

Hellaro: An Ode to the Gendered Subaltern

**First Degree Programme in
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Hellaro: An Ode to the Gendered Subaltern

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Certificate

This is to certify that the project titled "**Hellaro: An Ode to the Gendered Subaltern**" is a record of studies carried out by Sanija Kennedy, Suhaila Shiyas, Suja. S, Suji. N and Sukrutha. B under my guidance and submitted to the University of Kerala in Partial Fulfilment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, First Degree Programme in English Language under CBCS System.

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Declaration

We hereby declare that the project titled "*Hellaro: An Ode to the Gendered Subaltern*" is a record of research work carried out by us at the Department of English, All Saints' College under the guidance of Dr. Diana V. Prakash, Assistant Professor, Department of English and submitted to the University of Kerala in Partial Fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, First Degree Programme in English Language and Literature under the CBCS System.

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Contents

Preface

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: From Suppression to Expression:
A Journey of Defiance in Hellaro 6

Chapter Three: Conclusion 20

Works Cited 24

Preface

The vibrant tapestry of Indian cinema often features women, yet their portrayals can be as diverse as the landscapes they inhabit. While some films celebrate female empowerment, others remain tethered to traditional narratives, perpetuating stereotypes and silencing their voices. *Hellaro* stands out as a powerful exception, venturing into the heart of rural Gujarat to explore the complexities of gender oppression.

Abhishek Shah's directorial debut *Hellaro*, a Gujarati period drama released in 2019 received widespread critical acclaim and was lauded for its powerful storytelling, social commentary, and artistic execution. *Hellaro*, dives into the lives of women in a remote village struggling against patriarchal norms.

"*Hellaro: An Ode to the Gendered Subaltern*" explores *Hellaro*'s nuanced portrayal of the 'gendered subaltern', the women- marginalized by not only their gender but also their social class. The project is divided into three chapters.

Chapter One examines the scope of cinema as a medium of representation. In Chapter Two, the context shifts to the concept of gendered subaltern and its portrayal in Abhishek Shah's *Hellaro*. The final chapter sums up the main points and provides insight into how movies like *Hellaro* help provide a voice to the marginalized.

Hellaro achieved remarkable success, leaving its mark not only on the Indian cinematic landscape but also sparking important conversations about social change. It stands out as a powerful example of cinema that sheds light on the experiences of the marginalized. It challenges societal norms, celebrates cultural expression, and offers a platform for silenced voices to be heard.

Chapter One

Introduction

In the vast tapestry of human expression, few art forms possess the transformative power and universal appeal of cinema. Films serve as both mirrors and windows, reflecting our collective experiences while also offering glimpses into worlds beyond our own. From the silver screens of Hollywood to the indie theatres of Mumbai, cinema has emerged as a potent medium through which stories are told, emotions are evoked, and perspectives are challenged. The importance of films transcends mere entertainment; they shape our cultural consciousness, inform our worldview, and influence our social discourse. Through their narratives, characters, and visual imagery, films have the ability to provoke thought, ignite dialogue, and inspire change. Whether through poignant dramas that shed light on pressing social issues or escapist fantasies that transport us to fantastical realms, cinema possesses a unique capacity to engage, educate, and empower audiences across the globe.

Central to the impact of cinema is its role in representation – the power to depict diverse voices, experiences, and identities onscreen. In an ideal world, films would serve as a reflection of the rich tapestry of human diversity, offering nuanced portrayals of individuals from all walks of life. However, the reality often falls short of this ideal, with marginalized communities – including women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities – frequently underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream cinema. The absence or misrepresentation of marginalized voices not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also reinforces existing power dynamics and social inequalities. When certain groups are consistently relegated to the margins of cinematic narratives, their stories remain untold, their

experiences remain invisible, and their humanity remains unrecognized. This lack of representation not only erodes the diversity of cinematic storytelling but also deprives audiences of the opportunity to engage with perspectives and experiences different from their own. This brings us to the question if movies are meant to shape our cultural consciousness, inform our worldview, and influence our social discourse, then why do mainstream filmmakers shy away from representation?

Representation in movies is critically important for several reasons as stated above. However mainstream cinema struggles with adequate representation due to several factors. Theories and tests have been proposed to explain why there is less representation in mainstream cinema. Cultural hegemony theory, proposed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, suggests that the dominant culture (in this case, mainstream cinema) exerts control over the beliefs, values, and perceptions of society, reinforcing the status quo and marginalizing alternative viewpoints. According to this theory, mainstream cinema perpetuates dominant ideologies and power structures, which can lead to limited representation of marginalized groups. The stereotypical representation of Indians in Hollywood cinema essentially proves this theory. Furthermore, mainstream cinema is influenced by audience expectations and market forces, which can shape the types of films that are produced and distributed. Suppose there is a prevailing belief that movies featuring diverse casts or addressing social issues are less profitable or have limited appeal. In that case, studios may prioritize projects that align with perceived commercial interests. As a result, films with more diverse representation may receive less investment and support, contributing to their underrepresentation on screen. Another contributing factor to the lack of representation in mainstream cinema is the lack of diversity in decision-making roles within the industry. The predominance of individuals from homogeneous backgrounds

among filmmakers, producers, studio executives, and other key decision-makers limits the range of perspectives and experiences shaping the stories that are told. Without diverse voices in positions of power, it becomes more challenging to greenlight and produce films that authentically represent marginalized communities.

Against this backdrop of underrepresentation and misrepresentation, films that centre on marginalized voices emerge as vital interventions in the cinematic landscape. By offering authentic portrayals of marginalized communities and foregrounding their experiences, these films challenge dominant narratives, disrupt stereotypes, and amplify voices that have long been silenced. Through their narratives of resilience, resistance, and empowerment, they not only validate the experiences of marginalized individuals but also foster empathy, understanding, and solidarity among viewers. Indian cinema, especially its smaller regional industries like Malayalam, Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati etc offers a lot more authentic portrayals of the marginalized, this could be due to many factors like cultural diversity, artistic freedom, local storytelling traditions and less dependency on star power. Some regional film industries receive support from state governments through subsidies, grants, and other incentives. This support encourages the growth of regional cinema and enables filmmakers to explore diverse themes and narratives.

Hellaro a Gujarati film released in 2019, stands as a poignant example of cinema's potential to give voice to the silenced and marginalized. Set against the backdrop of rural Kutch, *Hellaro* offers a compelling portrayal of women whose voices are often unheard and whose stories are seldom told. It unfolds with a raw, unfiltered portrayal of the lives of women trapped within the confines of societal norms and oppressive structures. Their existence is marked by servitude, sacrifice, and a relentless struggle

for agency amidst the harsh realities of their environment. The film deftly navigates through layers of tradition, patriarchy, and cultural hegemony to the intricate dynamics that shape and confine the lives of its protagonists. Set in 1975 rural Gujarat, *Hellaro* tells the story of women in the village of Samarpura yearning for freedom amidst societal suppression. The village faces a drought believed to be caused by a rebellious widow's past. Tradition dictates that only men perform the Garba dance to appease the rain gods, while women are expected to stay home and fast. Manjhri, an educated young bride, questions these norms. When the women encounter a stranded drummer, Mulji, their lives take a turn. Manjhri offers him water, and in return, he plays music that awakens a desire in them to dance. In a moment of defiance, they break away from tradition and dance the Garba under the moonlight. This act ignites a fire within them. They practice Garba in secret, using their water fetching trips as cover. The risk of discovery and potential repercussions loom large, but the women are emboldened by their newfound freedom. Soon they are discovered by the men and beaten for their defiance. At the annual grand Garba night, they make a powerful statement by joining the men's dance circle, challenging the age-old tradition. The film leaves the consequences ambiguous, but it's clear the women have transformed. They've discovered a sense of solidarity and a voice to fight for their desires. The dance becomes a symbol of their newfound courage and hope for change.

At the heart of *Hellaro* lies a profound exploration of gendered subalternity – a term coined by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to describe the marginalized, disenfranchised groups whose voices are often suppressed within dominant discourses. Through the lens of gender, the film delves into the intersectionality of oppression, shedding light on how the experiences of women intersect with other axes of power such as caste, class, and religion. In doing so, it

unveils the complex web of privilege and marginalization that defines the social fabric of contemporary India. Films and media, when used effectively, have the power to break down barriers, amplify marginalized voices, and pave the way for a more just and equitable society. However, conscious efforts toward authentic representation and diverse storytelling are essential to avoid perpetuating existing power structures.

Chapter Two

From Suppression to Expression:

A Journey of Defiance in *Hellaro*

In the bustling world of mainstream Indian cinema, where glamour and grandeur often take centre stage, the portrayal of the gendered subaltern remains a nuanced yet vital aspect of storytelling. Yet, mainstream Indian cinema often struggles with the challenge of striking a balance between entertainment and authenticity. Stereotypical portrayals and regressive tropes occasionally overshadow nuanced representations, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing existing power structures. While films like *Queen* empower women, others like *Dabangg* perpetuate stereotypes. Despite these limitations, Indian cinema continues to evolve, with filmmakers increasingly exploring diverse narratives and perspectives that challenge traditional gender norms and amplify marginalized voices.

A "gendered subaltern" refers to someone who experiences subordination due to both their social class/position and their gender. Coined within the framework of postcolonial studies by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the concept of the subaltern originally focused on the socio-political silencing and marginalization of colonized peoples. However, within feminist and gender studies, the term has been expanded to acknowledge the intersectionality of oppression, recognizing that gender intersects with other axes of power such as race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Spivak in her widely discussed essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* makes a remarkable discussion on the problems involved with representation. She argues that the subaltern people cannot speak instead, they have to be represented. However, the problem with representation is that the very investigator's voice overshadows the subaltern's voice.

While evaluating the case of the gendered subaltern, Spivak argues that whether it is West or East, the women are denied the position from which they can speak on their own as both spaces are patriarchies, in which women are always turned into the object of the male's desire.

Spivak says, "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (103). She utters against an exceedingly wide application of the term in 1992: "Subaltern is not just a classy word for 'oppressed', for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'.... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern" (78).

Spivak is concerned with the subaltern and claims that the word does not just represent the oppressed people. She also takes reference from the post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. She also claims that the working class is also oppressed but that is not the subaltern. She sees the vague implementation of the term 'subaltern' and tries to limit it to the boundary in which it exactly works for the subaltern. Finally, she defines subaltern as entangled with the 'mechanics of domination', hegemonic discourse and representation with stereotypes. Spivak's declaration that "the subaltern cannot speak" (104),

has been mostly interpreted as the lack of means and strategy on the part of the subaltern to speak on their own. As Spivak has pointed out, whether the woman is looked at 'from above' merely as an object or 'from below' as a goddess, she is reduced to the object of the male's desire.

A "gendered subaltern" thus encompasses individuals who face multiple forms of marginalization and whose voices are often overlooked, silenced, or misrepresented within dominant discourses. This includes women, transgender and non-binary individuals, queer and gender non-conforming people, as well as other marginalized genders. The concept of the gendered subaltern highlights the complex ways that power structures intersect. It emphasizes the need to consider how gender interacts with other social categories like class, race, and caste when examining issues of marginalization.

The position of women in Indian society has undergone complex transformations throughout history. Ancient Indian society might have had some matriarchal elements, but the arrival of the Aryans around 1500 BC ushered in a patriarchal system. The Vedic period initially offered some freedoms, likely for upper-caste women, but the following centuries saw a sharp decline. Practices like child marriage, Sati (widow burning), and limitations on female education became widespread. Religious scriptures composed during this time further strengthened these inequalities, reducing women to primarily child bearers and objects of male gratification. The caste system and scriptures of the Medieval period further restricted women's lives. Denied education and subjected to practices like sati, women became the biggest victims of a rigid social order. The basis for gender oppression in India can be accounted for largely by both Hinduism and Islam, the two largest religious sects during British colonialism. According to Hindu doctrine, women were created by the Brahman to

provide company for men and facilitate procreation (42). Islamic texts allow polygamy under certain conditions. The codification of Hindu law during the British Raj further cemented these patriarchal structures within the legal system.

Pre-colonial India had entrenched gender inequalities. Practices like Sati, female infanticide, and child marriage inflicted suffering on women. The patriarchal caste system further marginalized them, with women in lower castes facing the brunt of male dominance and violence. The British rule's impact was complex. While they outlawed some harmful practices, their rigid codification of the caste system through the census inadvertently solidified existing gender inequalities within each caste. In colonial politics, certain groups of individuals are always removed from the mainstream to the fringes due to various factors like class, caste, gender, and sexual orientation. The prioritization of certain groups resulted in the formation of the „other“ and this made a true representation of their voice invisible or non-existent. This evidently portrays how the colonial discourses have created a false image of the „other“ without exhibiting their real voice.

The field of gender is crucial in a postcolonial perspective. The notion of the gendered subaltern exposes the double oppression faced by women based on their caste, class, or gender. This subalternized state relegates them to the "other," deprived of bodily autonomy and choices. For instance, colonial records in India often documented women through the male gaze, erasing their experiences and perspectives. For long, women have been treated as ignorant or glorified for their motherhood and femininity. These imposed roles are problematic because women are often removed from positions of power due to their gender, and their bodies become targets for violation and control. Both literary and non-literary hegemonic discourses reinforce this subaltern position, portraying women as passive and inferior. These narratives

perpetuate the idea of women's bodies as objects of punishment and confinement. Furthermore, the experiences and resistance of marginalized women are often excluded from mainstream narratives. A true representation of women's voices is either silenced or erased by the dominant power structures.

Bill Ashcroft argues that constructions of the precolonial woman are often tainted by a contemporary masculine bias. In recent years, however, contemporary narratives have emerged as a significant symbol of asserting female agency and subjectivity. These narratives challenge the conventional portrayals of subaltern women and replace them with images of resistance and courage. Abhishek Shah, an Indian filmmaker through his debut film *Hellaro* clearly portrays the subaltern position of Gujarati women and their homosocial inclinations in the rural landscape of Rann of Kutch, India.

Hellaro is a Gujarati period drama film co-written and directed by Abhishek Shah and produced by Ashish Patel, Nirav Patel, Aayush Patel, Prateek Gupta, Mit Jani and Abhishek Shah under the banner of Saarthi Productions and Harfanmaula films. The film has an ensemble cast of Jayesh More, Shraddha Dangar, Brinda Trivedi Nayak, Shachi Joshi, Niilam Paanchal, Tejal Panchasara and Kausambi Bhatt.

The movie opens with a man getting ready for the nightly Garba dance and impatiently asks his wife to hand him his sword. When his daughter asks to accompany him, he glares at his wife and states that girls are not allowed to dance or ask questions. He steps out of the house, adjusts the turban of his young son and leads him to centre stage to worship the goddess Amba. There are no women outside. This very opening scene aptly captures the tone of the film as the men joyously do Garba outside while the women longingly look from their guarded homes.

Hellaro transports us to 1975 rural Gujarat, a land where time seems to stand still. The harsh beauty of the Kutch region, characterized by its arid landscape, serves as a backdrop for a village untouched by the national Emergency declared that very year. Abhishek Shah in an interview quoted - "The primary need for my film was to show a complete disconnect between the village and the rest of the world. Which is why I chose 1975. It would be difficult to show such a disconnect today. If I tried to show such a village in Kutch today, it would not seem plausible. With the new facilities available today, one had to go back a little in time to depict a village out of joint with time and the rest of the world. Till you realise what is going on in the outside world you believe your world is fantastic. But as soon as you realise how much the world has progressed, you realise the extent of your backwardness. Secondly, I wanted to establish a period without explicitly mentioning the year. For this, I needed a historic event. A national emergency was declared in 1975. Through a passing mention of the fact, I was able to create a period. The village exists secluded from politics and mainstream society and has been suffering a three-year drought. The community here is your typical patriarchal set-up, with gender-specific traditions."

This deliberate choice by the director underscores the isolation of this community and the vast gulf between the national narrative and the realities of remote villages. The village is so remote, that neither the news of the Emergency nor the actual Emergency can have any effect. The men, sitting around passing the hookah, dismiss it as just another bad repercussion of letting a woman run the country. But pretty soon as their discussion wavers off to other matters like whether a widow should be allowed to go to the nearby pond to fill water or die of thirst, you realise, a state of Emergency-level suppression already prevails in this village. But just on the women folk. Here, tradition reigns supreme, dictating a strictly patriarchal social order. Men

hold the reins of power, enjoying freedoms like participating in the exuberant Garba dance, a vibrant expression of Kutchi culture. However, for the women, life is a stark contrast. Confined to domestic duties and denied participation in this very cultural celebration, they become emblematic of the subaltern status of women within this society.

The central conflict unfolds around a seemingly simple act – the women's banishment from participating in the Garba dance. This vibrant folk dance, traditionally performed by women during festivals, is more than just entertainment; it's a powerful symbol of cultural expression, joy, and feminine energy. Being denied participation excludes them from celebrating their heritage and expressing their womanhood. This ban fuels their desire for defiance.

Soon we are introduced to Manjhri, a bride newly married to a virile village recruit Arjan posted as a soldier on the China border. Manjhri, the first literate entrant with schooling up to seventh standard from a town, becomes the harbinger of change. She raises questions on the male mandate as she moves every day with the cluster of women to fetch water from a distant water body on the village outskirts. "Isn't it weird that when it does not rain, men dance and we fast?" Manjhri is not a radical revolutionary, but her education sets her apart from the rest of the women. She subtly challenges the status quo through conversations with other women, planting seeds of doubt about the fairness of the Garba ban.

There is a scene in the first half, where the women of the village are on their daily journey to fetch water, and one of them exclaims just how suffocating and exhaustive this job is. They speak about how their roles as women are bound to the act of collecting water. The burden of the ongoing drought falls upon them—the women—

while their husbands are allowed to dance to their Goddess—and to enforce motherhood upon their wives. The exchange between the women serves to be especially symbolic for the narrative of the story: the only time that they can interact with each other is when they all set out to fetch water, every day.

One such day, they run into a semi-conscious drummer, Mulji, dying of thirst. After much debate, Manjhri gives him water and in return, he plays the dhol for them. He respectfully faces away from them while the women gradually and hesitantly dance to the beat for the first time. Hence, begins the tale of our protagonists who gradually learn to let go of their inhibitions and superstition through Garba under the guise of fetching water every day. The path to unhindered self-expression is not straightforward. The women are initially guilt-stricken and waiting for the Goddess to punish them for breaking the rules. When one of them gives birth to a stillborn child, the older women are quick to assume that it is the result of their dancing and blame Manjhri. This confrontation makes way for a poignant and gut-wrenching scene where the bereaved mother sets their assumptions straight and blames her violent husband for the loss of her child. She frankly says "Not all sinners get punished. If so, the world wouldn't have so many men in it." This scene is a turning point for the sceptics amongst the group and all of them now fully commit to dancing every day. Even when they are spotted by the village trader, they continue. As Manjhri tells Mujli, "We feel alive for the few moments we dance to the tunes of your dhol. Now we won't stop living for the fear of dying."

Abhishek Shah, who is also the writer and co-producer, developed this story after he heard a local folktale about a group of women who are forbidden from doing Garba. They meet with a drummer and start dancing in secret. Once discovered, the drummer is killed by the men and the women commit suicide in protest and grief. Even without

knowing this story, one feels the sense of inevitable danger whenever the women go out to dance. The viewer knows that it is only a matter of time before they are found out and the film becomes fraught with tension. In an interview with Kartavya Sadhna, Shah spoke about the meaning of the title: "*Hellaro* is an archaic word, seldom heard in Gujarati today. It means a rising tide or wave of water. The sort of wave that rocks the world around you..."

Literally translating to 'Outburst', *Hellaro* then becomes a suitably named film which makes the audience hold their breath while the women in the film finally let out theirs.

In the film, Mulji is caught by the villagers, the women are brutally beaten by their husbands. Mulji is about to be sacrificed when it is decided that he be given one last wish. He asks that he be allowed to play the dhol one last time. "I will play till the leather tears off. Once it tears, burn me," he says. Immediately, doors around the village open up, and one by one, the women step out, despite their husbands telling them to go back inside. They have scars all over their bodies, pain and anguish painted across their faces, and upon their moment of defiance, it finally begins to rain. Nobody moves; the men are consumed by shock. "The Goddess has made her presence felt today," one of the men says. The women begin dancing. But this time, they never stop.

The film is made even better because of its inconclusive ending. We do not know what happens to the women but they get their last dance, and that is the point of *Hellaro*. It celebrates their defiance, dissent and courage without needing to attempt the impossible task of uprooting the status quo. *Hellaro's* narrative unfolds alongside a carefully crafted use of symbolism. This interplay between story and symbol elevates the film's message, allowing it to explore complex themes in a nuanced way.

Let's delve into some of these key symbols and how they illuminate the journey of the women and their fight for agency.

The unforgiving arid landscape of Kutch in *Hellaro* is more than just a backdrop; it becomes a powerful symbol that mirrors the harsh realities of the women's lives. The desolation and harshness of the desert echo the restrictions and lack of freedom they endure. The idea of a remote location, that almost lies in the middle of nowhere suggests that the women cannot escape if they want to. There is no connectivity to any means of transport. There is land everywhere but nowhere to go. It is all surrounded by openness but the women cannot breathe the air of freedom.

The conspicuous absence of embroidery is another striking yet subtle symbol. While the film might showcase other aspects of Kutchi culture, this traditional art form, often passed down through generations and practised by women, is strangely silent. This absence can be interpreted as a powerful symbol of the women's silenced voices and their restricted creativity. Embroidery allows women to express themselves through intricate patterns and narratives, yet this avenue for self-expression is denied. Their inability to engage in this art form reinforces the limitations placed upon them and the suppression of their unique voices within the community. The creators have conveniently established the absence of embroidery in the film. In a flashback scene, the eldest woman in the village narrates an incident of a young widow whose passion was embroidery, and who immersed herself in this art form. Embroidery became for her the beginning of a clandestine relationship with herself, and it helped fill for her a home that was overcome with grief. A man who used to travel outside the village to gather information about the modern world caught a glimpse of her clothes and helped her sell them in secret. When she was caught, she ran away with the man. Both

were killed brutally by the men of the village. Since then, women have been banned from textiles or art of any kind.

A notable symbol in the film, however, was that of water, especially in the intersections with the central themes that the direction has so poignantly experimented with. The relationship that women have shared with water is not new, with the longstanding role of those who fetch water by traversing through harsh weather and long journeys.

When the women meet a dhol player for the first time, he begs them for water. Despite judgement from the group, Manjhri offers him some. It is that simple act of kindness, saving a man's life from the same water that is the product of their labour, which develops into trust between the dhol player and the women. The relationship these women share with their daily pilgrimage allows for fluidity in their days, much like the nature of water itself. It is transformational and dynamic, but it is also a space that becomes political and exploited. As the village in the film suffers from a drought, the men respond through prayer and dance; the women through their own unique interaction with water. It gives them a space for protest, identity, and reflection. After a painful night when one of the women undergoes a miscarriage and shares her experiences, a mother—with bruises on her cheeks—wakes up her daughter the next morning and says, "Let's go. To fetch water. We won't die of thirst anymore."

Finally, the Garba dance transcends its literal form to become a powerful symbol of the women's journey. Stories of women fighting all odds and overcoming obstacles aren't new on the big screen, but using a dance form to showcase the same is something fresh and *Hellaro* does just that. Initially, it represents a forbidden activity, a source of joy and cultural expression denied to them. Watching those 12 women

dance barefoot in Kutch at soaring temperatures gives one a glimpse of their outburst (which is what *Hellaro* translates to), or catharsis, that comes out in the form of Garba. For them, it's not just a dance form but signifies their right to live for themselves. At one point in the film, one of the women says, "I would give away my whole empire for Garba, it's just that I don't have one." They've become so habituated to their state of that of a caged bird that they joke about it, just like the men in the village who also resort to sexist jokes at the women's cost, to entertain themselves.

The four Garbas, with a large variety of styles, are not only a feast to the viewers but they are meaningfully choreographed. The Garbas evince in many ways the expression of movement from fearful restraint to that of joyous liberty. The wording of the dialogue with its punch and the literary and emotional value of the Garba songs have the signature of Saumya Joshi. The first Garba is in the form of a lullaby.

"Call back your river of emotions, sheath your lightning, Halt the ringing of your anklets, stud your path with thorns, And pray to the goddess for a lonesome night". There is the gusto of the Garba but also the concern of a mother. In the song, the mother tells the girl child not to get carried away with dreams that may fall ahead. The first time the women dance Garba the lyrics translate to "The horizon of my caged mind has broadened, I was the one stopping myself from flying". Their initial Garba sessions are characterized by hesitant steps and a sense of fear, reflecting their limited agency and the risk of defying tradition. However, as the women practice in secret, the dance evolves. It transforms into a potent symbol of defiance and a reclamation of their cultural heritage. Their movements gain confidence and fluidity, mirroring their growing sense of empowerment. In the climax when the women finally dance in public the lyrics change to "I refuse to accept your tyranny anymore,

My anklets have now broken their silence. As my dreams have been freed from shackles". The final act of joining the public Garba circle becomes a culmination of this transformation. The dance is no longer a hidden act of defiance, but a bold claim to their right to self-expression, marking a significant shift in their power dynamic within the community.

Caste and gender are central themes of the film, and the writing and direction have handled them both with sensitivity and consciousness. Dhol players here usually belong to a lower caste and suffer from social isolation dictated by the practice of untouchability. When Manjhri asks the dhol player if he'll play for them so she can dance, he only does so after turning his back to her. The first question posed to Mujli by both the men and women of the village is about his caste and the film does not hesitate to depict the dominance of upper-caste men over everyone else.

Social isolation that exists on account of gender and caste is vast and complex in how it is practised and enforced. Among the group of wives, there exists the silent attendance of a widow, Kesar (Brinda Trivedi), who steps out of her home for the first time after a year and a half in the film. *Hellaro* showcases the stigma against widows in a powerful scene where Kesar states, with a kind of sadness that is almost aggressive:

"A woman neither belongs to a village nor a city, she only belongs to her husband."

Kesar appears and all the other women look away, causing her smile to fall, and she is forced to walk ahead, alone. This particular scene is asking its viewer to engage with different parts of a woman, to perhaps understand the multifaceted complexity of womanhood, that one's identity is in constant negotiation with the self, gender, and sexuality. What marriage and its borders can do to a body is manifested in the

character of Kesar, and it is Manjhri who recognises this anxiety and defends her when the other women think that Kesar is losing her mind. She explains that, when a woman is caged for so long, she can only feel overwhelmed by the sky.

"Hellaro" isn't merely a film; it transforms into a powerful voice for the silenced gendered subalterns of rural Gujarat. The film achieves this by shifting the spotlight away from dominant narratives and placing the women's experiences of oppression and their fight for agency at the center of the story. Instead of portraying them solely as victims, *Hellaro* allows the women to emerge as agents of change. They defy their limitations through collective action, challenging the status quo and demanding to be heard.

Slicing through the fancy hollow tones of pseudo-feminism *Hellaro* cuts a deep wound into the prison of patriarchy where men, out of a sense of unquestionable entitlement, decide what women should and shouldn't do. The film opens with a dedication to "the struggles of countless women who thrive in the face of patriarchal mandate". It lives up to this promise and all the creators involved in this film are sympathetic, honest and considerate in their portrayal of both gender-based and caste-based oppression.

Chapter Three

Conclusion

In the bustling world of mainstream Indian cinema, the portrayal of women remains a complex and often contradictory space. While some films celebrate empowerment, others perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Earlier eras were often dominated by stereotypical portrayals. Women were frequently depicted as passive figures, confined to submissive roles as the ideal wife, mother, or damsel in distress. Their desires and agency were rarely explored, and societal expectations dictated their on-screen narratives. *Hellaro* however, stands out as a powerful and nuanced ode to the gendered subaltern. It sheds light on the struggles faced by these women – marginalized due to both gender and social class – and amplifies their voices, which have often been silenced or misrepresented.

The concept of the "gendered subaltern" refers to individuals who experience multiple forms of marginalization. They are denied access to power and resources, and their voices are often overlooked or unheard. Spivak's observation that the subaltern "cannot speak" underscores the challenges they face in expressing their experiences and asserting their agency.

Hellaro beautifully portrays the plight of the gendered subaltern through the story of women in a remote Gujarati village. Their lives are circumscribed by tradition and patriarchy. Confined to domestic duties, they are denied the right to participate in the vibrant Garba dance, a symbol of cultural expression and joy. This seemingly simple act of exclusion becomes a powerful metaphor for the broader struggle against gender oppression.

The film breaks away from focusing on dominant narratives. Instead, it places the women's experiences and struggles, often silenced in society at the forefront of the story. By portraying the women as individuals with diverse experiences, the film acknowledges the complexities of their lives within the subaltern group. Each woman's story adds another layer to the collective voice, highlighting the varying experiences of oppression faced by gendered subalterns. Each woman in the group has her tale of woe under male torture and the film presents it with economy. Hansa suffers a miscarriage of a girl child as her husband beats and kicks her. Kesar, a widow in her youth, drags on life with her bed-ridden father-in-law and she is barred from talking to anyone in the village, including women. Gayatri's face shows bruises. Her peevish husband snaps and shuts up Sita whenever she dares ask or laugh. As the sprightly and dreamy Manjhri begins embroidery, a widow snatches the piece from her. Any such work is taboo because at some time in the past a young widow Mooli had run away to the city with a traveller who used to secretly buy her craft- work.

The film chronicles the women's journey from passive acceptance to active resistance. Manjhri, a young bride with a spark of education, ignites a sense of defiance. The women, emboldened by a shared sense of injustice, begin to dance Garba in secret, finding solace and a sense of self-expression in the rhythm of the dhol. Their initial hesitant steps evolve into a powerful symbol of rebellion as they reclaim their cultural heritage.

Stories of women fighting all odds and overcoming obstacles aren't new on the big screen, but using a dance form to showcase the same is something fresh. At the heart of the women's resistance in *Hellaro* lies the Garba dance. Traditionally a celebratory expression of feminine energy and cultural pride, Garba becomes a powerful tool for the women to reclaim their agency and defy patriarchal norms. Initially forbidden

from participating, the act of dancing Garba in secret becomes a subversive act of defiance. The rhythmic beats of the dhol transform into a language of rebellion, a silent protest against their oppression.

The film beautifully portrays the evolution of the Garba in the women's lives. Their initial hesitant steps, filled with fear and a sense of transgression, gradually morph into movements brimming with confidence and self-expression. As their secret dance sessions continue, the Garba evolves beyond a mere act of defiance. It becomes a transformative experience, a space for collective empowerment and a celebration of their womanhood.

The film's climax, where the women join the public Garba circle, marks a pivotal moment. It's no longer a hidden act of rebellion, but a bold public declaration of their right to self-expression and participation in their cultural heritage. The lyrics of the Garba songs change as well, reflecting their transformation – from hesitant whispers to a powerful assertion of their freedom. The Garba becomes a symbol of their collective voice, finally breaking free from the shackles of silence.

Hellaro's use of Garba transcends its literal form. It becomes a powerful metaphor for the fight against gender oppression. The film reminds us that resistance can take many forms, and even a cultural dance can become a weapon for social change. The movie employs powerful symbols to illuminate the women's struggles. The harsh desert landscape mirrors the harsh realities of their lives. The conspicuous absence of embroidery, traditionally a women's art form, highlights the silencing of their creativity. Water, a symbol of life, becomes a space for protest and self-reflection as the women embark on their daily pilgrimage to fetch water.

It transcends a simple narrative of female empowerment. It delves into the complexities of caste and gender dynamics, exposing the social isolation faced by women and lower castes. The film doesn't shy away from portraying the harsh realities of widowhood and the limitations placed upon women's mobility. Not only does the movie shed light on oppression and discrimination faced by women it has also very subtly and almost poetically addressed superstitions and how they influence people's lives

Hellaro is not merely a film; it is a powerful voice for the voiceless. It dismantles dominant narratives, placing the women's experiences of oppression and their fight for agency at the center of the story. By portraying them not as passive victims but as active agents of change, the film offers a glimmer of hope for a future where the voices of the gendered subaltern are finally heard and their struggles acknowledged. The film's inconclusive ending, with the women defiantly dancing in public, leaves a lasting impression and serves as a call for social change.

Hellaro doesn't pretend to be about anything other than the beauty of defiance, valuing it not for a promise of better things, but for its sheer existence. The warmth of this ephemeral outburst is what makes this one of the finest films of recent times. It is also about accepting the facts when you see them, even if it means going against centuries of rigid customs. The film is an ode to women who dare to break the shackles of patriarchy, casteism and blind faith.

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