



Dancing Towards Liberation: Gender Dynamics and Health in *Hellaro*

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Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal of gender dynamics and their impact on health in the Gujarati film *Hellaro*. The movie delves into the lives of rural women in rural Gujarat of 1975, highlighting their struggles against patriarchal norms and the consequent effects on their well-being. Through the lens of traditional dance, Garba, the film underscores the importance of agency and empowerment in promoting health outcomes.

Keywords

gender, empowerment, patriarchy, traditional dance, rural Gujarat

Introduction

Hellaro is a journey into the soul of Gujarati women and what it means to rebel against the authority of patriarchy and gender and health inequities. It takes place in a small village in the Rann of Kutch, Gujarat circa 1975, decades before India's economic liberalization and opening of free markets that have begun to transform the socioeconomic landscape of the region. The women of the village remain marginalized from the few meagre resources of the village, and the female protagonist Manjhri embodies the quiet but selfless suffering of her fellow women. Manjhri becomes the epicentre of the transformation that the women undergo, as they take a break from their daily house chores to participate in a Garba Rass (folk dance and music) performance. Rehearsal and performance of the Rass becomes an outlet for the women's repressed feelings and sexuality, and a catalyst event that ultimately leads to their liberation. As Manjhri's health, condition provided much discussion, the film deals mainly with the impact of gender and sex on health and disease. Healer women are the real-life counterparts to the characters in the film and are a central focus of *Hellaro*. Due to social pressures, they have remained as a shadow of formal healthcare and are often looked down upon, both by men and by women of higher caste. Their low social and economic status has given them little freedom of power or expression, and they are "participants" in their own suppression. Their reception of Manjhri can be likened to that of a sick person entering a healing theatre.



Fig 1: Patriarchal suppression due to myth, leading to assertion of female

Portrayal of Gender Roles

In the movie *Hellaro*, the portrayal of gender roles is multi-dimensional, central to the narrative, reflecting traditional expectations while also challenging stereotypes and empowering women. In the cinematic landscape of Gujarati cinema, *Hellaro* stands out for its poignant portrayal of gender roles and dynamics. Set against the rustic backdrop of rural Gujarat, the film delves deep into the lives of women who navigate the complexities of patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Through nuanced storytelling and powerful performances, *Hellaro* sheds light on the struggles, resilience, and eventual empowerment of its female protagonists. The movie challenges traditional gender roles and explores themes of agency, solidarity, and self-discovery, making it a compelling narrative that resonates with audiences far beyond its cultural milieu.



Fig 2: Difference in everyday routines of two Gender

Traditional Gender Expectations

Hellaro vividly portrays the traditional gender expectations prevalent in rural Gujarat, where women are often confined to domestic roles and expected to conform to societal norms. The female characters in the movie initially adhere to these traditional roles, obediently fulfilling their duties as daughters, wives, and mothers, while facing restrictions on their freedom and expression, “the only time that they can interact with each other is when they all set out to fetch water, every day” (Chakkar, 2023). The film highlights the rigid patriarchal structure that governs the lives of women in the community, dictating their behaviour, attire, and interactions with the opposite gender.

“A woman should be seen, not heard. That’s our tradition” (*Hellaro*, 12:35). This dialogue illustrates the traditional expectations placed on women in the patriarchal society depicted in the film. Women are expected to conform to a passive role, devoid of agency or voice. In the Kutch village, patriarchal norms reign supreme, intertwined with prevalent superstitions and misconceptions surrounding women and their bodies. Within this societal framework, issues such as marital rape, gender bias, religious intolerance, domestic abuse, and caste-based discrimination coalesce, shaping the fabric of social dynamics within the community. Initially, the women in the village are depicted as oppressed and objectified, consistent with Mulvey’s (Mulvey, 2013) concept of the male gaze. Their movements and freedoms are restricted, and they are portrayed as existing primarily within the domestic sphere, subject to the scrutiny and control of their husbands and village elders.

Breaking Stereotypes

As the narrative progresses, *Hellaro* showcases the gradual breaking of stereotypes as the women in the village come together to challenge oppressive norms and assert their agency. Through their participation in Garba, a traditional folk-dance form, the women defy societal expectations and stereotypes associated with their gender, reclaiming their bodies and voices in the process. The act of dancing becomes a powerful symbol of resistance and liberation, enabling the women to express their suppressed emotions, desires, and frustrations, thus subverting

traditional gender roles. 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). As the women start dancing, they reclaim their bodies and their agency. This shift can be seen as a challenge to the male gaze, as they move from being passive objects to active subjects who derive pleasure and empowerment from their own actions. The women's defiance against gender stereotypes that confine them to traditional roles could be understood with the given dialogue by expressing their desire to dance, the women challenge societal norms and assert their right to pursue their passions and desires.

Empowerment of Women

"Why should men have all the fun? We can dance too!" (*Hellaro*, 28:50). *Hellaro* ultimately portrays the empowerment of women as they assert their rights and demand recognition and respect within their community. Through solidarity and collective action, the women in the film challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for gender equality, leading to a gradual transformation in societal attitudes and behaviors. The narrative emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment as a catalyst for social change, highlighting the resilience and strength of female characters in the face of adversity.

"We are not weak. We are strong. We will fight!" (*Hellaro*, 1:14:20). This powerful dialogue reflects the women's journey towards empowerment and self-assertion. It signifies their determination to break free from oppression and take control of their destinies, thus challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to confine them. Through these dialogues and corresponding moments in the film, *Hellaro*, offers a nuanced portrayal of gender roles, displaying the tension between traditional expectations and the evolving aspirations of women in rural Gujarat. The camera might linger on the women in ways that emphasize their subjugation, aligning with Mulvey's idea of the male gaze. The framing might restrict their presence within the confines of the household or depict them through the eyes of their male counterparts.

Through its compelling storytelling and powerful performances, we see the film celebrating the agency of women, ultimately advocating for gender equality and empowerment. It effectively portrays the evolution of gender roles, from traditional expectations to the breaking of stereotypes and the empowerment of women. The movie serves as a powerful depiction of women's resilience and courage in the face of adversity, inspiring audiences to question and challenge gender norms in society. 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). At first, Shah's female characters are labelled as the subaltern, perceived as voiceless and passive in their resistance. However, with the arrival of our protagonist, Manjhri, as Arjan's new bride, the narrative undergoes an unexpected shift. Through

her influence, the women in the community develop a newfound aspiration to participate in Garba, prompting them to recognize their own agency and subjectivity. As the narrative progresses and the women find solace and empowerment in dance, the cinematography shifts to more dynamic and inclusive shots. The camera begins to celebrate their movements and expressions, offering a more egalitarian and possibly feminist perspective that celebrates their newfound agency rather than objectifying them.

Impact on Mental Health

In the movie *Hellaro*, the portrayal of gender roles has a significant impact on the mental health of the female characters. The concept of Child marriage, where the main lead Manjhri, is shown to get married at a tender age, unknown to the reality of life afterwards where she is just considered a house cleaner. “Despite a steady decline in this harmful practice over the past decade, child marriage remains widespread, with approximately one in five girls married in childhood across the globe” (UNESCO). In the film *Hellaro*, the exploration of gender dynamics extends beyond the physical realm to deeply affect the mental well-being of its characters. Set against the backdrop of rural Gujarat, the movie vividly portrays the psychological toll of oppressive patriarchal norms on the women of the village. As they navigate societal expectations and confront systemic inequalities, their mental health becomes intricately intertwined with their struggle for empowerment. Through the lens of traditional dance, Garba, the film subtly underscores the therapeutic power of self-expression and solidarity in mitigating the emotional burdens imposed by gender-based oppression. Thus, *Hellaro* not only sheds light on the physical challenges faced by its characters but also highlights the profound impact of gender roles on their mental resilience and self-worth. Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1948).



Fig 3: Windows depicting the control and power dynamics between two genders.

Suppression and Emotional Burden

The traditional gender roles imposed on women in rural Gujarat often led to suppression and emotional burden. Women are expected to conform to societal expectations and face limitations on their freedom and expression. This suppression takes a toll on their mental health, leading to feelings of frustration, sadness, and

helplessness. They have to cover their heads and should always be covered head to toe. Taking away their choice to live freely. They become their husbands play toy, by not showing their face to anyone gives the male an authority over their body, as if they are a showpiece supposed to be kept away from all. Arjan warns Manjhri by saying, “Here, in our village, the rules of the caste come first” (*Hellaro*18:13-18:18). The women are shown performing mundane household chores with resigned expressions, conveying a sense of suppression and emotional burden imposed by societal expectations and gender roles.

Scene (*Hellaro*, 25:00)

“હું એ જ છું, જે હું હમણાંને બનાવવાની યાહીએ છે”.

(Translation: “I am just what I am supposed to be”.)

“Our lives are confined within these walls. We’re not allowed to express our desires or dreams”.

“We’re burdened with the expectations of society. Our voices are silenced”. (*Hellaro*, 15:00)

Liberation and Self-Expression

Through Garba, the traditional folk dance, women in *Hellaro* find a means of liberation and self-expression. 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 centred locale. This act of defiance against gender norms allows them to break free from the shackles of societal expectations and assert their individuality. By expressing themselves through dance, they experience a sense of empowerment and liberation, positively affecting their mental well-being. Garba Rass is something associated with Goddess Maa Ambaji, which gives agency to women to express themselves freely. In the movie, the storyline takes a dramatic shift when it intersects with the superstition surrounding Rup, a widow and skilled embroiderer, who resolves to take charge of her life by seeking independence through earning. She flees the village with a man who helps to sell her product in urban market secretly; both were killed brutally by the men of the said village, an act believed to have angered the goddess, resulting in years of drought. Since then, village banned women from any textile or art of any kind. Despite efforts to appease Maa Amba through men’s Rass performances, rainfall remains elusive. 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 (The Quint,2019). The prohibition against women participating in Garba exacerbates their suffering, reinforcing the notion that women should be marginalized and denied opportunities for participation. 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).

“સંતો પડ્યો તો આપણે પડ્યા નથી, લડાવા છે!”

(Translation: “If saints fell, we wouldn’t have fallen, we’d be fighting!”)

(*Hellaro*, 40:00)

When the females decide to take things into their hand by regularly playing Rass after their water refill, they find a Dholi who plays Dhol for them and they perform the Rass happily asserting their feminine self. The women gather in a secluded area to practice Garba, a traditional folk dance. As they dance with vigour and passion, their faces light up with joy and freedom, symbolizing their liberation from societal constraints. 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).

Scene (*Hellaro*, Timestamp 55:00)

“Let’s dance! Dancing allows us to break free from the chains of patriarchy. It’s our way of reclaiming our bodies and souls”.

“Yes, through dance, we find liberation and self-expression.

Healing and Resilience

Despite facing adversity and oppression, the women in *Hellaro* demonstrate remarkable resilience and strength. Through their journey of empowerment and solidarity, they find healing and inner resilience. Their ability to confront and overcome challenges contributes to their mental well-being, instilling a sense of hope and determination for a better future. They demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, finding solace in their shared experiences and bonds of sisterhood, after facing backlash from the patriarchal society for their bold actions, the women gather to support each other

“અમારી શક્તિ પછી પ્રકાશ નથી માનવતાની દુનિયામાં ખાડી જાય છે!”

(*Hellaro*, 1:20:00):

(Translation: “Our strength does not disappear in the world of humanity!”)

“Despite the challenges we face, we stand united. Our bond gives us strength and resilience”.

“Together, we find healing and hope for a better future”. (*Hellaro*, 1:35:00)

In *Hellaro*, the portrayal of gender roles highlights the emotional toll of societal expectations on women’s mental health. However, through acts of defiance, self-expression, and solidarity, the female characters find avenues for healing, liberation, and resilience, showcasing the transformative power of collective action in challenging oppressive structure.

Physical Health Challenges

In the movie *Hellaro*, the portrayal of gender roles is closely linked to physical health challenges faced by the women characters. They had to walk miles to nowhere

in between the Rann of Kutchh to fetch water for everyday needs. “Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, when the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth increases. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends, taking a heavy toll on their mental health” (UNESCO,2023). This practice robs girl of their childhood and threatens their wellbeing, maximum girls face domestic violence, no education and worst possible health. Water being the main concern for people of Gujarat this movie gives us the inside view how things were, walking miles to get a drop water was an everyday labour-intensive activity. They used to perform work likes pottery, embroidery, glass designing. In the movie, the impact of physical health challenges is palpably depicted through the lens of rural women in Gujarat. These women face various obstacles stemming from their socioeconomic conditions and the patriarchal structure of their society. The physical labour they endure, coupled with limited access to healthcare resources and information exacerbates their health challenges. Additionally, the suppression of women’s voices and agency within the patriarchal framework further compounds these issues. Through the characters’ journeys, the film sheds light on the toll that such constraints take on their physical well-being, highlighting the urgent need for empowerment and societal change to address these health disparities. What such labour involves varies with income, class and culture; but because the home is such a basic feature of everybody’s lives, the routine risks encountered while working in the home are easily overlooked (UNESCO,2017).



Fig 4: Working Situation of females in village.

Occupational Hazards

“Our bodies ache from dawn to dusk, but who will listen to the pains of women like us?”

“Every day, we toil in the scorching sun, our hands blistered and backs bent. But society expects us to carry on without complaint”.

Not only in *Hellaro*, the women characters are depicted engaging in labour-intensive tasks such as grinding grains, fetching water, and working in the fields. These occupations expose them to various physical health hazards, including fatigue, strain, and injuries. Household labour also frequently involves caring for other family members children, the sick and the elderly. Even where men share this work, it is usually the woman who is the primary carer, and she may suffer additional health risks. All the females had to walk miles in dessert to get water, which led to scalding

of their foot soles but there was no immediate relief to pain they went. These may be physical for instance, muscular problems caused by lifting all those heavy pots of water on head led to severe nerve and spinal decompression injuries. All these injuries remained unnoticed as no healthcare option was present. Their extreme tiredness, was labelled as unfit and their stress was not a subject of discussion. Depression in the women of movie remained highly layered by patriarchy as it still remains in India. Female health is never given equal space in quorum. Women may undertake paid employment at home, or combine part or fulltime paid employment with household work and the care of children, the sick or the elderly. They had to keep working day and night.

Scene: Women grinding grains in the courtyard. [*Hellaro*, Time: 25:00
26:00]

“Aaj no bhaag saras kare, sukh jova male”. (“Today’s run was good, I enjoyed it”.)

“Haan, pan aa chakki no kaam roj ni nathi”. (“Yes, but grinding at this mill every day is not enjoyable”.)

The camera pans across women working in the fields, carrying heavy loads of crops and water, illustrating the physical toll of their labour. Most of the women’s from Rabari clan lose their eyesight due to working with needle and thread for embroidery, it was one of the main earning sources of this women’s and till date only they inherit this specific art.

Lack of Access to Healthcare

“When I fell sick last month, I couldn’t even visit the doctor. My husband said it was too expensive, and we couldn’t afford it”.

“The nearest hospital is miles away, and we don’t have transportation. We have no choice but to rely on home remedies, no matter how serious the illness”.

In *Hellaro*, the women’s access to healthcare is limited due to societal norms and economic constraints. They often lack access to proper medical facilities, resulting in untreated illnesses and complications. Rann of Kutch is a huge dessert in Gujarat with never ending mass of land; the weather is not forgiving its scorching heat and lack of water makes things worst. Most of the people suffer with untreated problems like Kidney Stones, Rashes, and Cancer, loss of eyesight. The effects of potential occupational hazards on women’s reproductive health have probably been the major focus of concern in the health of women workers. This concern has increased in recent years as more environmental hazards are identified and as more women enter the paid workforce. A large range of occupational reproductive hazards has been documented (UNESCO, 157).

Scene: Women discussing a sick member of their community.
[*Hellaro*, Time: 40:00 - 41:00]

“Ae toh aa ne ghare ni ma kevu banavu, biji sathe kidhu thayu”. (“She needs to be taken care of at home; she got sick while working in the fields”.)

“Haan, pan dukh toh maan ma hamesha rahe”. (“Yes, but the pain always stays in the heart”.)

A scene shows women performing traditional healing rituals like herbal remedies, rituals, for a sick member of their community, indicating the lack of access to modern healthcare. Baija and healers were the only resort for people residing in village. They believed more in traditional practices over modern due to the lack of resources. Further the cultural indifference played a huge role, maternal healthcare is a significant aspect depicted in the movie. It highlights the challenges faced by pregnant women in rural areas, such as lack of prenatal care, skilled birth attendant, and aftercare after birth. Death of women’s during childbirth was the most common issue of all time. The constant heat from cooking near the burner makes them loose their fertility, and giving them early menopause. Already a child body adhering another child is weak further; the workload makes their rest period even shorter. Menstrual health is ignored highly; they use pieces of clothes during their periods. There is no doctor to give them the nuances of being a mother or to teach them how to take care after delivery, they go right back to work after the baby is born. Their to is a societal difference if it is a boy child mother is given extra time to recover but for a girl child it is not the case.

Coping Strategies

“We may not have access to modern medicine, but our grandmothers’ remedies have always worked for us. We know how to heal ourselves”.

“When times get tough, we lean on each other for support. Together, we can face any challenge that comes our way”.

Despite facing physical health challenges, the women in *Hellaro* demonstrate resilience and ingenuity in coping with their circumstances. They rely on each other for support and find strength in their unity. They refuse to succumb to the status quo and strive to challenge existing norms, even at great personal risk. As the narrative progresses, women undergo a process of self-discovery and empowerment. Through their collective journey, they realize their worth and potential, breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy and asserting their agency.

[Scene: Women discussing their daily struggles.] [*Hellaro*, Time: 1:10:00 - 1:11:00]

“Aa jeevan ne joi ne jitey hoy, ek biji no sahara avashyak hoy”. (“To live this life and face its challenges, we need each other’s support”.)

“Haan, pan jode ne pase hoy toh sab kuch jara sahaj thay. (“Yes, but if we have someone by our side, everything becomes a bit easier”.)

The women come together to perform a traditional dance, finding solace and strength in their shared experiences and solidarity. *Hellaro* portrays how gender roles intersect with physical health challenges faced by women in rural Gujarat. Through dialogues and visual storytelling, the film sheds light on the difficulties of women's life in rural parts of world. It gives a glimpse of atrocities which are still prevalent in society while we sit in our air-conditioned offices talking about equality.

Intersectionality of Gender and Caste

In *Hellaro*, the intersectionality of gender and caste is intricately woven into the portrayal of gender roles, highlighting the challenges faced by women who experience double discrimination due to their gender and caste identities. In the movie, the intersectionality of gender and caste emerges as a central theme, providing a nuanced portrayal of the complexities faced by women in rural Gujarat. The film not only explores the challenges of gender inequality but also delves into how caste dynamics intersect with and exacerbate these issues. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the movie depicts how women from marginalized caste backgrounds face compounded forms of discrimination and oppression. Through its narrative, *Hellaro* sheds light on the interplay between gender and caste, highlighting the need for a more intersectional approach to understanding and addressing social inequalities. In India we all know there is caste within a caste therefore, this concept could be understood when we see female being kept in periphery as doubly marginalised once by her gender and secondly, by her caste. The leverage in male caste gives them power to dominate the female and make them their slaves as apparently, they have done a huge favour by marrying her.



Fig 5: Ideal female depiction.

Double Discrimination

The film illustrates how women from marginalized caste backgrounds face double discrimination, both as women and as members of lower castes. 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” (Ashcroft 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 “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). This intersectionality compounds their struggles and limits their opportunities for social mobility and empowerment. 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 (John, 2021).

“We may be women, but we are also Dalits. Double the discrimination, double the oppression”.

This dialogue highlights the intersecting nature of gender and caste discrimination faced by the characters in the film. It emphasizes the additional challenges and barriers that women from marginalized caste backgrounds must overcome in their struggle for empowerment and equality.

“We are not only considered inferior as women, but also because of our caste”. (*Hellaro*, 15:32)

“Yes, society has always oppressed us, both as women and as lower caste individuals”.

Social Hierarchies

Hellaro explores the entrenched social hierarchies that perpetuate discrimination based on gender and caste. These hierarchies dictate the roles and expectations imposed on women from marginalized caste backgrounds, reinforcing their subjugation. “In this village, your caste determines your worth. No matter how talented or capable you are, if you’re born into a lower caste, you’re destined to be treated as inferior”. This dialogue underscores the rigid social hierarchies that dictate power dynamics and access to resources in the village. “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 (John, 2021) It highlights how caste-based discrimination intersects with gender, further marginalizing women from lower caste backgrounds.

“Our place in society is predetermined by our caste. We are expected to adhere to certain norms and restrictions”.

“Yes, and as women from lower castes, those restrictions are even more suffocating. We are denied opportunities and treated as second-class citizens”. (*Hellaro*, 28:19).

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 (John, 2021)

Overcoming Prejudice

Despite facing systemic prejudice and discrimination, the women in *Hellaro* demonstrate resilience and determination in challenging social norms and asserting their agency. Through their solidarity and collective action, they strive to overcome the barriers imposed by gender, caste. The film also portrays the journey of women in challenging, and overcoming prejudice and discrimination based on both gender and caste. Dialogues like the following illustrate this theme:

“We refuse to be confined by the limitations society imposes on us. We will dance, we will resist, and we will break free from the shackles of patriarchy and caste oppression”.

The dialogue captures the defiance and determination of the women in *Hellaro* to defy societal norms and assert their agency. It reflects their resilience and courage in the face of systemic discrimination, inspiring others to challenge prejudice and strive for equality.

“We may be oppressed by society, but we refuse to be defined by our gender or caste. We will dance and defy these oppressive norms”.

“Yes, together we can break free from these shackles and pave the way for a better future for ourselves and future generations”. (*Hellaro*, 1:12:45)

In *Hellaro*, the intersectionality of gender and caste is depicted as a pervasive force that shapes the experiences and opportunities of women from marginalized communities. Through their resistance and resilience, the women in the film challenge these intersecting forms of discrimination, advocating for equality and empowerment. *Hellaro* effectively portrays the intersectionality of gender and caste, shedding light on the complexities of discrimination faced by marginalized communities. Through its powerful narrative and dialogues, the film calls attention to the need for collective action to dismantle oppressive structures and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Cultural and Societal Norms

In the movie *Hellaro*, cultural and societal norms play a significant role in shaping the lives of the characters, particularly in reinforcing patriarchal norms, navigating cultural barriers, and depicting the journey towards changing mindsets. In the landscape of *Hellaro*, cultural and societal norms emerge as powerful forces shaping the lives of its characters. Set against the backdrop of rural Gujarat, the film delves into the intricacies of traditional customs and expectations that govern the community. These norms dictate rigid gender roles, confining women to domestic spheres while men hold authority in public domains. The movie intricately portrays the tensions and conflicts arising from the clash between these entrenched norms and the desires of individuals striving for autonomy and self-expression. Through its narrative, *Hellaro* invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of cultural heritage

and societal expectations, and the profound impacts they have on personal freedom and collective identity.



Fig 6: Manhandling of wives to assert identity.

Patriarchal Norms

The film depicts the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms on the lives of women in rural Gujarat, where they are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles and submit to male authority. 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 as and better than women. Their voyeurism and male chauvinism unite them (John, 2021). They are not allowed to go around without their head covered, has to always remain fully dressed. Child marriage happens to be the most common thing in society, a minor girl is married off to 20+ yrs old men with a huge amount of dowry. They were considered baby incubator and house cleaner for the family. They had no opinions, desires, and aspirations openly. The pressure to adhere to traditional marital expectations, including arranged marriage, poses a significant barrier to women’s autonomy and self-determination. Women are often expected to prioritize family honour and societal expectations over their own desires and aspirations. Women in the village are often confined to the domestic sphere, with limited freedom to explore the world outside their homes. This restriction on mobility prevents women from pursuing education, employment, or other opportunities that could empower them and broaden their horizons.

“Women in our community are expected to stay within the confines of the home and obey their husbands without question”.

“Yes, our worth is often measured by our ability to fulfil our duties as wives and mothers, reinforcing the patriarchal hierarchy”. (*Hellaro*, 11:10)

Cultural Barriers

Hellaro highlights the cultural barriers that women face in expressing themselves and pursuing their aspirations, particularly in the context of traditional customs and social expectations. Religious and ritualistic practices also served as

barriers to women's empowerment and self-expression. Certain customs and traditions reinforced patriarchal values and restricted women's participation in religious ceremonies or cultural events. Expressing oneself freely, especially through art forms like dance, is often stigmatized in conservative societies. The film depicts how women face judgment, ridicule, and condemnation for engaging in activities perceived as immodest or inappropriate according to cultural norms. The film portrays how societal norms and expectations dictate the behaviour and choices of women. There is immense pressure on women to conform to traditional roles of wife, mother, and caretaker, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and self-expression.

“Our cultural norms dictate that women should not engage in activities outside of household chores”.

“Yes, but through dance, we can challenge these barriers and assert our identities beyond the confines of societal expectations”. (*Hellaro*, 22:45)

Changing Mindsets

The film portrays the journey of the women as they challenge entrenched mindsets and societal expectations, paving the way for transformative change and empowerment. The women in the village initially accept their oppressed status as a natural part of life, conditioned by generations of patriarchal norms. However, as the story unfolds, they begin to recognize the injustices and limitations imposed upon them solely based on their gender. Through various interactions and experiences, the women start questioning the status quo. They challenge the traditional roles assigned to them, ascribed by society, and begin to envision a different, more liberated future for themselves. Changing mindset requires courage and conviction, and the women of *Hellaro* exhibit both as they rebel against oppressive customs and expectations. They refuse to conform to societal norms that confine them to the domestic sphere and deny them agency over their lives. As the women unite in their struggle for equality and dignity, they realize the power of collective action in effecting change. By supporting each other and standing together against injustice, they amplify their voices and challenge the existing power structures. Through their journey, the women of *Hellaro* encounter new perspectives and possibilities beyond the confines of their village. They become open to alternative ways of thinking and living, rejecting the limitations imposed by tradition and embracing a more inclusive and egalitarian worldview. By defying societal expectations and asserting their rights, the women become agents of change within their community. Their courage and resilience inspire others to question and challenge oppressive norms, initiating a ripple effect of transformation.

“We must challenge the outdated beliefs and mindsets that restrict our freedom and potential”.

“Yes, by embracing our true selves and asserting our agency, we can inspire others to break free from the shackles of tradition”. (*Hellaro*, 1:03:20)

In *Hellaro*, cultural and societal norms act as formidable obstacles for the women, shaping their experiences and limiting their opportunities for self-expression and autonomy. However, through their collective defiance and resilience, they challenge these norms, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Empowering Women’s Voices

Empowerment is a complex process of negotiation rather than a linear sequence of inputs and outcomes (Cornwall and Edwards, 2014, p. 27). In the Gujarati movie *Hellaro*, the empowerment of women’s voices is a central theme, depicted through their collective strength, efforts to challenge oppression, and inspiration for change. In the film *Hellaro*, directed by Abhishek Shah, the journey of women from oppression to empowerment takes centre stage. Set against the backdrop of rural Gujarat, the movie unfolds a powerful narrative of resilience, solidarity, and self-discovery among a group of women. Through the traditional art form of Garba, these women find their voices and agency, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and reclaiming their right to self-expression. *Hellaro* serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative power of women’s voices and the importance of collective action in effecting social change. For the females in movie, this bonding helps them to create meaning out of their bodies and make themselves away from the stereotypes and prejudices of society. Thus, when they say this to Muljhi, “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) they conceptualize their individuality.



Fig 7: Female Assertion of Identity through Rass.

Collective Strength

The film emphasizes the collective strength of women as they come together to confront adversity and assert their agency. Through unity and solidarity, they find the power to challenge oppressive norms and redefine their identities. *Hellaro* beautifully illustrates the vital role of empowering women's voices in fostering collective strength and driving meaningful change within the community. Through a nuanced portrayal, the film emphasizes the recognition of individual agency, showcasing how each woman's unique experiences and perspectives contribute to the emergence of collective strength. Despite facing diverse forms of oppression, the women find unity in their shared struggle against patriarchal norms, celebrating their diversity to tap into a collective reservoir of resilience. Moreover, the movie highlights the importance of community support and solidarity, depicting how sharing stories fosters a network that amplifies their impact. By challenging patriarchal structures and norms, the women demand recognition and equality, asserting their right to participate in decision-making processes. Their courage and resilience inspire future generations, shaping a future where women's voices are valued and heard, ultimately highlighting the transformative potential of inclusive decision-making processes in fostering social change". Alone, we may be powerless, but together, we are unstoppable". "Yes, our collective strength lies in our unity. Let us stand together and fight for our rights" (*Hellaro*, 23:10).

Challenging Oppression

Hellaro portrays women's courageous efforts to challenge oppression and break free from societal constraints. They refuse to accept their prescribed roles and instead strive for autonomy and self-determination. In *Hellaro*, empowering women's voices serves as a potent tool in challenging oppression and patriarchal norms within the confines of a remote Gujarati village. The film portrays how the act of giving voice to women's experiences, aspirations, and frustrations fosters a sense of agency and solidarity among them. Through their collective voice, the women confront and challenge entrenched systems of oppression, demanding recognition and respect for their identities and rights. Whether through the rhythmic beats of their traditional folk dances or the outspoken defiance against oppressive customs, the women of *Hellaro* assert their autonomy and refuse to be silenced. 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). By amplifying their voices, they not only reclaim their narratives but also inspire others to question and challenge the status quo. In doing so, *Hellaro* illustrates the transformative power of women's voices in dismantling oppressive structures and paving the way for greater empowerment and equality.

"We will not be silenced or confined by society's expectations. We deserve to live on our own terms".

“Indeed, we must challenge oppression in all its forms and pave the way for a brighter future”. (*Hellaro*, 38:55)

Inspiring Change

The women in *Hellaro* serve as catalysts for change, inspiring others to question established norms and envision a more equitable society. Their resilience and determination ignite a spark of hope and transformation. *Hellaro*, captivates audiences with its portrayal of women’s empowerment amidst rural Gujarat. Set in a remote village, the movie follows a group of women who reclaim their voices through Garba, a traditional dance form. Garba, deeply rooted in Gujarat’s culture, symbolizes tradition, community, and female expression. The film exposes the oppressive patriarchal norms that confine women to domestic roles, stifling their voices and aspirations. Yet, through solidarity and collective action, the women find strength to challenge societal norms and envision a liberated future. Garba becomes their tool for empowerment, breaking societal constraints and asserting their identities. Despite facing resistance, the women resiliently reclaim public spaces and inspire others to defy patriarchal shackles. *Hellaro* celebrates the resilience and beauty of womanhood, portraying women as agents of change. Through their journey, the film challenges norms, amplifies voices, and celebrates the power of solidarity and self-expression.

“Our actions today will inspire future generations to strive for equality and justice”.

“Yes, let us be the agents of change and create a world where all women are empowered to realize their full potential”. (*Hellaro*, 1:05:20)

In *Hellaro*, the empowerment of women’s voices is portrayed as a transformative force that challenges the status quo and paves the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. Through their collective strength, resilience in the face of oppression, and commitment to inspiring change, the women in the film embody the spirit of empowerment and liberation.

Role of Education and Awareness

In the Gujarati movie *Hellaro*, education and awareness play pivotal roles in fostering positive societal change and promoting equality. By providing access to education, individuals, especially women and girls, are empowered with knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities. Education serves as a catalyst for breaking cycles of poverty and oppression by offering opportunities for personal and professional development. Moreover, raising awareness about social issues such as gender inequality, discrimination, and health disparities is essential for driving collective action and advocacy efforts. Through education and awareness-raising initiatives, communities can challenge outdated beliefs and practices, promote inclusivity, and foster a culture of respect and equality for all. A major difference between

approaches is the extent to which ‘health literacy’ is conceptualised in terms of empowerment (UNESCO, 2017).



Fig 8: Coming out of domination to assert their identity.

Breaking the Cycle

Empowerment is a complex process of negotiation rather than a linear sequence of inputs and outcomes (Cornwall and Edwards, 2014, p. 27) they have decided that they “won’t stop living, for the fear of dying” (*Hellaro* 1:09:05). Education emerges as a powerful tool for dismantling the cycles of oppression and ignorance that fuel gender inequality and marginalization. The film underscores the importance of education and awareness in disrupting entrenched patterns of poverty, discrimination, and injustice. By providing access to quality education, individuals can equip themselves with the necessary skills and knowledge to transcend socioeconomic limitations and pursue better opportunities. Education not only empowers individuals to challenge systemic barriers but also enables them to advocate for their rights and the rights of others. Complemented by awareness-raising initiatives, education becomes a catalyst for social change, illuminating entrenched social issues and catalysing dialogue and action. The movie advocates for a comprehensive approach to breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality, one that addresses structural barriers while empowering individuals and communities through education, awareness, and advocacy.

“Education is the key to our liberation. It empowers us to question and challenge the status quo”.

“Yes, through education, we can break free from the chains of ignorance and oppression that have bound us for generations”.
(*Hellaro*, 10:15)

Promoting Health Education

Over 800 women still die every day in pregnancy and childbirth – mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa; violence against women remains devastatingly pervasive, affecting 1 in 3 women globally (WHO, 2021); The film emphasizes the importance of health education, particularly for women, who often lack access to information and resources for their well-being. Through education, women are empowered to make informed decisions about their health and break free from traditional constraints. In the movie *Hellaro*, health education emerges as a crucial tool in empowering individuals, particularly women, to make informed decisions about their well-being.

The film underscores the significance of providing accurate and culturally relevant health information to communities, enabling them to prevent diseases, bridge health disparities, and foster healthier lifestyles. Vital health and support services targeting women and girls have been severely disrupted, while reports of domestic violence have increased. Pregnant women have been specifically excluded from many treatments and vaccine trials (WHO, 2021). Within the narrative, health education encompasses various themes, including reproductive health, nutrition, disease prevention, mental well-being, and hygiene practices. Through the portrayal of women in a rural setting, the movie highlights the importance of promoting health education among marginalized groups, such as women and girls, to address gender-specific health challenges and advance gender equality. By integrating health education into school curricula, community initiatives, and public health campaigns, societies can empower individuals to take charge of their health and contribute to building healthier and more equitable communities.

“We need to educate ourselves about our health and well-being. It’s time to break the silence and stigma surrounding women’s health issues”.

“I agree. With knowledge comes power. Let’s empower ourselves and take control of our health”. (*Hellaro*, 35:50)

Advocacy for Gender Equality

In the narrative of the film *Hellaro*, education emerges as a potent force for catalysing gender equality and dismantling patriarchal structures. Through education, women gain the tools to challenge societal norms and demand equal rights and opportunities. It serves as a pathway for raising consciousness and nurturing critical thinking, empowering women to advocate for their own liberation. The advocacy for gender equality becomes paramount in addressing entrenched systemic barriers that perpetuate inequalities, such as limited access to education, workplace discrimination, gender-based violence, and political marginalization. Through advocacy endeavours encompassing policy reforms, awareness campaigns, and community mobilization, advocates strive to dismantle these barriers and foster a more equitable society. By amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, advocating for legislative changes, and fostering cultural shifts, advocates pave the way for meaningful progress towards gender equality and inclusivity. Furthermore, this advocacy is deeply interconnected with broader initiatives promoting human rights, social justice, and sustainable development. Through collaborative and intersectional efforts, societies can collectively strive towards building a more just and equitable world that upholds the rights and dignity of all genders.

“We refuse to be confined to the roles assigned to us by society. We demand equality and respect”.

“Yes, education has opened our eyes to our worth and potential. We will no longer accept anything less than equal treatment and opportunities”. (*Hellaro*, 1:20:05)

In *Hellaro*, education and awareness are depicted as transformative forces that empower women to challenge oppression, advocate for their rights, and strive for equality. Through education, women break free from the constraints of tradition and ignorance, paving the way for a brighter and more equitable future.

The Importance of Representation

In the cinematic realm, representation serves as a crucial cornerstone, reflecting and shaping societal norms and values. Within the compelling narrative of the Gujarati film *Hellaro*, representation emerges as a powerful vehicle for challenging stereotypes and amplifying marginalized voices. This introduction delves into how *Hellaro* deftly navigates the landscape of representation, particularly in its portrayal of women from rural Gujarat. Through their stories, struggles, and triumphs, the film not only offers a nuanced depiction of gender dynamics but also serves as a beacon of empowerment and inspiration for audiences worldwide.



Fig 9: Movie in a whole.

Breaking Stereotypes in Media

Hellaro breaks stereotypes by showcasing strong, independent women who defy societal expectations and norms. Through their portrayal, the film challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the diverse experiences and capabilities of women from marginalized communities.

The film portrays women from a rural village as protagonists, challenging the stereotype of passive and submissive women often depicted in mainstream media. By showcasing the strength, resilience, and agency of these women, *Hellaro* breaks the mould of traditional gender roles and offers a more nuanced and authentic representation of Gujarati women. This portrayal not only empowers women by providing them with relatable role models but also challenges societal perceptions and encourages audiences to reevaluate their preconceived notions about gender and empowerment.

“We are not just the submissive women society expects us to be. We are strong, resilient, and capable of so much more”.

“Yes, it’s time our stories are told, breaking free from the stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media”. (*Hellaro*, 10:15)

Inspiring Others

The representation of empowered women in *Hellaro* serves as an inspiration to viewers, encouraging them to challenge oppressive norms and pursue their dreams despite societal barriers. The characters' resilience and determination inspire others to assert their agency and strive for change. *Hellaro* serves as an inspiring narrative that has the potential to uplift and empower audiences, particularly women. Through the journey of the characters, viewers are encouraged to find their voices, defy societal norms, and pursue their aspirations. The film's depiction of women supporting and uplifting each other underscores the importance of solidarity and collective action in effecting positive change. By witnessing the courage and determination of the characters in *Hellaro*, audiences are inspired to confront their own challenges and strive for personal and social empowerment.

“Seeing these women dance with such passion and courage makes me believe that I too can overcome the challenges in my life”.

“Their strength gives us hope and reminds us that we are not alone in our struggles”. (*Hellaro*, 36:50)

Amplifying Marginalized Voices

Hellaro amplifies marginalized voices by centering the narrative on women from a rural community who are often overlooked and marginalized in mainstream discourse. The film provides a platform for these women to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives, allowing their voices to be heard and validated. By shining a spotlight on marginalized communities and their struggles, *Hellaro* fosters empathy, understanding, and awareness among viewers. It challenges the invisibility and erasure of marginalized voices in media and advocates for greater representation and inclusivity. In doing so, the film not only empowers the women within its story but also empowers marginalized communities by giving them a platform to share their truths and reclaim their narratives.

“Our stories have been ignored for too long. It's time for our voices to be heard, loud and clear”.

“Yes, through our art and our resilience, we can reclaim our narratives and demand the respect and recognition we deserve”. (*Hellaro*, 1:25:10)

In *Hellaro*, representation serves as a powerful tool for social change, allowing marginalized voices to be heard and empowering viewers to challenge stereotypes and advocate for equality. Through its portrayal of strong, resilient women, the film inspires others to defy societal expectations and assert their agency in pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Gujarati movie *Hellaro* masterfully intertwines the themes of gender and health, offering a poignant commentary on the challenges faced by women in marginalized communities and the transformative power of empowerment and solidarity. Through its portrayal of traditional folk dance as a form of resistance and liberation, the film sheds light on the intersectionality of gender and caste, highlighting the double discrimination experienced by women from marginalized backgrounds. *Hellaro* portrays the detrimental effects of societal norms and expectations on women's physical and mental health, illustrating how gender roles and caste-based hierarchies perpetuate oppression and limit opportunities for empowerment. However, the film also celebrates the resilience and determination of its female characters, who find strength in solidarity and collective action. By amplifying marginalized voices and challenging stereotypes, *Hellaro* emphasizes the importance of representation in media and the role it plays in inspiring others and fostering social change. Through its powerful storytelling and compelling characters, the film advocates for gender equality and social justice, urging viewers to confront systemic injustices and strive for a more inclusive and equitable society.

In essence, *Hellaro* serves as a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of women and the transformative potential of collective resistance, offering a message of hope and empowerment to audiences worldwide.

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