

Film Criticism

Dipsikha Bhagawati

Hellaro: Whetting the Esteem of Existence

"I've heard that educated girls somehow grow wings. And some horns too. Better know your limits. No matter what you've grown, wings or horns, cut them on your own. If I cut them, it will hurt more." – Arjan to Manjhri.

In the very initial evening of their wedding, *Manjhri*, (*Shraddha Dangar*), the prima donna, had spotted this savage truth about the contemporary station of the existence of women, long back in a rural set up of 70's, in a village of Gujrat, bursting out from her husband, *Arjan*, (*Aarjav Trivedi*). But time was destined to change from the cataclysmic empire of sharp ended moustaches to the unbound pulsate of skirts in move. An offbeat soul, a deviation, *Manjhri's* heart cried in ways aloud: "I want to break free!"

Strength is defined in her paroxysm, not in mortifyingly sober silence. The very initial visual locates a man's face, in a ruby red close shot of light and shadow. Pride, arrogance and mastery of being a

"man" was clear in his face. Honing the moustache, facing a small mirror, with a wild facial reflection of male chauvinism, he snatches the ancestral sword from his woman, not wife in the sense, offers garba to the silent goddess with bare sword, saying to his little daughter when she had asked about their strict restriction against doing garba – *"girls are not permitted to ask questions."*

The same frame of that small mirror reflects two lives, dwelling in two opposite poles under the same roof. One is free to smoke pipes after beating his pregnant wife, and the other in destined to shed tears, surrounded by the smoke of the fireplace. Smoke vapors up and along with carries their silent sighs. Life for those destined creatures is what the others

"allow" them to do. Anklets, veils, bangles - all ornamental accessories metaphorically chain their freedom, even to "live." It was a period of volatile political shape emergency was declared across the country and the then female Prime Minister was blamed by the men folk for all these chaos. Though projected on a lighter vein, this was exactly how they behaved with woman -- as owned property, not assets.



Debut director and co-writer Abhishek Shah's *Hellaro* - outburst, projects this pragmatism, set in the mid-70s Kutch in Gujrat. A fine cinematic tour de force exposing the multi layered social issues of that closed community in a crucial and complex juncture of volatile socio-political predicament of India is a canvas of aesthetically knitted, sensitive gossamers of casteism, patriarchy and exerting superstition. A brilliant story, in fact an adaptation of a folklore of Vrajvani village in Kutch, is brilliantly scripted and executed in a real setup. In this visual, the audience is not expected to experience some extended and loud cinematic attire or some royal ambience, like fog or snow whistling out from some corner of scripted fantasy. It's just what was happening, how it was happening and what were the haunting efforts to break free these shackles of multilayered, black social paradigm.

Garba was offered to the powerful silent goddess in the open extension and the real women, the omnipresent care takers inside the confined huts had lost all the rhythms of life. Their skirts strived to dance with the dhol beats, their hearts struggled to croon the sweet tune of garba songs, but their surroundings were hostile enough to brutally restrict all those longings. It's not about only the superstitious and dominating patriarchy but the senior woman folk, like the mother in laws too, were in the same frame. Might be because they had experienced the same schedule and so wanted to exercise the same upon their daughters-in-law. No positive social education was there to refine their mental galaxy. Being beautiful, educated, literate or illiterate-- all were the flat beads of the same monochromatic rosary. On the very next day of their wedding, Manjhri is asked to go with the other women folk of the village to fetch water. Her mother in-law removes the colourful, embellished veil from her head and replaces it with a dull one, as if suggesting the fading, colourless hours of her approaching life. Women in the flock where is very eager to know about the looks of their new bride-- Manjhri, but one elderly from them says with a note of emptied exhaustion:

"Would Arjan bhai even have seen her face? Now all that beauty will remain within four walls of our home. All her beauty and knowledge will be blown off in the kitchen. And then, she will go from the village to the lake and from the lake to the village all her life with us, like us."

These are the words of the whole female fraternity of Kutch. But time was incubating a breeze of storm to burst out- hellaro! So, when said by a woman, *"the only time we talk and listen is when we go to fetch water, other than that we have to put a knot to this snake of a tongue and put it away"*, Manjhri replied, *"but then what if this suffocated snake stings?"*

Superstition was filled to its extremely fixed patriarchal consistency. A woman, a widow-- Kesar was brutally restricted inside the four walls for more than a year after her husband's death, which a serious offence of violating human right. But in a

dire patriarchy, the court was there and the judge too. She was considered to be ominous, blasphemous. But, being compelled by the situation, she was however permitted to go to fetch water with the restriction of not talking to any other woman of the community. The drought of the extended dryland was merged with the aridness of their lives like a sad shroud. The arresting frames of camera, mostly of the panning shots and long shots intensify the emotions of those destined folk.

This short spin was their only refreshment. One day, they saw a man lying in the sand and assumed him to be dead. They were not basically allowed by their husbands to talk to other males. But Manjhri detected his fatigue and saved him by offering him some drinking water. Water was too precious in that desert and it's offering too carried the same degree of integrity. That person, *Mulji (Jayesh More)* turned out to be a drummer. Manjhri could not resist herself from dancing with his dhol, and he too played his honour, to cachet his life saver. The suppressed souls broke free, the monotonous schedule of fetching water was transformed to be the most awaited hours to celebrate suffocated freedom. Some were out of the flock, but unchained feet cared a little! As if shattering the captivity of male chauvinism: *"A wife neither belongs to a village nor a city, she only belongs to her husband"*, they cheered: *"No, I belong to my own life!"*

Surprisingly, in then Kutch, the women were not even permitted for any needlework, as once, a window had earned some benefits by selling embroidered clothes through a person coming from the nearby city. Earning by women was considered to be an ignominy to their "manhood". The couple eloped, but was heinously killed by the villagers, when caught. But that confident face has always remained as a tight slap to their established ego, who can even beat their parturient wives, murder the bud, and relish over the hookah, so nonchalantly. The trivial talks among the village men folk reveal their sallow tendency of considering women either as a sex object, a domestic worker or a carrier of human reproduction -- a property to them, whom they own

but don't nurture. Women were like one time investment without no consistent premium.

Two characters in the movie, *Bhaglo (Maulik Nayak)* and *Mulji* can be considered as the voice of conscience. *Bhaglo* in an outward provision of comic relief, but through his compassionate behavior, he exposes the virtues, follies and foibles of the characters. He is messenger of good vibes and positive frequency. In that desert, he saw the woman dancing with *Mulji's* drum beat, but remained silent. The women folk felt secured in this dear man's company: *"He won't tell it to anyone."* Excessive superstition of the village folk to welcome any change even in the field of archaeology is closely reflected in the denial of the *Mukhi Bappa* (village head) to donate the old canon to the Museum officials in the city. They thought that the absence of this ancestral canon would bring bad omen to the village. *Bhaglo*, with a mixture of sarcasm and humor, desperately speaks out, *"Anyway, the absence of rain for three consecutive years is going to turn the village itself to a museum!"*

It sounds funny, but digs out the prevailing darkness of superstition.

Mulji is a low born drummer. His entire family, including his wife and his little daughter *Reva* was burnt alive because he had played the drum in the high born's village, as innocent, little *Reva* wanted to do garba in the rhythm of her father's drum. They were not permitted to do so by the high caste villagers. He used to tie a tiny doll to his drum, gifted by his dead daughter and started living a nomadic life like an insane. In this course, he came to the company of the Kutch women folk who loved him like their own brother and a savior to their dream. They used to bring him food, covered his shelter with their head clothes, so as to protect him, simultaneously protecting their sojourn of limited freedom. But *Mulji* found it too difficult to survive in the midst of that lone desert. But sarcastically he had to take shelter in Kutch, as Navratri was approaching and the village lacked a good drummer. Though *Bhaglo* knew the whole secret, he was too polished, polite and sensitive to feel the pain of that surd torment. His gentle touch on the little girl's

head, waiting worriedly for some unexpected situation about the secret of their garba in desert, portrays his sensible integrity.

But time and situational destiny had some other plan. Secret was revealed by a woman of her own group whose father and brother had died in lightning while working in the field. Just before that an Infant was born dead. For some women who were coexisting with this monotonous domination had already adopted it to be their way of life. So, according to them Manjhri was the route of all these unexpected evils. The woman folk were brutally beaten by their husbands including Manjhri. The silence of the night it was shattered with the sound of cries, bursting out of the closed doors. Outdoor was decorated for garba in honour of the Goddess, but in the closed indoors, the women with suppressed vocals were dishonored to extremity. Mulji was verdicted death sentence as an offering to the goddess for his "offence." As his last wish he begged to be burnt alive after playing his drum to its death.

Hellaro transpired. The chained legs caught the fire of life. Rhythming to Mulji's drum beat, all the suppressed women filled the night with their carefree garba moves. After three years, the sky started pouring its blessing on the ever-tormented souls. Goddess was pleased. Nightscape-- blessed with fertile drops after a hiatus.

Exclusively brilliant projection of folk songs as the backdrops of most of the visuals, and accomplished camera work are the DNA of Hellaro. Music director *Mehul Surti* and lyricist *Saumya Joshi* has created a brilliant on-screen musical chemistry. Very few films have been made, where repetition of the

visuals and chemistry of folk songs is so well balanced with the prevailing situation of the course in motion. Use of colour is restricted mostly to reddish and complementary black. The very theme of the film is dark and so it is well complemented through it. *DOP, Tribhuvan Babu Sadineni's* excellent cam frames capture the vast sandy extensions, haphazardly grown faded shadowy trees, congested village areas through long and extreme long shots, and with no added and exaggerated cinematic colour. The close shots reflect the inertia and internal world of the characters. It's a film, consisting no pure Hero. Every character is justified in their own aura. A pure cinema has little catching up to do with its dialogues. The dialogues of Hellaro, specially scripted on the female characters, sound to be a little loud, comparing to their suffocating situation, sometimes they jump, than arriving at something. But smooth editing and fair screenplay, jointly written by *Abhishek Shah and Prateek Gupta* has made it a pure cinema that can be concerted and felt only through the visuals in motion, if dialogues are even muted.

Universally acclaimed by the critics, *Hellaro* was selected as the opening film at the Indian Panorama during the 50th International Film Festival of India (IFFI), held in November 2019 in Goa, where it won a special mention from jury for its "*incredible music, colour and choreography.*" *Hellaro* won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film at the 66th National Film Awards. All the 13 female actors were accoladed with special jury award.

Hellaro -- "the outburst" is a powerful screen story par excellence, historying the strength of a subdued marginal fraternity to emerge and excel in a non-filmly way, being filmed.

Dr. Dipsikha Bhagawati is a Teacher, Dept of English, Dawson Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, Nagaon, Assam. Based in Nagaon.