks the shackles of societal marginalization and she became the voice for the muted. The movie, Gangubai Kathiawadi is based on a chapter from Hussain Zaidi's book *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*.

Ganga was sold to Sheila Masi's brothel and was forcefully asked to engage in the business of flesh trade by her own lover. Gangubai did not have option to return back even though she wished to and hence turned a prostitute. She gained respect from fellow prostitutes. Her bond with Don Rahim Lala and her strong will made her the mafia queen. She wanted to make the life of the women in her community and also helped young betrayed girls who ended up in the brothel to return to their own places. The embodiment of multiple feminine archetypes, makes Gangubai a particularly fascinating subject, each reflecting a different stage in her journey toward self-realization. These archetypes are the main matter of discussion in Jean Shinoda Bolen's "Goddesses in Everywoman", in which she identifies seven key goddesses from Greek mythology as metaphors for different personalities of female and stages of life. This article examines Gangubai's journey through the lens of these goddess archetypes. Carl Jung's concept of individuation can be considered as an important key to understand the evolution of Gangubai. She can be seen as caring mother, a dear sister, a bosom friend, and a powerful leader too. "The Jungian perspective has made me aware that women are influenced by powerful inner forces, or archetypes, which can be personified by Greek goddesses. And the feminist perspective has given me an understanding of how outer forces, or stereotypes—the roles to which society expects women to conform—reinforce some goddess patterns and repress others. As a result, I see every woman as a "woman-in-between": acted on from within by goddess archetypes and from without by cultural stereotypes." (Goddesses in Every Woman).

C. G. Jung introduced the concept of archetypes into psychology. He put forward the idea of collective unconscious, which is present in each and every individual. It is the integration of the conscious and unconscious. The goddess archetypes describing in the book are the six Olympian goddesses—Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Artemis, Athena, and Aphrodite—plus Persephone, whose mythology is inseparable from Demeter's. The author has divided the seven goddesses into three categories: the virgin goddesses, the vulnerable goddesses, and the alchemical (or transformative) goddess. The virgin goddesses represent the independent, self-sufficient quality in women. Unlike the other Olympians, these three were not susceptible to falling in love. Emotional attachments did not divert them from what they considered important. They were not victimized and did not suffer. As archetypes, they express the need in women for autonomy, and the capacity women have to focus their consciousness on what is personally meaningful. The three

vulnerable goddesses represent the traditional roles of wife, mother, and daughter. They are the relationship-oriented goddess archetypes, whose identities and well-being depend on having a significant relationship. They express women's needs for affiliation and bonding. They are attuned to others and vulnerable. These three goddesses were raped, abducted, dominated, or humiliated by male gods. Each suffered in her characteristic way when an attachment was broken or dishonored, and showed symptoms that resembled psychological illnesses. Each of them also evolved, and can provide women with an insight into the nature and pattern of their own reactions to loss, and the potential for growth through suffering that is inherent in each of these three goddess archetypes. The Aphrodite archetype motivates women to seek intensity in relationships rather than permanence, to value creative process, and be open to change. (Goddesses in Every Woman) In Gangubai Kathiawadi, Sanjay Leela Bhansali retells the story of a woman who rises from marginalisation, exploitation and betrayal to be crowned as the leader of her community. She stood for dignity and rights of the sex workers. She lent her voice for the muted sex workers and their community. Her character can be studied on the basis of the characters from the mythology and also from the Jungian concept of archetypes. She is nurturing, hurting, strategic protective and vengeful like the various divine archetypes. These divine goddess figures stand as psychological blueprints of feminine power and the complex nature of female. Hence her journey and her transformation can be considered as mythical also.

Persephone – The Maiden and Survivor, Gangubai embodies Persephone in the early stages of her life. In the mythology, Persephone is an innocent maiden who is forcefully taken from her world to the underworld. Persephone's archetype shows innocence, vulnerability, and the forced transition. Just like Persephone, Gangubai is initially naive, full of dreams and wished to become a movie star. But she was betrayed and sold to a brothel by her own lover. Her innocence was lost and the dark phase of her life began there. Persephone's dual role - both the victim and the queen of the underworld, mirrors Gangubai's own tragic life in Kamathipura. She was initially exploited and was forced to engage in prostitution, but later takes control of her life and circumstances and reigned there for the rest of her life. She, just like Persephone, was able to rise from exploitation and found her own place amid those patriarchal world.

Demeter, The Nurturing Mother- Gangubai's life with the women and girls in the brothel unfolds her inner motherly instincts. The archetype of Demeter represents, motherhood and fertility. It is rooted in a deep sense of unconditional love, protection, and self-sacrifice. Gangubai provided staunch support to the girls and the women in Kamathipura, offering them both physical protection and emotional support. In Kamathipura, Gangubai assumes the role of protector for the younger women, offering them not only physical protection but also emotional support and empowerment. She fought for the rights of sex workers and for their dignity.

Athena, The Strategist and Political Leader, the goddess of wisdom, strategy, and justice. Gangubai's rise as political power in the film stands for the archetype of Athena. Athena is often portrayed as a warrior who uses intellect and logic to overcome challenges, than force. Gangubai, like Athena, strategically solved the issues put forward by the patriarchy, the double marginalisation faced by her for being a woman and a prostitute. She decided to become a political leader to fight for the rights of her community clearly shows the archetype of Athena. Gangubai transcends the portrayal of the stereotypical image of a victimized woman and becomes a symbol of strategic empowerment by representing the wisdom of the underdog.

Artemis- the goddess of the hunt and protector of women. Artemis is independent, protective of those she loves, pictured as a warrior who defends the vulnerable without any discrimination. From the very beginning of the movie, this archetype is clearly visible. When a little girl was sold to the brothel and how Gangubai stood for her reflects Artemis' strength. Throughout her life she refused to submit to the patriarchal norms and lend a helping hand for the needy ones. The male gaze in this movie shows how women especially those who were engaged in prostitution, were treated. Her one man army struggle places her as a modern day Artemis.

Hera - The Queenly Authority, As Gangubai was the mafia queen, she powerfully asserted her control over the brothel and was able to earn the respect of those around her. She evolves into a queen. Hera is a goddess of regal authority, dignity, and commitment. Gangubai's authority and self-assuredness mirrors Hera's trait. She never rely on a man for validation or power. She builds her own kingdom. Her rise as the "madam" of Kamathipura, which marks her transformation into a queenly figure.

Aphrodite – The Lover and Creator, the goddess of love, beauty, and sensuality. Gangubai stood for her loved ones. Her love for Ramnik made her end up in the brothel. The relation she had with Afshan was selfless and it was her love for him made her to arrange his marriage with a fellow prostitute's daughter. She wished to see him succeed in his life. She also had deep emotional connection with her community and its members. Gangubai's sense of beauty, her elegant saris, jewelry, and poised demeanor, symbolizes the sensual energy of Aphrodite.

The Wise Woman – The Integrator of Archetypes. Gangubai transforms into the amalgamation of various aspects of goddesses within her as she matures. Her character develops into the Wise Woman archetype, which represents wisdom, healing, and spiritual guidance, integrating both the nurturing and protective aspects of Demeter and Artemis with the strategic intellect of Athena and the regal authority of Hera. Gangubai's inner wisdom is reflected in Gangubai's capacity to balance love and leadership, vengeance and forgiveness showcases her inner wisdom.

Conclusion

Gangubai Kathiawadi presents a modern myth of power and transformation. Gangubai's journey, seen through the lens of Jean Shinoda Bolen's goddess archetypes, offers a portrayal of how women navigate and integrate the various aspects of their identities. She is a testament to the complexity, strength, and resilience of women, who, like the goddesses, move beyond victimhood to become empowered creators of their own destinies. Gangubai's character can be considered as an amalgamation of the archetypes of various goddesses. It redefines the classical portrayal of female characters in the Indian cinema.

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