

The cyclical nature of patriarchy in *Qala*: An exploration of mother-daughter relationships

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Abstract: This research article delves into the intricate mother-daughter relationship depicted in the Netflix film *Qala* directed by Avnita Dutt, through the lens of Adrienne Rich's seminal work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Focusing on the characters Urmila and Qala Manjushree, the study explores the complex dynamics of their bond within a patriarchal context. By examining the psychological and emotional underpinnings of their relationship, the research highlights how cultural norms shape the experiences of motherhood and daughterhood. The analysis employs Adrienne Rich's and Andrea O'Reilly's feminist critique of motherhood and provides a framework for understanding how the film portrays the dual role of women as both enforcers and victims of patriarchal authority. The study reveals how the characters navigate their identities and relationships in a world dominated by paternal values, ultimately reflecting broader societal themes of power, control, and resistance within familial structures. This article aims to contribute to the discourse on gender, power, and familial relationships in contemporary cinema, offering insights into the nuanced portrayal of mother-daughter bonds in *Qala*.

Keywords: mother-daughter relationship, Adrienne Rich, motherhood, feminist theory, contemporary cinema, patriarchy

Introduction

In India and the world, gender norms and patriarchy have had a close relationship. Women's freedom and autonomy are frequently constrained since they were expected to conform to traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers. In the 1940s, India was deeply entrenched in patriarchal cultural and societal norms that reinforced

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gender roles, family structures, and social expectations. Men were regarded as the family leaders, primary earners, and decision-makers, whereas women were expected to be compliant, docile, and responsible for household tasks like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. (Davis 2012) Adriene Rich (1986) argues that motherhood, as an institution, is deeply embedded in patriarchal structures that seek to control and define women's roles. Society imposes strict norms and expectations on mothers, often limiting their freedom and autonomy.

Qala, a 2022 Indian psychological thriller directed by Anvita Dutt and produced by Anushka Sharma and Karnesh Sharma under Clean Slate Filmz, unfolds in 1940s India. Released on Netflix, the film revolves around Qala, a young woman grappling with past traumas that shape her present struggles. *Qala* is set in 1930s and 1940s India, exploring themes of gender, patriarchy, and mother-daughter relationships. The film follows Qala Manjushree, the only daughter of a musically inclined family, as she transforms from a timid girl to a celebrated singing sensation. However, when media inquiries trigger memories of her past, viewers witness Qala's struggle for approval and validation from her mother, Urmila, who embodies patriarchal values. Another pivotal character is Jagan Batwal, a talented singer and Qala's rival, whose presence intensifies her insecurities and desire for her mother's recognition. Through poignant flashbacks, the film delves into the complexities of female identity and agency within a patriarchal society, highlighting the enduring impacts of societal norms on individual lives. (Agarwal & Kumar 2023) Noteworthy for its exploration of trauma, mental health, patriarchy and motherhood, *Qala* delves into the harsh repercussions of patriarchal norms on women in 1940s India. (Kumar 2022) The film received generally positive reviews with 7.2 stars on IMDB rating for its compelling narrative and strong performances, particularly lauding its portrayal of psychological and emotional depth.

The film *Qala* depicts the ways in which patriarchal norms were reinforced in 1940s Indian society. For instance, in the movie, we see how the male characters hold power over the female characters and make important decisions on their behalf. The film also portrays the societal expectations placed on women, such as marriage and motherhood, which are seen as the ultimate goals in their lives. According to Rich (1986, 111), mothers do not establish rules; rather, they are responsible for enforcing them. She describes motherhood as a state of "powerless responsibility." Whether influenced by parenting

literature, medical guidance, or paternal regulations, mothers raise their children based on the prevailing societal norms and expectations. This is evident in Qala's mother, who pressures her to marry and conform to societal expectations. Additionally, we see how women are objectified and judged based on their physical appearance, as evidenced by the way her mother comments on Qala's beauty and criticises her for not being traditionally feminine. She rebukes Qala, "akal mein zero, shakal mein zero, talent mein zero." / "you have no brains, beauty or talent" (Dutt 2022, 18:115) Qala is left feeling utterly inadequate since she wants Urmila's approval more than anything else. (Vyavahare 2022)

The film *Qala* highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchy in 1940s India and how it shaped the lives of the female characters in the film. It demonstrates the ways in which gender roles, family structures, and social expectations were used to restrict women's autonomy and limit their opportunities, leading to a sense of helplessness and despair. By exploring these issues, the film offers a commentary on the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the need to challenge patriarchal norms in contemporary society as even in 2024 there is very little change in the social structure of our country.

Urmila's rejection of Qala in *Qala* serves as a stark illustration of society's entrenched norm of privileging sons as the sole bearers of family legacy. Throughout the film, Urmila's longing for a son is palpable, manifesting in her adoption of Jagan and her subsequent devastation upon his tragic death. These actions underscore Urmila's deep-seated desire for power and validation, which she perceives as contingent upon the presence of a male figure in her life. The loss of Jagan represents not only a personal tragedy but also a symbolic blow to Urmila's sense of identity and worth, as she grapples with the realization that her existence has been defined and justified by the presence of a male counterpart.

Urmila's narrative in *Qala* serves to challenge the societal glorification of men in women's lives, highlighting the detrimental consequences of perpetuating such patriarchal norms. Her belated recognition of her own folly comes at a heavy cost, as she finds herself estranged from her daughter, Qala. This poignant turn of events underscores the tragic consequences of prioritizing patriarchal ideals over the bonds of familial love and connection. Urmila's journey serves as a cautionary tale, prompting viewers to reflect on the ways in which gendered expectations can distort relationships and perpetuate cycles of oppression and alienation.

Qala's mother constantly reminds her that she is a woman and cannot have the prestigious title of *Pandit* (a wise or learned man in India —often used as an honorary title) in music, which reflects the internalized misogyny and patriarchal mindset that women can adopt, perpetuating the oppressive system. For example, even after an outstanding performance at the party she is not given a chance in the film industry. Mr Sumant Kumar who had visited her home later only offered Jagan to record with him after he recovers his voice. Here to take control of her future she mimics the tactics she had seen her mother adopt with Mr Sanyal and goes up to Mr Sumant in the night dressed like her mother and flirts with him. This in fact leads to Mr Sumant Kumar making her an offer to record for the film industry and later become her constant sexual predator. This unwitting perpetuation of oppressive norms by a maternal figure intensifies Qala's trauma, as her quest for self-expression clashes with ingrained expectations. Qala's mother instills guilt and fear in her, which becomes her entire world, causing her to act in extremes and leading to her distorted version of herself. The film depicts the male authority over art and how people show great importance to men over women, which contributes to the trauma experienced by Qala. At the end of the film, Qala dies by suicide, symbolizing the loss of women's battle against misogyny and the patriarchal system. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Qala commits suicide (Dutt 2022, 1:52:16)

In its portrayal of Urmila's plight as a mother, *Qala* offers a compelling critique of patriarchal structures and the ways in which they shape individual lives and relationships. Urmila's realization of her misplaced priorities serves as a powerful reminder of the need to

challenge and dismantle gendered hierarchies that privilege sons over daughters. Lauri Umansky's researched on identifying two opposing feminist perspectives on motherhood. The first, referred to as the "negative" discourse, views motherhood as "a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of woman's independence." (Umansky 1996, 2) This is the type of motherhood that we see in *Qala*, as when Urmila ultimately return to Qala to share the mother-daughter bond Qala always pined for, it was too late, Qala had already ended her life by then waiting for her mother to accept her and love her. The second, the "positive" discourse, suggests that "motherhood minus 'patriarchy' [...] holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood denies to women." (Ibid, 3) Ultimately, Urmila's story serves as a reminder of the importance of forging authentic connections based on mutual respect and love, rather than adherence to societal norms dictated by gender.

In essence, the film delicately illustrates how the actions of female characters, whether unintentional perpetuation of norms or acts of rebellion, become integral elements in Qala's traumatic narrative. The cumulative effect of these actions not only reinforces the oppressive environment but also intensifies Qala's internal struggle as she grapples with the conflicting influences of societal expectations and personal desires. By intricately weaving these elements into the narrative, *Qala* provides a compelling exploration of the ways in which women, as both victims and contributors to patriarchy, shape and amplify the trauma experienced by its central character.

A pivotal element that connects the personal dynamics within *Qala* and the broader societal critique is the exploration of gender bias in the film industry. Urmila's mistreatment of Qala and preferential treatment of Jagan highlights the importance of sons over daughters, reflecting deeply rooted patriarchal values. This bias is mirrored in the professional realm by figures like Sumant Kumar, the musical director, whose discriminatory attitudes towards female artists reinforce societal stigmas. Through these interconnected layers of family and industry, *Qala* vividly portrays the systemic challenges women face, illustrating how patriarchal structures pervade both personal and public spheres, thereby shaping and amplifying the trauma experienced by its central characters.

Women's position in the film industry

Qala's mother ill-treats her as a child and constantly reminds her that she is a woman and cannot have the prestigious title of Pandit. Her mother's unequal treatment of her and her adopted son Jagan plays a significant role in showcasing the importance of daughters in a household and the male authority over art. The instances of discrimination faced by Qala extend beyond familial dynamics to societal perceptions perpetuated by figures such as Sumant Kumar, the musical director. Kumar's admonition for Qala to avoid associating with singers like Bai ji, whom he deems inferior, reflects deeply ingrained gender biases and class distinctions prevalent in society. His remark reinforces perpetuating the stigmatization of female artists, "Acche ghar ke ladkiyon ko gaane bajane waliyon ke saath milna nahi chahiye" / "Females from a respectable household should not mingle with females who sing as a profession. (Dutt 2022, 1:34:32)

Amanda Weidman (2007) in her research provides a nuanced analysis of the stigma surrounding female playback singers and performers within the context of South Indian music and cinema. It delves into the intricacies of the constructed nature of the female voice, illustrating how societal norms and class distinctions shape perceptions of morality and respectability. The dichotomy between the "respectable middle-class" woman and the lower-class "prostitute" influences the way female voices are perceived, overshadowing the artistic accomplishments of certain women, such as *devadasis*, with the stigma of prostitution. *Qala*, being a movie set in the Indian context, explores themes related to the stigma associated with female voices and performers. The film delves into the complexities of societal expectations regarding female voices, particularly in the realm of music and cinema, and how these expectations shape the experiences and trajectories of female characters.

Furthermore, Weidman discusses the emergence of the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" voices, with classical singing being hailed as "natural" and film songs as "artificial," reflecting societal biases towards different genres. Critics use language with sexual connotations to describe film singers, contrasting them unfavorably with the perceived purity of classical singers, reinforcing the association between respectability and classical music. The advent of playback singing allowed female singers to navigate societal conventions, but it also raises questions about agency, as many singers refrained from speaking in public, linking agency more with the

speaking voice than singing. (Weidman 2007) For instance, the protagonist of *Qala* is a talented playback singer grappling with societal prejudices and stereotypes surrounding her voice. She also faced challenges related to the dichotomy between “natural” and “artificial” voices, with her talent being questioned or devalued due to the genre of music she performs or the roles she takes on in films.

Moreover, the film explores the intersectionality of gender, class, and respectability, depicting how the protagonist's social status and background impact the way her voice is perceived by society. Playback singing serves as a thematic element in *Qala*, highlighting the ways in which female performers navigate societal expectations and negotiate their agency within the constraints of the industry. The protagonist's struggles and triumphs in asserting her voice and however failing to ever reclaim her agency to serve as a central narrative arc, offering insights into the broader issues of gender inequality and representation in Indian cinema.

The character of Urmila in *Qala* serves as an embodiment of the complexities of patriarchy and its impact on women's agency and autonomy. Her journey from a talented *thumri* (the song having attractive - rather sensuous, gait of melody and rhythm) singer constrained by societal norms to a figure that enforces those same norms on her own daughter highlights the cyclical nature of patriarchal oppression. It is important to note here that the cultures of patriarchy are doubly marginalizing for women. In her 2020 research, Priyam Sinha (2020) establishes that women in the film industry, particularly in Bombay cinema during the 1930s-1950s, were subject to significant stigmatization. The industry viewed women's participation as a threat to morality, respectability, and femininity. Despite offering higher salaries, acting was considered “dangerous” for women due to the objectification of their bodies and the stigma associated with being labeled as entertainment for the masses. Cultured women, especially from upper-class backgrounds, were discouraged from joining the film industry due to societal perceptions of immorality and sexuality linked to acting.

The concept of “cultured women” had a significant impact on female actors in the Bombay cinema industry during the 1930s-1950s. The film industry viewed acting as a profession that conflicted with traditional notions of femininity, respectability, and morality. Women from upper-class backgrounds, considered “cultured,” were discouraged from joining the film industry due to societal perceptions

of immorality and objectification associated with acting. Despite offering higher salaries, acting was stigmatized as “dangerous” for women, leading to tensions and moral panic regarding female participation in the film business. The entry of women into filmmaking and the challenges they faced in navigating notions of stardom and cultural expectations have been subjects of scholarly attention within feminist film historiography.

The stigmatization of female artists in the film industry has been a persistent issue with long-term implications. Historically, from the 1930s to the 1950s in Bombay cinema, women were absent from the archives and rendered invisible within the film business due to changing urban landscapes and the emergence of talkies. The industry raised questions about female sexuality and respectability, primarily driven by a morality discourse closely associated with women acting in films. This led to tension, moral panic, and distress, creating a stigma around the film industry as a heterosexual and hybrid workspace that capitalized on voyeuristic pleasures by objectifying women’s bodies. (Sinha 2020)

In confronting these themes, the film prompts viewers to reflect on the ways in which patriarchy operates within familial and societal structures, and the urgent need to challenge and dismantle these power dynamics in order to create a more equitable and just society for all. In examining these scenes, it becomes evident that *Qala* masterfully captures the intricate web of female characters navigating a society steeped in patriarchy. The film refrains from presenting a simplistic dichotomy of victims and oppressors, opting instead for a more nuanced portrayal that acknowledges the multifaceted roles women play within a system that constrains their agency. This approach enhances the film’s thematic depth, inviting viewers to reflect on the complexities of patriarchy and its impact on individual choices and relationships.

“The power of the father”

Similarly, Urmila Devi’s persistent efforts to associate *Qala* with her father’s legacy, as depicted in the film, parallels Adrienne Rich’s concept of “the power of the father.” (Rich 1986, 57) This notion suggests that paternal influence extends beyond tangible actions to encompass language and cognitive processes, shaping societal standards and expectations for women. In *Qala*, Urmila’s attempts to align *Qala* with her father’s esteemed lineage exemplify this concept,

“Aaj pehli baar Dewan Manjushree ki beti ga rahi hai Ustad Ji” / “Today for the first time Devan Manjushree’s daughter is going to Ustad ji¹”. (Dutt 2022, 19:52) highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms in defining women’s roles and aspirations within the family structure. The universality of this idea is underscored by its abstract and intangible nature, as well as its manifestation across diverse cultural contexts. Indeed, the power of the father operates both metaphorically and tangibly, permeating every sphere of social life and exerting control over women’s actions and identities.

However, the complexity of “the power of the father” lies in its nuanced articulation within different cultural frameworks. While its overarching influence is undeniable, its expression may vary depending on cultural norms and values. Thus, while Urmila’s actions in *Qala* exemplify the manifestation of paternal authority within a specific context, the broader implications of Rich’s concept resonate across cultural boundaries, highlighting the enduring impact of patriarchal structures on women’s lives worldwide.

It is important to understand how the overarching influence of patriarchal authority intersects with the specific dynamics of motherhood. While “the power of the father” manifests differently across cultural contexts, the concept of patriarchal motherhood, as discussed by feminist scholars like Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick, underscores a universal theme: the regulation and scrutiny of mothers within a patriarchal framework.

Patriarchal motherhood versus mothering - contestations in *Qala*

Many women engage in motherhood within a patriarchal framework where they adhere to the ideology of what feminist writer Sharon Hays (1996) has coined “intensive mothering”. According to Adrienne Rich (1986, 111), women’s roles as mothers are shaped and regulated by the broader patriarchal society they inhabit; they do not create but rather enforce societal norms. Rich characterises motherhood as a state of “powerless responsibility,” where mothers raise their children in accordance with societal expectations, whether through parenting guides, medical advice, or paternal rules. Sara Ruddick describes how mothers are constantly scrutinised by others, including family members, and strangers, leading them to doubt their own judgement and conform to external standards. This external scrutiny can cause

¹ An expert or highly skilled person, especially a musician.

mothers to compromise their authenticity and undermine their own values (Rich 1986; Ruddick 1989). “Fear of the gaze of others,” she continues, “can be expressed intellectually as inauthenticity, a repudiation of one’s own perceptions and values” (Ruddick 1989, 112).

Through poignant flashbacks, *Qala* peels back the layers of Qala’s upbringing, revealing the roots of her mother Urmila’s discontent. Psychoanalysts, particularly since the twentieth century, have placed significant emphasis on the role of the mother in a child’s identity development (Rich 1986; Winnicott 1971; Kohut 1959; and others). Whether as the primary caregiver or through the lens of object relations theorists, the mother’s influence on a child’s formation and development is paramount. (Horney 1950; Erikson 1963) It is believed that from the outset, the mother intuitively understands the newborn’s needs due to her identification with the infant, thus anticipating and meeting their demands (Winnicott 1971). Winnicott (1971) delves into the complexities of this process, noting that the mother’s own experiences as a baby, and how she was cared for, can either aid or hinder her in her role as a mother. Rich, however, critiques the idealized image of the “selfless mother” and the cultural myths that perpetuate unrealistic standards for women. These myths often serve to oppress women by holding them to unattainable ideals. Motherhood, in Rich’s (1986, 3) words, “has a history, it has an ideology”.

In patriarchal motherhood, the assumption that mothering is inherent to women and that child rearing is exclusively the biological mother’s responsibility leads to what feminist writer Sharon Hays (1996) terms “intensive mothering.” Secondly, this practice assigns mothers the sole responsibility for motherwork but denies them the authority to dictate the circumstances under which they perform this role (O’Reilly 2012). Urmila in *Qala* defies this typical responsibility of “intensive mothering” by rejecting Qala as her beloved daughter from the start, consumed instead by grief over the death of her son, Qala’s twin brother. In Urmila’s perception, Qala is held responsible for the loss of her male child, leading her to resent and even attempt to harm Qala, as evidenced by her act of trying to strangle her with a pillow while she sleeps. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Urmila trying to strangle Qala (Dutt 2022, 00:07:41)

“Instead of acknowledging the institutional violence inherent in patriarchal motherhood, society tends to label women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological” (Rich 1986, 263). According to Emily Jeremiah (2003), the institution of motherhood, is “violently oppressive [. . .] and give[s] rise to violent behavior on the part of mothers.” And: “Motherhood without autonomy, without choice,” Rich (1986, 264) explains, “is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control”. The powerless responsibility of patriarchal motherhood discussed earlier is what gives rise to mothers’ suffering and often results in violence against children. Violence, whether it be manifested in child neglect and abuse, the murder of children or a mother’s suicide, is caused by the patriarchal institution of motherhood, not the demands of mothering per se. “We have, in our long history,” Rich continues, “accepted the stresses of the institution as if they were a law of nature” (Ibid, 276).

This poignant portrayal underscores the pervasive bias ingrained within Indian society, where the value of a female child is often eclipsed by patriarchal expectations and preferences. Within patriarchal societies, women grapple with an ongoing struggle for recognition and agency. In environments where rigid gender norms are deeply ingrained and male dominance is institutionalized, women often find themselves subjected to various forms of subjugation and discrimination. Sultana (2010) aptly highlights the myriad manifestations of this subjugation, including discrimination, disregard, control, exploitation, and violence, both within familial settings and broader societal contexts. In such oppressive landscapes, women are

forced to navigate complex power dynamics in their quest for visibility and autonomy. In *Qala*, this struggle is poignantly depicted through the lens of the titular character, who yearns for her mother's affection amidst Urmila's misplaced blame for the death of her twin brother. These heartbreaking dynamic underscores the profound impact of patriarchal conditioning, as Qala is forced to grapple with the consequences of societal expectations and familial resentments. As Urmila says, "Naam ke aage Pandit lagna chahiye, uske peeche Bai nahi" / "Your name should have the prefix of Pandit not the suffix of Bai" (Dutt 2022, 09:25).

Urmila emerges as a symbolic representation of patriarchal ideologies in *Qala*, perpetuating societal expectations and exhibiting sexist views towards women. Her preoccupation with societal norms and desire for conformity highlight her role as a guardian of traditional gender roles and expectations. This is evident in her derogatory reference to female singers in the music industry as 'bai,' a term historically associated with courtesans known for their singing talents. It is important to clarify that we do not endorse this pejorative view; rather, we acknowledge that it reflects deep-seated cultural prejudices. By expressing her preference for Qala to aspire to the prestigious title of 'pandit,' typically reserved for exceptional male singers, Urmila reinforces deeply entrenched gender biases and societal hierarchies. As highlighted by Rich (1986, 13), "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control".

The historical context of the term 'bai' adds layers to Urmila's stance, revealing her adherence to antiquated gender norms and the perpetuation of patriarchal power dynamics. By rejecting the notion of Qala pursuing a career as a female singer, Urmila exemplifies her misogynistic attitudes and the ways in which she wields patriarchal authority to enforce societal expectations. This stance is particularly striking given Urmila's own esteemed position as a renowned Hindustani classical singer, underscoring the complexities of gender and class intersectionality within society.

Through Urmila's character, *Qala* offers a searing critique of the intersectionality of gender and class, shedding light on how entrenched patriarchal ideologies manifest within familial dynamics and broader societal structures. Urmila's insistence on adhering to traditional

gender roles and her dismissal of Qala's aspirations reflect the broader societal pressures faced by women to conform to rigid expectations, "motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression" (O'Reilly 2012, 2) Additionally, her strict adherence to traditional gender roles and expectations leads to her inability to support her daughter in her time of need. When Qala recognises that she isn't alright and needs help she reaches out to her mother via a lightning trunk call, "Something is wrong with me mamma. I think I need help." (Dutt 2022, 01:14:56) However, Urmila Manjushree is too drowned in her sadness over the loss of Jagan Batwal that she fails to recognise the call for help from her own child. In doing so, the film prompts viewers to interrogate the ways in which patriarchal power operates within different spheres of society and the profound impact it has on individual agency and aspirations.

Urmila thinks that because Qala is a female she can never take forward her father's legacy and hence she keeps searching for a male heir to her husband's legacy and stardom. Even after Qala has actually achieved the heights in her career as a singer she is still pining for her mother's approval and validation. In the movie, in her press conference after receiving the Golden Vinyl Award, a journalist asks her how is she feeling after receiving the award to which she answers, "Ayesa lag raha hai jaise, thak ke ghar pahuchi hu aur maa ne darwaza khola hai." / "It feels as if I have reached home, tired, and mother has opened the door". (Dutt 2022: 03:34) Unfortunately, her mother does not open the doors of her heart to her until it's too late. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Qala during the press conference (Dutt 2022, 00:03:34)

Qala's journey in *Qala* is marked by relentless pressure to prove herself in the eyes of her mother, Urmila. Despite undergoing rigorous training, Qala finds herself constantly falling short of Urmila's expectations. The breaking point in their tumultuous relationship occurs when Urmila, instead of appreciating Qala's performance at a show, becomes enamored with a young boy named Jagan, who exhibits exceptional singing talent. Urmila's decision to adopt Jagan and prioritize his musical aspirations over Qala's marks a significant turning point, intensifying the divide between mother and daughter. Qala, once the focus of Urmila's ambitions, is relegated to a supporting role, tasked with assisting Jagan in his musical endeavors.

As Urmila goes to great lengths to further Jagan's career, including leveraging her connections in the film industry and even resorting to intimate relationships with music directors, Qala's sense of betrayal and abandonment deepens. The growing affection showered on Jagan exacerbates Qala's feelings of neglect, ultimately culminating in a desperate act of revenge. In a tragic turn of events, Qala poisons Jagan's milk with mercury, resulting in the loss of his voice and, ultimately, his suicide. This act of vengeance serves as a poignant manifestation of Qala's profound sense of isolation and betrayal, as she seeks retribution for the love and attention stolen from her by her own mother.

The tragic demise of Jagan and the subsequent estrangement between Urmila and Qala serve as the final blow to their fractured relationship. With nowhere else to turn, Qala is cast out of her home, left to navigate the harsh realities of the outside world alone. This heartbreaking conclusion underscores the devastating consequences of patriarchal pressures and the lengths to which individuals are willing to go in pursuit of validation and recognition.

Urmila willingly engages in an affair with Chandan Lal Sanyal to secure Jagan's entry into the film industry (Figure 4). In stark contrast, she refuses to allow Qala to sing even two lines in front of Mr. Sanyal (Figure 5). Additionally, she coerces Qala into meeting eligible bachelors to adhere to societal expectations of marriage, while she encourages Jagan to prioritize his career in the Kolkata Film Industry. This behavior underscores the deeply entrenched gender biases that favor male ambition over female talent and autonomy.



Figure 4. Urmila with Chandan Lal Sanyal (Dutt 2022, 00:42:04)



Figure 5. Urmila stops Qala from singing Dutt 2022, 00:39:13)

The film highlights the need to challenge patriarchal norms and expectations and to provide support and understanding for individuals impacted by these norms. The examination of trauma, and gender within the cinematic narrative contributes to an ongoing discourse, emphasising the need for a deeper understanding of these intricacies within the context of women's rights and societal progress.

Female characters in the film as both victims and enablers of patriarchy

In *Qala*, the nuanced portrayal of female characters as both victims and enablers of patriarchy adds layers to the exploration of gender dynamics in 1940s India. The film aptly captures the complex interplay of power,

societal expectations, and individual agency, presenting characters whose actions both reflect and resist the prevailing patriarchal norms.

One compelling example occurs in a pivotal scene where Qala, the lead character, interacts with her mother. Here, the mother, constrained by societal expectations and entrenched patriarchy, unwittingly becomes a perpetrator as she reinforces traditional gender roles. Despite experiencing the oppressive effects of patriarchy herself, the mother unintentionally perpetuates these norms by urging Qala to conform to societal expectations, emphasizing the importance of marriage and family reputation over personal well-being. Ruddick identifies this phenomenon as a relinquishment of maternal authority. Patriarchal motherhood is based on such relinquishment of maternal authority, resulting in a form of mothering that lacks authenticity.

On the evening when Urmila organized a party to introduce Jagan to the prominent figures of the film industry with the assistance of Mr. Sanyal, Qala requested permission from her mother to perform as well. In response, Urmila scoffed and chastised her for even considering performing in front of professionals from film industry, “Film industry walon ke samne pta hai kaisi ladkiya gaati hai.” / „Do you know what type of females sing in front of people from the film industry?” To which Qala acknowledges and asks her, “So the rules are different?” (Dutt 2022, 00:46:13) and Urmila just smiles in affirmation. (Figure 6) This observation in *Qala* resonates with Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal argument in *The Second Sex*, wherein she posits that males oppress women primarily by viewing them as the Other, defined solely in contrast to men. In patriarchal societies, men often perceive themselves as the standard against which women are judged, leading to the relegation of women to the status of the foreign or the Other. Consequently, men project themselves onto the external world and assert dominance, while women are confined to the narrow sphere of the family, expected to passively await male intervention. This dynamic perpetuates double standards of treatment for women within patriarchal setups, wherein they are subjected to unequal treatment and expectations dictated by societal norms and gender roles.



Figure 6. Urmila helping Qala get ready for the party (Dutt 2022, 00:46:13)

Adrienne Rich argues that women's mothering is entirely governed and judged by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. She asserts, "The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not 'reality' but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives." (Rich 1986, 42) The mother-daughter dynamic impacted the protagonist's sense of self, independence, and relationships with others. The movie explores themes of dependency, identity formation, and societal expectations within a patriarchal context, here the viewers witness how the protagonist's character evolves through her experiences with her mother. The influence of patriarchy on their relationship manifested in struggles for autonomy, emotional growth, and the perpetuation of certain female personality structures across generations.

Through the character of Urmila in *Qala*, the film offers a poignant portrayal of the complex dynamics of patriarchy, illustrating how women can simultaneously perpetuate and suffer under its authority. Drawing on the concept of the internalization of patriarchy by women, as discussed by Kandiyoti (1988) in the context of South Asia, Urmila exemplifies how individuals who experience subjugation and hardship may internalize patriarchal power structures, ultimately becoming agents of patriarchy themselves. In the film, Urmila's trajectory from a trained thumri singer to a dutiful wife who relinquishes her singing career upon marriage to a renowned pundit reflects the constraints imposed by societal norms on women of certain caste and class backgrounds. Despite her own experiences of marginalization and

restriction, Urmila becomes complicit in perpetuating patriarchal norms, exerting control and authority over younger women like Qala.

Urmila's decision to prioritize societal expectations over her own aspirations underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchy on women's lives and choices. By conforming to traditional gender roles and abandoning her singing career to fulfill her duties as a wife, Urmila exemplifies the internalization of patriarchal values and the ways in which women may inadvertently perpetuate these power structures. Her actions serve as a sobering reminder of the insidious nature of patriarchy, which not only marginalizes women but also fosters a system where women themselves become agents of oppression.

Conclusion

Despite the oppressive constraints of patriarchy, *Qala* introduces themes of resistance and empowerment. Female characters in the film challenge and resist patriarchal structures, showcasing a determination to overcome societal limitations. By focusing on the characters Urmila and Qala Manjushree, the film intricately explores the complex dynamics of their bond within a patriarchal context. This depiction sheds light on the cultural conventions that influenced women's lives, presenting a fresh and pertinent perspective.

Qala not only brings forth the historical context of 1940s India but also resonates with contemporary society, emphasizing the enduring relevance of its themes. The film's portrayal of Qala's traumatic experiences, rooted in the oppressive societal norms of the time, offers a universal commentary on the far-reaching consequences of patriarchy. Qala's internal struggle, portrayed with remarkable nuance, becomes a microcosm of the broader challenges women navigate both historically and in the present day.

The actions of the female antagonist, while seemingly betraying other women, provide evidence of the complex ways in which patriarchy shapes individuals. Her choices, driven by a need for survival within the patriarchal system, contribute to the layers of trauma experienced by Qala. This character serves as a microcosm of the broader societal impact on women, reinforcing the film's argument on the cyclical nature of trauma perpetuated by gendered oppression.

Qala emerges as a compelling narrative that intricately explores the complex dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship, delving into the profound impact of maternal influence on identity formation and emotional well-being. Through Qala's poignant journey, the film

confronts the enduring societal norms of patriarchy, gender bias, and the relentless pursuit of male validation, offering a nuanced commentary on the intersecting forces that shape women's lives in India. In the context of Hindi films, *Qala* provides an alternative portrayal of motherhood, challenging traditional depictions and illustrating the multifaceted nature of mothering. The film's representation of Qala's struggle against patriarchal expectations and Urmila's role as the upholder of the patriarchy and thereby struggling with her motherhood which is deeply informed by the patriarchal society offers a critical lens through which to view the evolving roles of mothers in Indian cinema, presenting motherhood as a site of both challenge and potential empowerment.

Adrienne Rich's seminal work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, provides a critical framework for understanding the film. Rich distinguishes between the concept of motherhood and the act of mothering, highlighting that motherhood is an institutionalized concept in a patriarchal world, representing a powerless responsibility within the realm of the father. The film's depiction of Urmila as a mother who embodies patriarchal ideals and her resentment towards Qala underscores the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations.

The film adeptly navigates themes of trauma, mental health, and the quest for acceptance within the context of familial and societal constraints, prompting viewers to reflect on the enduring struggles faced by women in their pursuit of autonomy and self-realization. Qala's yearning for her mother's love and approval underscores the profound emotional impact of maternal rejection, highlighting the psychological toll exacted by societal norms and gendered expectations. Ultimately, *Qala* serves as a powerful indictment of the pervasive influence of patriarchy on women's lives, urging us to confront the entrenched inequalities that continue to shape gender dynamics in contemporary society. Through its poignant storytelling and nuanced character portrayals, the film calls upon us to challenge prevailing norms and strive towards a more equitable and just world where the enduring impacts of patriarchy on mental and emotional well-being are acknowledged and addressed. As such, *Qala* stands as a testament to the resilience and strength of women who navigate the complexities of life amidst societal constraints, offering a compelling vision for a future defined by empathy, compassion, and equality.

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