



Semiotic exploration of Indian patriarchy: Roland Barthes' perspective on Gangubai Kathiawadi



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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the profound impacts films can exert on audiences. Through an in-depth exploration of the Gangubai Kathiawadi film, it endeavors to unveil the intricate layers of patriarchal culture prevalent in Indian society. Employing Roland Barthes's Semiotics as a guiding framework, the research meticulously examines the semiotic elements of signs, denotations, connotations, and myths embedded within the movie. To ensure the robustness of the findings, a multifaceted approach to data collection and analysis was adopted. The primary data source, the Gangubai Kathiawadi movie itself, was the cornerstone. Additionally, secondary data sources, including literature reviews and interviews with domain experts, were strategically utilized to triangulate perspectives and enrich the analysis. The meticulous triangulation of data sources ensures the reliability and validity of the findings, thereby enriching our understanding of the intricate interplay between film representations and societal constructs. The methodology employed in this research is anchored in descriptive qualitative techniques, wherein scene-by-scene analysis units are meticulously scrutinized for insights. By employing this methodological rigor, the study endeavors to unravel the patriarchal representations depicted in the film. The research findings illuminate a spectrum of patriarchal constructs within the Gangubai Kathiawadi, including stereotypical gender categorizations, instances of subordination and objectification of women, and systemic injustices faced by prostitutes. The film adeptly portrays the entrenched societal norms that perpetuate the superiority of men and the inferior status accorded to women. Through its compelling portrayal, Gangubai Kathiawadi emerges as a poignant reflection of societal attitudes towards women, particularly within the context of Indian society.

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1. Introduction

As the award-winning film at *Filmfare Awards*, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* movie not only portrays the patriarchal culture in Indian society but also depicts how the societal environment normalizes such behavior. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* film is a cinematic production focusing on social issues and society in India. The movie achieved placement on the *Netflix* Top 10 list in 25 countries globally, spanning Australia, Canada, South Africa, the UK, UAE, Thailand, and Indonesia [1], [2]. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* depicts a woman fighting for justice and her rights and those of her family in a patriarchal society. The film depicts the majority of actors in the practice of prostitution are women. However, there are also some male roles in it. But behind this, the role of men seems invisible and has no negative impact on men who play a role in the practice of prostitution. Whereas Soerjono Soekanto said that prostitution or prostitution is a work that is surrendered to commit sexual acts by getting a wage [3], someone who sells sexual services is called a WTS (*Wanita Tuna Susila*), which is now often referred to as a Commercial Sex

Workers (CSWs) [4]. When social sanctions are given by society against the parties involved in the prostitution business, the woman as the provider of prostitution services receives the heaviest reproach from the community [5]. Discrimination, based on sexual orientation and gender identity, is common across the globe and it is one of the many angles that are viewed as contributing to prostitution. In discussions about gender discrimination within the realm of organizational behavior, the focus predominantly centers on women [6], [7]. It also implies the existence of an entrenched patriarchal culture. The prevalence of patriarchal perception is one among many factors that influence gender stereotypes, gender labeling, and gendered socialization, leading to gender inequality and inequity in society [8]–[10]. Patriarchal beliefs are manifest in the structural frame of society [11]. Society sets rules, traditions, or habits that eventually become the culture. Culture is one of the shreds of evidence of human existence, both socially and individually [12].

In Indian culture, men traditionally occupy the dominant role within families. The head of the family, typically the father, holds significant economic and decision-making responsibility. This societal structure, characterized by male authority, is known as patriarchy. The term patriarchy finds its roots in the concept of "patriarkhia," which denotes the supremacy of the father figure [13], reflecting a social norm prevalent in Indian society, particularly in traditional contexts. Walby in Suliman [14] has stated that patriarchy is often described as a framework or arrangement that regulates social interactions between binary genders in societies, with its primary characteristic being the control, suppression, and exploitation of women by men. The predominance of men in India is widely acknowledged within the community due to the enduring presence of this system and its accompanying structures. This value has been embraced and ingrained in society over numerous generations, becoming deeply entrenched in its fabric from the past to the present day. Films emerge as captivating storytellers, etching their mark on the collective consciousness. They capture the essence of our traditions, beliefs, and values, offering insights into the human experience that echo through generations. Also, film is a cultural and artistic product that functions as a communication medium. All the references perused concurred that film is an effective medium for conveying messages. Moreover, a film can also be used for propaganda purposes [14], [15]. Research on cultural representation, as carried out by scholars, concluded that there was generally a satisfactory depiction of culture, cultural diplomacy, and national values, as understood by each researcher [16], [17].

The delineation of the cultural propaganda category is not as straightforward as [18]. Kurniawan [19] conducted research that raised issues of patriarchy which found that women do not have access to high positions or have significant power, particularly in highly rewarding jobs. Men are considered more competent than women, which leads to inequality in employment. In addition, women are portrayed as sexual objects that only exist to fulfill men's desires. They are not only sexually objectified, but also treated as objects that are vulnerable to violence perpetrated by men. In another study conducted by Karkono [20], it was found that women do not have equal rights in education compared to men, let alone in the political and economic spheres, because they are considered to only have to take care of household needs. From previous studies, it is common to raise patriarchal issues related to inequality in employment, wages, and violence that occurs to a woman because of her gender. This research will raise issues related to discrimination that occurs to a prostitute as a result of the patriarchal culture that is perpetuated in society, especially Indian society. The researcher chooses to discuss the topic of patriarchy in this movie to reveal how the patriarchy is represented.

2. Method

The paradigm used in this research is the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm assesses social science as a systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through direct and detailed observation of social actors in natural daily settings, to be able to understand and interpret how the social actors concerned create and maintain/manage their social world [21]. The constructivist paradigm is a framework that considers that truth in social reality is the result of social construction, so that truth in the context of social reality is considered relative. This paradigm focuses on the study of reality formed by humans and its impact on life in society.

The object of this research is the patriarchal culture represented in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. As a unit of analysis, this research will focus on discriminatory behavior and gender injustice against the negative stigma of prostitutes in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. This research is conducted in a descriptive qualitative manner. Qualitative research is research that produces and processes data that is descriptive, such as interview transcriptions, field notes, pictures, video recording photos, and other fields [22].

The application of a qualitative descriptive approach in analyzing a film involves a process that pays attention in detail to film elements such as character, plot, setting, theme, and narrative style. Through in-depth descriptions and qualitative analysis, researchers gain a broader understanding of the meaning and messages contained in the film. By emphasizing quality and complexity over quantity of data, this analysis pays attention to nuance, context, and subjective interpretations that enrich the understanding of the film. Thus, a qualitative descriptive approach makes it possible to convey a deeper understanding of how the film creates a unique aesthetic and narrative experience for its viewers. The data collection techniques used in this research are observation, documentation, literature study, and interview. This interview is used as a method triangulation data validity technique to test the truth or credibility of data and is done by checking the data that has been obtained from the same source using different techniques. For example, data obtained from observation is then checked by interview. In analyzing this film, the application of interviews as a triangulation technique can provide additional perspectives and validation of the findings obtained from the subjective analysis. Through interviews with experts or individuals who have a deep understanding of certain aspects of film production, or are experts in theory, researchers can confirm and enrich interpretations about various film elements, such as visual choices, hidden messages, or creative intentions behind the scenes. key. By comparing and combining expert views with findings from analysis of the film itself, researchers can strengthen the reliability and validity of the conclusions, while also enriching understanding of the cultural influences behind the film.

Roland Barthes' semiotic method will be the analytical approach employed in this study. Known for applying Saussure's linguistic and semiological theories, Roland Barthes was a structuralist philosopher. According to him, language serves as a sign system that displays the presumptions of a certain culture at a particular period [23]. Roland Barthes' semiotics focuses on three main elements at the core of his analysis, namely denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and the concept of myth, see Fig. 1. This can provide deep insight into the meanings contained in audiovisual representations. Denotative interpretation involves identifying and understanding literal film elements, such as objects, locations, and character expressions. Connotative interpretation involves interpreting the implicit or symbolic meaning of the elements, such as the cultural associations or values conveyed. Meanwhile, myth interpretation highlights dominant narratives or stereotypes that may be reinforced by the film, revealing the ideologies or views of society embedded in the work. By dissecting films through denotative, connotative, and mythical lenses, researchers can explore deep layers of meaning, understand how films create cultural representations, and provide a more comprehensive picture of their messages and impacts.

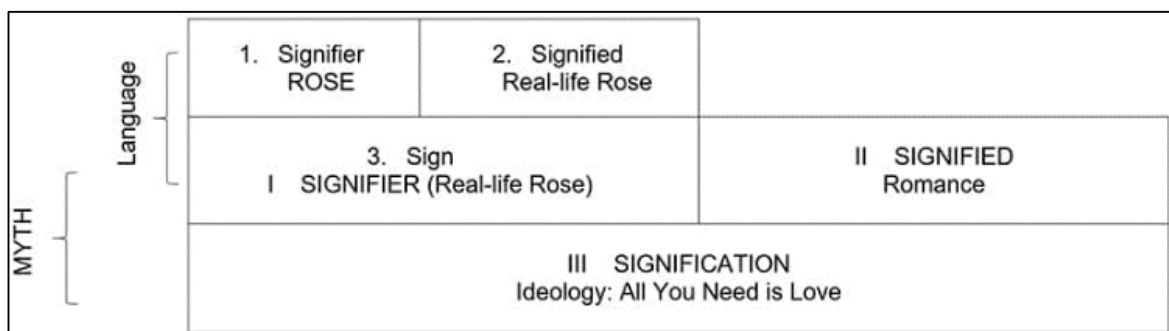


Fig. 1. Media-studies.com/barthes (2024)

In this study, researchers wanted to find the representation of patriarchal culture presented in the scenes of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* movies. To find the representation of patriarchal culture, researchers used Roland Barthes' semiotic method where there are denotation, connotation, and mythical meanings. Based on this, the researcher found the meaning or meaning contained in the film based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis in finding the representation of Indian patriarchal culture in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*.

3. Results and Discussion

In the *Gangubai Kathiawadi* movies, the presence of Indian patriarchal culture is depicted through male dominance in decision-making, objectification, subordination, discrimination, prejudice, and patrilineal lineage.

3.1. Male Dominance

In **Table 1**, the denotative meaning shows in the scene that it was a poorly lit room, with only one window as a light source. A young girl has just arrived in a neighborhood called Kamathipura, a notorious prostitution area in Mumbai. The young girl is sold to an uninhabitable-looking house that turns out to be a brothel. A woman comes to persuade her to follow the rules of the brothel and accept her current fate, as another girl who was desperate to return home was not welcomed back by her family, but was instead hanged in public. The woman asks who brought her to the place, and the young girl states that she was brought there by her husband.

The connotative meaning shows the girl's position at the bottom shows Madhu's helplessness, supported by Madhu's appearance which depicts her inadequate state. The white-colored saree used by Gangubai in this scene shows the sense of peace she carries in talking to Madhu, but her determination and courage are depicted through the sunglasses she uses, the glasses depict Gangubai who has a strong attitude in various difficulties. The dialogue in this scene suggests that the family as a child's first place is not guaranteed to accept their daughter back who has stumbled into a prostitution case. Some of them will strongly refuse. It also shows the practice of child marriage considering the girl is only 14 years old. On the other hand, there is the practice of forced prostitution by the girl's husband, Jameel, which shows that a husband has full control over his wife.

Table 1. Scene of Male Dominance in Decision-Making

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 9.27 - 9.42	Dialogue
	<p>Gangubai: Her family hanged her to death in public. Who brought you here? Madhu: Jameel? Gangubai: What do you have to do with him? Madhu: I'm his wife.</p>

The myth in this scene is the perception of a woman who is considered never able to take a stand for herself. A woman when she is a child must always obey and depend on her family's decisions, and when she is married, she must depend on her husband's decisions. On the other hand, in India, child marriage can be considered a form of gender-based violence, comparable to the rape of women in the context of marriage. These violent incidents can include physical acts within the domestic environment, prostitution, and utilization [24].


"This scene is appropriate because a woman can never be considered independent, she must always follow her guardian or a man. If she is still a child, in this scene she is forced to get married, the one who marries her is her father who is a man. When she is married, she decides to follow her husband, who is also a man." (Interview with DPS, January 2nd, 2024)

Women are never allowed to assert themselves. A girl should be in the custody of her father when she is a child, a woman should be in the custody of her husband if married, and the custody of her son if she is widowed. Under no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself.

3.2. Objectification

In Table 2, the denotative meaning shows a scene a man sees a young woman in front of a brothel in the dark, and he feels attracted and invites her to enter the brothel. The connotative meaning from Table 2 shows the man's gaze at the woman in front of the brothel suggesting that the man sees the woman as an object. The women lined up in front of the brothel illustrate the perception of women as objects on display and waiting to be chosen. In addition, the dialogue 'Let's go' suggests an authoritarian unilateral decision from men.

Table 2. Scene of Objectification

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 20.45 - 21.30	Dialogue
	Mr Govind: Lets Go

The myth of the scene shows the gaze of the man towards the woman in front of the brothel this scene shows that there are men who consider women as objects. This illustrates gender-specific roles where women are presented as sex objects. Therefore, the problem of objectification of women is a global issue but it is more prevalent in India as a country dominated by patriarchal culture. This depiction of the relationship between men and women normalizes violence against women as a result of normalizing the objectification of their bodies [25].

"This is objectification, because in brothels, for example, the Red Light District in the Netherlands uses window displays. Things like this are supposed to be private. But they make it as if they are selling goods, and why do women have to sell like in a window? That is also a form of male gaze to attract men" (Interview with DPS, January 2nd, 2024).

Regarding objectification, society believes that the nature of women is to seduce men in this world. Even though men may be immoral, sexually deviant, and devoid of any good qualities, women must constantly worship and serve the men. This seems to normalize the objectification that comes from the male mind, and labels women as creatures whose nature is to seduce men in the world.

3.3. Subordination

In Table 3, the denotative meaning shows in a poorly lit room, a man pays the woman to serve him, instead of physically assaulting her. The connotative meaning in this scene shows the position of confining the woman with both hands showing the power relations, that the man feels stronger and has more rights over the woman. The violence perpetrated by the man on the woman in this scene illustrates the power of the man over the woman who considers women weaker than him, especially since the man perpetrated the violence because he felt that he had rewarded the woman even though it was beyond the initial agreement. The myth shown in this scene demonstrates myths related to social norms that allow men to control, command, and demand respect from women by using violence [26]. The existence of power relations and subordination is also one of the beginnings of violence against women. Tyson [27] asserts that conventional gender roles portray men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive, while women are depicted as emotional, weak, nurturing, and submissive.

The described characteristics position women in a powerless role, emphasizing the disparities that contribute to gender inequality, particularly for women.

"For example, in the case of commercial sex workers, men will be arbitrary because they feel they can pay, and commercial sex workers are considered to have a lower social status. This is also an explanation for the emergence of discrimination and subordination because men feel more dominant and higher in social status" (Interview with DPS, January 2nd, 2024).

Society believes a woman's only obligation is to obey and please her husband or men and for that reason, she will be exalted in heaven. This puts the man on top even compared to the woman herself, signaling the subordination of women.

Table 3. Scene of Subordination

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 29.52 - 31.10	Dialogue
	Gangubai: Aunty Sheela!

3.4. Discrimination

In [Table 4](#), the denotative meaning shows a woman who was giving a speech in front of many people, she raised the question of why the Kamathipura neighborhood was considered bad, even when it was men from another neighborhood who came and polluted. The connotative meaning in this scene shows the dialogue *'Men from your neighborhood come to us, and our neighborhood is famous. Why?'* hints at the confusion and injustice of men needing the services of prostitutes, yet it is the prostitutes who are always labeled as negative and immoral by society. Meanwhile, the men who come and go from the prostitution scene don't seem to get any negative stigma. Based on [Table 4](#), the myths generated make men who become customers feel safe, and free from the risk of punishment and social stigma.

Table 4. Scene of Discrimination

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 2.09.00 - 2.09.12	Dialogue
	Gangubai: Why do they only object to our existence? Why is it only our profession that is considered immoral? Men from your neighborhood come to us, and our neighborhood is the one getting famous. Why?


The power relations between prostitutes and customers are very unbalanced. Men as consumers do not experience consequences proportional to the impact felt by women who become prostitutes. This imbalance is also shaped by the patriarchal culture in India that still maintains male dominance over women. In this context, the existence of women as prostitutes is due to the existence of men as parties who have demand. However, discrimination occurs when men who are also 'enjoyers' of prostitution do not get any form of discrimination, there is no labeling of themselves, and all the bad stigma seems to be transferred to women who are

prostitutes. The system of *devdasi* (servants of God) dedicating young unmarried girls to Gods in Hindu temples, often making them objects of sexual pleasure for temple priests and pilgrims, was an established custom in India by 300AD.

3.5. Prejudice

In Table 5 the denotative meaning shows a man who is a local politician coming to the brothel, another man states that the politician is afraid to come to the brothel. A woman in the brothel understands the politician's fear. The connotative meaning shows the position of clasping the politician's hands in front of Gangubai and displays the respect that the man has for Gangubai as the leader of Kamathipura. However, the reality of the politician's fear of coming to Kamathipura as the neighborhood is considered dirty and immoral neighborhood as per the dialogue 'When men like him visit our brothels, we get the honor, while they lose it.' The myth in this scene shows that in India sex work in brothel neighborhoods, especially in large and well-known districts in metropolitan areas such as Sonagachi in Kolkata and Kamathipura in Mumbai is supported by structural interventions and community-led development projects. However, the community often has a negative view of commercial sex and engages in prejudice against places like brothels. In an interview with DPS on January 2nd, 2024, it was stated that people do have more expectations of politicians. Politicians are seen as human beings who must be kept clean. When he enters a brothel with all its negative cachet, he will be perceived as no longer clean and pure. Especially in conservative Indian society, the stigma against sex workers can also affect the perception of the places where they work. Society may create negative associations towards brothels and see them as dirty or immoral environments. Stigma towards sex workers is also often related to gender, where female sex workers may face more negative views than male sex workers. This can create the perception that brothels are dirty or demeaning places for women.


Table 5. Scene of Prejudice

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 2.14.05 – 2.14.17	Dialogue
	<p>Fezi: I managed to bring him after much persuasion. He was afraid to come here. Gangubai: When men like him visit our brothel, we get the honor, while they lose it.</p>

3.6. Patrilineal Linage

In Table 6, the denotative meaning shows the woman from the brothel in Kamathipura requested that the school still enroll her daughters using her name as guardian. However, the principal asked who should be written as the father. The connotative meaning in this scene shows the societal perception of using the father's name as the primary identity of a child is indicative of the patrilineal system in society, especially in India. The mother's name, or the lineage derived from the mother, is never considered sufficient to identify a child. The myth shows in this scene that a patrilineal society. Most Hindu castes follow a patrilineal family system. In a patrilineal society, male lineage is considered more important than female lineage. All male members, namely husbands, older brothers, and fathers, perform duties such as decision-making for other family members, and their physical and moral protection [28]. Family names, estates, and social status are often passed down through the male line. Patrilineality deepens son preference as the lineage succeeds through the male line [29]. Arokiasamy & Goli [30] also add to the discussion that the culture of patrilineality subverts the social, political, and economic position of women to a significant extent. The World Economic Forum emphasized that India is one of the 15 countries in the world where deep-rooted patriarchal norms hamper women from claiming and exercising their rights to property.

Table 6. Scene of Patrilineal Lineage

Visual (Signifier) Minutes 1.55.00 – 1.55.13	Dialogue
	<p>Gangubai: Write... Mother's name Gangubai Kathiawadi Principal: And Father? What should we write as father? Gangubai: Mum's name isn't enough, is it?</p>

As the researchers have explained at the beginning of this research, this research is aimed at analyzing the representation of patriarchal culture contained in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to find out the representation of patriarchy that is seen and depicted in several scenes and dialogues contained in this film in the aspects of denotation, connotation, and also a myth. In a society characterized by patriarchy, there is an inherent assumption from the outset that men hold a superior position to women in personal life, family dynamics, and societal structures, see Fig. 2. Patriarchal culture consists of social and cultural circumstances that portray men as superior, often exerting control over women by positioning men in a dominant role [10].

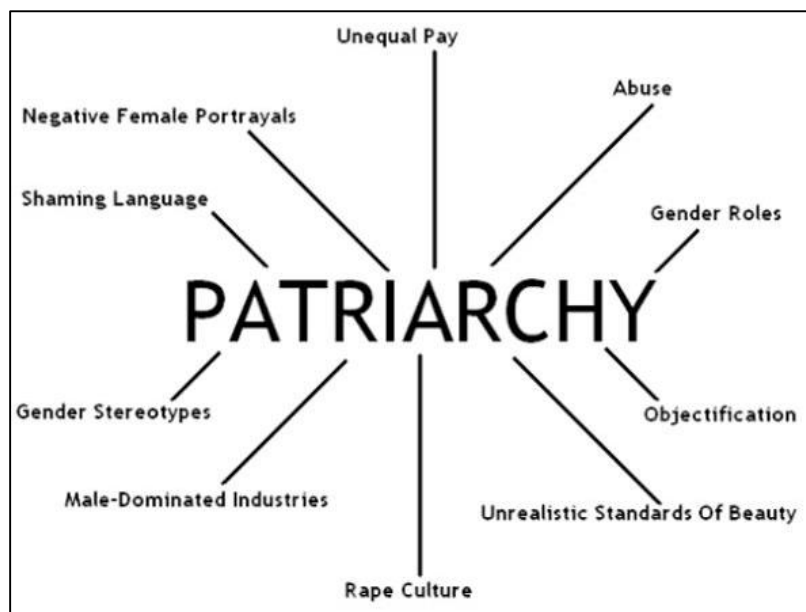


Fig. 2. Splendidofsun.wordpress.com/Patriarchy Characteristic (2017)

Indian society remains patriarchal. The influence of patriarchal values on matters such as sexuality, reproduction, and social roles is conveyed through distinct cultural metaphors, see Fig. 3. While explicit rules restricting women from particular significant activities and withholding certain rights have existed, a more nuanced manifestation of patriarchy lies in the symbolism [31]. Patriarchy is defined as a social system that gives men greater power in various aspects of life. This system creates a gender hierarchy where men dominate women in terms of power, access to resources, and influence in society. The depiction of patriarchy is clearly illustrated in several scenes, including discrimination against women, injustice, subordination, objectification, and so on. Several other patriarchies are also depicted in the scenes, dialogues, and settings in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* movie.

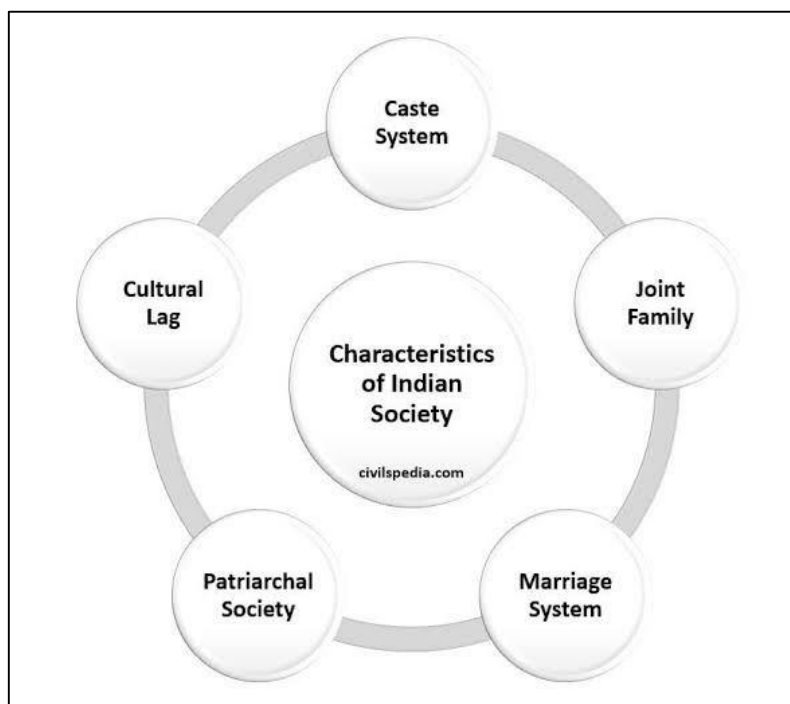


Fig. 3. Civilspedia.com/Salient Features of Indian Society (2023)

4. Conclusion

Based on the presentation and data analysis of the research, the following conclusions can be drawn: the representation of Indian patriarchal culture towards women shows the forms of male domination, subordination, objectification, discrimination, prejudice, and patrilineal lines that have an impact on women, especially on prostitutes in the Kamathipura neighborhood. In this study, 6 scenes have been taken that reveal how patriarchy is represented through all the scenes that have been analyzed and discussed. The film successfully shows how Indian patriarchy limits women's choices and forces them into certain roles in society, especially in the context of marginalized women who are forced to engage in sexual labor. It highlights how India's patriarchal structure still influences women's lives in many aspects, even as they strive to seek freedom. The film highlights Gangubai's aspirations to have control over his own life and fight for freedom and equality in a highly patriarchal context. It is interpreted as a liberal feminism narrative that highlights the importance of women's rights and their power to change their destinies. The assumptions of liberal feminism theory, related to freedom and equality of rationality show the ideal form of an equal society without discrimination, subordination, and other things between the two genders between men and women. Limited research studies were conducted in the context of feminism, framing, and resistance of marginalized women. This research is an attempt to paint a picture of the discrimination faced by women in a patriarchal society. Given the importance of this research in understanding the patriarchal culture that is perpetuated in society, several limitations need to be addressed to assist future research. The use of semiotic methods in this research only focuses on examining signs of patriarchal culture in films. Apply an intersectional lens to the semiotic analysis of "Gangubai Kathiawadi" to examine how patriarchy intersects with other forms of oppression such as caste, class and religion in Indian society. Exploring how semiotic representations of patriarchy in the film reflect and perpetuate intersecting systems of power and privilege. This research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender inequality in the broader social context of India.

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