

Of Desire and Defiance: Abhishek Shah's *Hellaro* as an Ode to the Gendered Subaltern

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Abstract

India is always plagued by its caste system and discriminations based on social and economic castes and classes. This is part of the social dynamic of India, and it has terribly affected the identity of the individuals. Subalternity acts as an invisible agent delimiting the agency especially that of the women counterparts in the country. Here, the women are placed in a subaltern position, and their status is questioned and often manipulated and demeaned by social expectations and gender roles. Thus, the ties of gender traverse across the class boundary to a wider realm of gendered subalternity. 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. This cinematic text evidently marks the different social factors that construct the subaltern women of Kutch. Along with restricted subjectivity and enforced gender roles, violent treatments and constant suppression becomes the true story of the community. Though these women belong to the upper caste, they are removed to the fringes because of their gender. But the women break free from their patriarchal confinements through their homosocial attitude which is exhibited through their ethnic dance Garba. Through my paper, I intend to propound how *Hellaro* promotes the idea of freedom through dance and how the women characters move away from their subaltern position through their homosocial disposition and the beats of the dhol.

Keywords: Gendered subalternity, rural feminism, subjectivity, female homosociality, resistance.

Introduction

Forages, the canonization of certain social, economic, and cultural forms has brought out subalternity, a state of subordination and violence into the forefront. 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, etc. As M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham had noted, "the subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse." (238) The subaltern cannot speak, or his speech is not considered relevant in front of the dominant power structures. Here, they do not have any agency to define or direct their social status; their voices are often silenced or are left unheard. The prioritization of certain group result in the formation of the 'other' and this made a true representation of their voice invisible or nonexistent. This evidently portrays how the colonial discourses have created a false image of the 'other' without exhibiting their real voice. At this moment, it is imperative to recognize and acknowledge their voice and resistance.

The field of gender is important in postcolonial perspective, and the notion of gendered subaltern clearly indicates the double oppression faced by women based on their caste, class or gender. This subalternized state always made them the 'other' deprived of their bodily autonomy and choices. Since long time, women have been treated as ignorant and vicious individuals, and occasionally they are glorified for their motherhood, femininity, and benevolence. Their roles as

‘mother’ and the ‘other’ is unapologetically problematic because, women are often removed from their positions of power because of their gender and their bodies are always subject to violation and mass incarceration. They bear impositions ascribed on them either by their male counterparts or by any social institutions existing around them. Along with this, the hegemonic discourses both literary as well as non-literary always place them in a subaltern position and inculcate the idea of their inferiority. They perpetuate ideas which present women as subaltern bodies of punishment and confinement. Besides these inhuman treatments, the perspective of the marginalized and their suppression never appeared in mainstream narratives. And a true representation especially of women are either purposefully eliminated or invisibilized by the hegemonic power structures.

As Bill Ashcroft had noted, “constructions of the traditional or the precolonial are often heavily inflicted by a contemporary masculinist bias that falsely represents ‘native’ women as quietist and subordinate.” (95) In addition to this, the conventional theories and representations put subaltern women as “doubly colonized” (Ashcroft 95) individuals and distanced them from accomplishing an identity of their own. Their participation in any sort of resistance was also declined with hostility. But in recent years, contemporary narratives have emerged as a significant symbol of asserting female agency and subjectivity. The conventional portrayals of subaltern women as uncouth, uncivilized, or vicious was replaced with new challenging representations. Along with this, age-old icons of female suppression were replaced with images of resistance and courage. So, the aim of this study is to analyse the delimiting space of the gendered subaltern and its extirpation through an Indian Gujarati film *Hellaro* (2019) directed by Abhishek Shah, an Indian filmmaker. *Hellaro* is set in a rural village in Kutch under the National Emergency of 1975. The plot revolves around Manjhri who is married off to Arjan of this village who is a military man. Manjhri along with the other women folk is bound by the rules of the village which is accompanied with certain superstitions and myths. The only escape from this patriarchal shackle is when they go out to fetch water from a distant lake. One day on their daily water run they encounter a dying man, Mulji a dholi (drummer). From this point the lives of the women of Kutch are metamorphosed forever.

Garba, an Indian folk-dance act as the agent of ‘expression’ in this film. In Kutch, men performed Garba as an offering to their deity, Goddess Durga. But here, the women are prohibited from performing this dance form and are confined within in their households. One day, out of the blue, there happens an ‘outburst of expression’ when the women folk encounter Mulji. This is the point where the women start to redefine their identity through their ethnic dance form, Garba. Here, Garba acts as a medium of expression through which the women question the norms of patriarchy. And dismantling all the delimiting agency of religion, patriarchy and colonialism they engulfed in freedom. My study clearly intends to showcase the rampant gender violence which is still prevalent in our country. Also, how female homosocial attitudes and notions of sisterhood help these women to overcome their subaltern position imposed by hegemonic masculine powers. India completing its 73 years as an independent nation is still clinging on to its precolonial and colonial wild thoughts of patriarchy, misogyny, and gendered violence. This paper is an ode to the gendered subaltern to reclaim their identity through their bodies.

Discussion

The presence of the ‘other’ “is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world.” (Ashcroft 154) Colonial discourses have brought the ‘other’ into the mainstream, and it often refer to “the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’.” (Ashcroft 155) Here, the ‘other’ gain identity through the ‘Other’, the imperial centre. In many colonial discourses, the subjectivity of the ‘other’ is determined by the ‘Other.’ The ‘body’ of the ‘other’ plays a pivotal role in colonial discourses as they are always inscribed with meanings. This ‘body’ is a huge reservoir of representation which is controlled by the

imperial centre. Recently, there has been an increase in the involvement of 'body' and its 'gender' in fashioning the images of colonial secondary status. As Bill Ashcroft had noted, the body "is a specially material text, one that demonstrates how subjectivity, however constructed it may be in fact be, is 'felt' as inescapably material and permanent." (166) But in recent years a radical rewriting of the subjectivity of the bodies happened and more autonomous and authentic representations were pulled off.

Our cinematic text under consideration *Hellaro*, a Gujarati film directed by Abhishek Shah constructed 'body' as a site of resistance to imperial powers. The damaging imperial rule that has been perpetrated against the 'other' in *Hellaro* is patriarchy and the conventions of the rural village Kutch. Here, the 'other' stands for the women folk of Rann of Kutch and they were subject to the hegemony of their male counterparts and held an inferior position in the society. These subaltern women "have less access to the means by which they may control their own representations and less access to cultural and social institutions." (Ashcroft 199) Thus, they become the 'gendered subaltern' deprived of their bodily, political, and social autonomy and are "perceived reductively not as sexual but as reproductive subjects." (Ashcroft 95) As Spivak had noted, "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (28) Shah's women characters are initially branded as the subaltern who cannot speak and they in no way voiced their resistance. But by the arrival of our protagonist Manjhri as the new bride of Arjan the entire story takes an unanticipated turn. Through her the entire women folk inculcated a desire to perform Garba, and hence, they started to realise their subject position and autonomy.

The village in Kutch is a patriarchal space lead by superstitions and myths about women and their body. Marital rape, gender discrimination, religious bigotry, domestic violence, and caste discriminations are all bound together to form the social fabric of this village. The denial of self-expression and creativity is ingrained in the psyche of the village folks and whenever someone attempts to assert their individuality, they are suppressed and is branded as the fallen one. This is clearly depicted in the film where, Manjhri's husband threatens her "no matter what you've grown, wings or horns, cut them on your own. If I cut them, it will hurt more." (*Hellaro* 18:14-18:32) Despite the threats and warnings, Manjhri has decided to follow her heart's desire. The women folk of Kutch lead by Manjhri performed Garba to the beats of Mulji's dhol. From this point, their morning ritual of collecting water has turned into a joyful journey of self-satisfaction and revival. Here, the women have challenged the codes and conventions of patriarchy and religion through their bodies by performing Garba. And as Nikia Smith Robert had noted, "resistance emerges out of epochs of domination." (169) Thus, the village's women folk has decided to resist in order to come out of the manacles of their male centered locale.

Domination is an interminable presence in the village of Kutch, and it had eventually become habitual creating social hierarchies. In this narrative, Arjan warns Manjhri by saying, "Here, in our village, the rules of the caste come first." (*Hellaro* 18:13-18:18) This undeniably emphasizes that; a gendered subaltern identity is created upon the women by their respective caste and "this is achieved by the perpetual state of dominance that proliferates rules in a variety of forms and modes to normalize oppressive structures." (Robert 177) Day by day new forms of control are taking form in the village but its essence remains the same. For example, women of this village are not allowed to do embroidery work because women working to earn money were considered like selling themselves in the market. Muli, a widow started to sell her embroidery work in the city with the help of Kano, a city man. As the secret got exposed Muli fled with Kano. This made embroidery banned in this village for life. This incident indeed validates Gramsci's assumption that, "subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise." (55) This incident signifies that, whenever the village women question the borders of their gender and cross the patriarchal boundaries to follow their heart, they fall victim to

hegemonic policies and norms set down by religion and caste. This will further lead to their portrayal as vicious, seductress and sexually frustrated individuals leading men to havoc.

The old modes of control have new manifestations in this new era of mass imprisonment where religion and other institutions are brought to adorn the exploited body. Bringing in religion to validate the oppression has become a popular idea along with “knowing your limits.” (*Hellaro* 18:19-18:22) As Nikia Smith Robert said, this law “takes hold of bodies and makes them its text.” (182) But, despite these delimiting circumstances, the women folk had tried to reclaim their long-lost identity to make themselves free from their oppressors. Garba helped them to overcome their oppressor with the prowess of resistance. The only time the village women get to talk and listen is when they go out to fetch water. On all other moments they are silenced and represented by their husbands. Manjhri and Kesar, the widow are the two characters who have identified their autonomy. Through them all the other women started to identify their own subject position and embraced Garba as their carrier to freedom from the men who restricted them. The performance of Garba by men is hypocritical in the narrative because traditionally Garba is an Indian folk dance performed to show one’s reverence towards goddess Durga. And Garba is a Sanskrit word meaning “womb” and it represents femininity. This clearly points to religious bigotry prevalent in Kutch. Though these men worship and honor female deities in their religious texts, they do not even validate the subjectivity of women in their life. The men often consider their female counterparts as their caretakers or house maids.

Along with this, we can also cite instances from the film where the men folk are engaged in describing female body represented in popular films like *Bobby* (1973). This evidently reinstalls the idea of sexually objectified female body where they are placed as icons to satisfy male desires. Though this is the reality, the film *Hellaro* embarks on the concept of body as a ‘site of resistance.’ The women lead by Manjhri dance to the beats of the dhol and activate their desire to have an existence and subjectivity of their own. At this moment, the homosocial bonding between different individuals demand attention. This, nonsexual interpersonal interaction is present within the men and women in the village. Among the male members, it disseminates hegemonic masculinity which is often described as, the “practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalized ways of being a man.” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”) They become competitive with other men, sexually objectify women, and even project themselves as different and better than women. Their voyeurism and male chauvinism unite them. Whereas, for the women folk, this bonding enables them to create meaning out of their body to put themselves away from stereotypes and prejudices. This adherence made them conceptualize their individuality, and they once said to Muljithat, “those few moments that we play Garba to your rhythm, we feel alive. Other than that, what’s life for us anyway? Only the sound of the winds and the silences of the houses.” (*Hellaro* 1:08:35-1:08:50) They also said that, “there are no loving hands or kind eyes anywhere” (*Hellaro* 1:08:51-1:08:55) and what they experience in their village is the inhuman treatment from their husbands and they are not less than an animal in their village. Manjhri also brings out her emotional pangs through her words. She says that, “We’re humans. We’re getting to live a little bit because of your music.” (*Hellaro* 1:08:56-1:09:04)

The homosocial inclination while performing Garba helped the women to mediate their desire to follow their heart. So, the women characters though they do not begin as women with agency, later they start to express their agency and defiance through their body and dance. And hence, they began to redefine and transcend their destructive space to a space of individuality and distinctive identity. Though the unjust social expectations forced them to be obeying mothers, daughters and wives, Garba made them rethink about reconstructing their own identities and subjectivities. Hence, they questioned the borders of their gender and crossed the patriarchal boundaries to follow their heart. With all these elements, we can hail this narrative as the finest

example of reclaiming the lost and sidelined female subjectivity and identity. Abhishek Shah has prioritized a true representation of the women characters from the cultural landscape of Rann of Kutch, India and thus erased their minority status forced upon them by the colonial forces and patriarchy. Breaking free from their subaltern position, the women of Kutch are no more the “beauty and knowledge that will be blown off in the kitchen.” (*Hellaro* 19:49)

Conclusion

In the last two decades of the 20th century, subalternity and its related studies gained popularity. Camouflaged by the “officially” accepted ruling class’ representation of the ‘subaltern’, they lack a true representation and authentic presence. Their history or perspective “is necessarily fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel.” (Venugopal et al. 126) Contemporary literary and non-literary narratives have emerged as significant symbols for asserting subaltern women’s subjectivity and identity. Dismantling the conventional portrayals of subaltern women as deviant, and sexually frustrated individuals, new powerful icons of defiance and desire were projected. Abhishek Shah, an Indian filmmaker through his debut film *Hellaro*, reclaim the lost agency of the gendered subaltern in the village of Kutch. Dismantling the hegemonic power structures and their norms, his women characters have embraced ultimate autonomy. Though they belong to the upper caste, these women characters are invisibilized by their upper caste men through the norms and conventions of their religion and its superstition.

Most of the women characters in the film are deliberately silenced or are left unheard. They do not have a stage to present and represent themselves in their village, and they are mere ‘objects without desires’ to be battered by their male counterparts. Also, they are commonly used to reinforce the superiority of their men. The village in the film is plagued by caste and gender hierarchies and therefore women are removed from its activities and rituals. Garba, a Gujarati folk dance performed mainly by men to worship goddess Durga, was never the women’s cup of tea. But Shah challenged all the social norms and prejudices to recover the voices and perspectives of the oppressed women. The women folk dismantled their subaltern silence through Garba. Their suppressed desire to dress up in colourful choli’s, to care for oneself and moreover to represent their own choices, opinions and ideas found an outlet through Garba. ‘Freedom through dance’ was also their choice to question patriarchy and its violent inhuman practices to build a sense of belonging. These women and their homosocial inclinations perpetrated sisterhood which made them stand for each other and together they swam across the violent sea of religion and misogyny to the shore of experience, humanity, agency, and self-realization. Thus, they have decided that they “won’t stop living, for the fear of dying.” (*Hellaro* 1:09:05)

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