

Visualizing the layers of psyche: Madness, abjection, and the crisis of self in *Qala*

Santanu Panda and Sri Krishan Rai*

Abstract: Chora, according to Julia Kristeva, is the pre-lingual stage of a child. It is a chaotic space of the psyche where the child fails to distinguish its subjective existence from its mother. In Anvita Dutt Guptani's 2022 movie *Qala*, the eponymous protagonist questions the very subjectivity of her own existence. Connecting Julia Kristeva's concepts of 'Chora' and 'abjection,' the paper aims to highlight how the identity of Qala remains enmeshed with her mother, owing to which she fails to untangle her own 'self' with that of the (m)Other. The leitmotif of flight, reiterated through various imageries of wings and butterflies, emphasizes Qala's innermost desire to break free. Pertaining to this, the paper accentuates Qala's constant endeavour to escape from incarceration at the cost of her inner destruction of self and the eventual catastrophe of her personal life. It showcases how Qala's concealed and repressed emotions are transformed into anxiety, leading to a tragic turn in the course of the story, captured through the dark visual artistry, the bleak colour palette, and the snowy setting of the movie reflecting the repressed layer of the human psyche, the 'Id,' the unconscious, accentuating the character's inner pessimism, abjection, hopelessness, disorientation, and anomic disconnection.

Keywords: Chora, abjection, identity, psyche, self, unconscious

Introduction

Cinema, as a narrative and visual medium, has consistently served as a powerful cultural text that reveals the communal concerns, ideologies, and psychological dynamics of a society. This medium uniquely externalises internal states, shaping and texturing the inexplicable complexity of human subjectivity. In the realm of Hindi cinema, typically marked by formulaic plots and emotional intensity, recent

* Santanu Panda; Sri Krishan Rai (✉)

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Durgapur, India

e-mail: sp.20hs1102@phd.nitdgp.ac.in (corresponding author)

years have seen a significant shift towards psychologically complex, aesthetically innovative, and socially relevant themes. The study of psychological and emotional intricacies has become a significant area of study in Indian cinema with its rapid and swift development, particularly in narratives that focus on the inner lives of women. The psychological cinematic representation *Qala* (2022) by Anvita Dutt is a good example of this shift in tone. It acts as a vital tool to examine mental illness, insanity, and the intricate connection between gender and identity artistically portrayed in this film. In the culturally and historically distinctive context of early twentieth-century Bengal, with characteristics like colonial modernism, patriarchal constraints, and changing aesthetic traditions, *Qala* creates a story that is as deeply personal as it is distinctly metaphorical.

Indian cinema has swiftly developed and evolved into a realm for the exploration of psychological and emotional complexities, especially in stories centred on women's internal experiences and inner selves. Anvita Dutt's psychological film *Qala* (2022) exemplifies this transformation effectively. It functions as a significant medium for analysing the cinematic portrayal of psychological trauma, madness, and the complex relationships among identity, gender, and artistic expression. Situated in the culturally and historically unique milieu of early twentieth-century Bengal, marked by colonial modernism, patriarchal limitations, and evolving aesthetic traditions, *Qala* constructs a tale that is both profoundly personal and notably allegorical. Qala Manjushree, a rising classical vocalist, is the subject of the movie. Her outstanding accomplishments are overshadowed by her mother's overwhelming influence, ghostly appearances, and an unsolved past. With its 1940s setting and contemporary themes, the film follows the protagonist Qala Manjushree as she spirals into mental illness, emphasising the psychological effects of society's gender norms, maternal neglect, and artistic ambition. *Qala* transcends a mere depiction of madness; it is a profound exploration of the broken, repressed, and eventually abjected feminine psyche within the symbolic order.

This study posits that *Qala* functions as a stratified cinematic narrative that depicts the disintegration of the ego through the motifs of abjection, psychosis, and melancholia. This study utilises psychoanalytic frameworks, particularly Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and symbolic order, and Michel Foucault's genealogical critique of madness, to

analyse the film as a significant medium for examining the formation and dissolution of feminine subjectivity. Research, including Bhaskar Sarkar's examination of melancholy and postcolonial affect, alongside Priya Jaikumar's investigation of spatial politics in Indian film, provides a basis for viewing *Qala* as a text deeply interwoven within emotional and psychological cartographies. However, *Qala* requires further examination due to its unique blend of visual brilliance and psychological depth. With fractured temporalities, elaborate interiors, and surreal visual features, *Qala* creates a vivid psychological landscape that is both beautiful and intimidating. In this world, the protagonist's mental troubles are physically and perceptually embodied. The home, the recording studio, and the theatre are walls separating truth from fantasy, memory from suppression, and social acceptability from abjection.

Urmila Manjushree is a demanding and frigid lady with a taut relationship with her daughter, whose refusal to show her daughter love causes her to battle with identity and self-worth all her life. A fragmented self that never fully integrates emerges as a result of this parental rejection, which makes a linear connection with the Kristevan concept of the abject, in which the subject is shaped by a fundamental expulsion of what is viewed as unclean or polluting. It is possible to read *Qala*'s hallucinations, auditory delusions, and self-destructive behaviours not only as signs of mental illness but also as the results of a subjectivity. It is constantly weakened by the pressure to conform to a patriarchal ideal of femininity that is selfless, competent, and submissive. The movie presents madness as a complex interaction of internal rebellion, familial abuse, and social conditioning, challenging oversimplified medical interpretations of the disorder. Furthermore, in addition to being stylistic elements, the film's aesthetics, picturised with a sepia-toned palette, recurring mirror images, discordant soundscapes, and purposeful lighting, are crucial to its psychological plot. Mirrors function as metaphors for self-monitoring and detachment, reflecting us with the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, when the subject's identity is constructed through a deceptive appearance of completeness. *Qala*'s recurrent confrontations with her mirror image indicate an ongoing inability to integrate the disparate facets of her identity. Her craft serves as a double-edged sword: a vehicle for expression and affirmation, yet simultaneously a battleground for incessant comparison, guilt, and the obliteration of authenticity under patriarchal scrutiny.

Since the 1840s, when women protested for suffrage, the discourse on patriarchy and women's rights has significantly evolved. Literature illustrates the evolution of feminist ideology and activity across time, expanding its breadth and making substantial contributions to the theorisation and implementation of feminist politics (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006, 112). This study situates *Qala* within a theoretical framework encompassing psychoanalysis, feminist film theory, and affect studies, examining how the film portrays crazy not as an exception, but as a consequence of social violence and internalised misogyny. The film's visual and narrative structure facilitates a continuous exploration of the feminine crisis of identity in a society that simultaneously expects and penalises female ambition. It also aims to illustrate how *Qala* examines the psycho-political conditions of women in contemporary India, providing a visceral and poetic depiction of the duality of both being seen and invisible, audible and muted, acknowledged and obliterated. It contributes to the discussions regarding the cinematic portrayal of mental health, gendered trauma, and the aesthetics of psychological interiority and establishes *Qala* as both a film deserving of critical analysis and a cultural artefact that addresses persistent enquiries regarding identity, power, and the repercussions of womanhood in a society designed to silence her voice.

Madness as inheritance and infection

Madness is not defined as a distinct psychological phenomenon or a medically identifiable disorder. It manifests as a transgenerational malady, an inheritance shaped by emotional neglect, familial quiet, and cultural suppression. The film offers a gendered depiction of mental disintegration, in which lunacy is both inherited and contagious, transmitted through maternal connections and internalised within patriarchal societal institutions. *Qala*'s psychological crises should be perceived not alone as an individual disorder, but as a manifestation of profound systemic violence that compels women to endure silently, the burden of unrecognised trauma and unattained aspirations. The concept of lunacy as a hereditary trait is presented early in the film via the tumultuous relationship between *Qala* and her mother, Urmila. From the beginning, *Qala* is portrayed as a replacement for a deceased male heir, her twin brother, who perished at birth, thus characterising her existence as an error, a tangible reminder of failure and disillusionment. Urmila's emotional detachment from *Qala* serves not just as parental neglect but also as a symbolic act of abjection in the

Kristevan context: a repudiation of elements that jeopardise the integrity of the self or the social structure (Kristeva 1982, 4). The film portrays enduring loss and unresolved relationships. The figure Urmila illustrates how women can simultaneously embody both the bearers and victims of patriarchal rule (Hazarika and Dowerah 2023, 706). Qala's early years, characterised by her quest for her mother's love and validation, are defined by a constant feeling of inadequacy and alienation. This emotional inadequacy is not coincidental but structurally ingrained, transmitted from mother to daughter as a form of mental heredity that predetermines Qala's psychological breakdown.

The anguish of maternal rejection is exacerbated by the haunting presence of the departed twin brother. Although never visible, his absence serves as a pervasive spectre throughout the narrative. Qala develops a deeply internalised sense of her own inadequacy as a result of her survivor's guilt, which is made worse by her mother's overt favouritism towards the departed son. This idea has significant psychodynamic implications since it describes Qala as a person who has been moulded by rejection, loss, and insufficiency. These ongoing contrasts between self and other, life and death, and sanity and insanity are no longer viable in the psychological reality depicted by her hallucinations of her brother and the feelings of contamination that follow. Because of her instability, she is vulnerable to psychological infection, which in the context of the movie refers to the spread of insanity by environmental and interpersonal stimuli as opposed to biological illness.

Qala's breakdown is sparked by Jagan, Urmila's male protege, whom she values more than her daughter with her unrequited love. His gift, validation, and symbolic proximity to mother love intensify Qala's underlying anxieties and lead to her eventual betrayal. The unrequited love from her biological mother leads her to the destruction of Jagan's career, which is more than just a plot device; it is a psychological split where Qala tries to establish control inside a system that consistently rejects her individuality. Qala's psychological collapse is made worse by Jagan's subsequent suicide and the guilt that follows. This series of events suggests that being crazy is a developing condition that is aggravated by guilt and impacted by interpersonal aggressiveness rather than a set state. The film aesthetically promotes the depiction of madness as contagion through its visual and audio elements. The extensive utilisation of mirrors, warped soundtracks, and

chiaroscuro lighting creates a psychological environment that externalises Qala's internal conflict. These aesthetic selections serve not merely as stylistic enhancements but as symbolic expressions of a fragmented psyche. The mirror functions as a Lacanian apparatus, invoking the "mirror stage" in which the subject misidentifies itself through an illusory appearance of completeness (Lacan 2006, 77). Qala's recurrent encounters with her reflection highlight the discord between her internal identity and the persona she feels obligated to present, a persona perpetually scrutinised by society and familial standards.

Furthermore, Qala's perception of insanity is inextricably linked to the societal milieu in which she resides. As a female musician operating within a male-dominated musical environment, her success is invariably dependent on her readiness to adhere to patriarchal norms. Her talent is examined, her ethics challenged, and her psychological stability exploited. In this context, Qala's psychological decline might be seen through the framework of feminist cinema theory as a reaction to a cultural system that paradoxically mandates female greatness and penalises female ambition. The historical categorisation of "female hysteria," according to Elaine Showalter (1985), has served as a tool of control, pathologizing women's emotional expression and resistance. Qala is a prime example of this paradigm, when the people around her, including her mother, make her suffering unfathomable until it leads to her total breakdown. Both a genetic trauma and an emotional contagion are how madness functions in *Qala*. Maternal repression, systemic misogyny, and a visual language that blurs the line between truth and illusion are the ways in which it is communicated. The movie acts as a challenging agent to patriarchal structures by presenting insanity as a sociopsychic state that creates and pathologizes female subjectivity rather than as a medical condition. In this attempt, *Qala* challenges popular notions of sanity, guilt, and creative liberty in addition to illuminating the psychological costs of womanhood in a gender-hierarchical society. In this viewpoint, madness is a distorted reflection of a culture that does not view women as whole persons, but rather as the result of subjectivity.

Abjection and the female body

In *Qala* (2022), the female body emerges as a pivotal locus of conflict, scrutiny, and symbolic violence. This body, depicted as both beautiful and monstrous, is presented not only as a medium for performance and

beauty but also as the centre of repression, contamination, and pain. By consistently emphasising hunger, reproduction, physiological vulnerability, and artistic rigour, *Qala* creates a visual and narrative landscape where the female body is characterised by abjection. Utilising Julia Kristeva's (1982, 4) concept of the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order", this section contends that the film positions the female body as both the subject and object of abjection, simultaneously marginalised and intertwined with social and symbolic frameworks. Kristeva characterises abjection as the mechanism via which the subject delineates its identity by expelling that which it perceives as impure, menacing, or alien. The abject is neither entirely an object nor a subject, but rather something that disrupts boundaries, particularly those pertaining to the body. In *Qala*, the female body, especially that of the protagonist, is continually marked with abject significations. In the initial scenes, Qala's physique is depicted in various stages of physical and emotional fatigue: stooped, quaking, feverish, or staring into mirrors with profound detachment. The process by which Qala isolates herself from her own body—a body that is constantly politicised, assessed, and controlled by parental, institutional, and patriarchal power—is depicted by these bodily representations, and they are not incidental.

An important axis for the operation of abjection is the mother-daughter bond. The mother of Qala, Urmila, forces her daughter to be both morally upright and exceptionally talented. She does, however, simultaneously deny Qala's maternal affection, which may lessen such expectations. Qala's body is abject as a result of her parents' rejection; rather than being loved and cared for, she is watched over and ignored. In one of the most emotionally charged scenes in the movie, Qala scrapes at her own neck and chest while having hallucinations of contamination and decay, which makes the figurative violence of this connection real. This act of self-harm represents not only a breakdown but also an interaction with the vile: the body as excess, as guilt, as trash.

In the film, food and hunger serve as symbols for deprivation and dominance, reflecting established feminist critiques of the female body concerning desire and societal compliance. In many scenes, Qala's rejection or incapacity to consume food signifies her body as one deprived of sustenance, both literal and symbolic. Her fragility serves as a visual symbol of internalised self-neglect. Susan Bordo (1993) contends in *Unbearable Weight* that the regulation of the female body,

especially via hunger, is a sort of gendered abjection, in which women are conditioned to control and reduce their physical presence. Qala's waning physique, seldom depicted in whole vigour, serves as a poignant emblem of the cultural expectation for women to be little, subdued, and self-effacing. Furthermore, the cinematic setting of *Qala* emphasises bodily abjection through *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. The confined rooms, deteriorating textures, and diffused light collectively create a sensory ambiance of deterioration and suppression. Mirrors provide a crucial function; they do not validate identity but instead reveal fragmentation. Qala's recurrent confrontations with her reflection evoke discomfort, indicating that the visage she perceives has become unrecognisable. These reflective gazes are not narcissistic but abject; they challenge the observer with the tenuous boundaries of the self and the pervasive presence of guilt, failure, and impurity. Her breakdown is both physical and psychological, with the body being rejected as a solid, cohesive means of expressing who she is. Motherhood and reproduction themes further complicate the film's depiction of the female form. Urmila's contempt for Qala stems from her birth, a failed reproductive occurrence in which the 'incorrect' child endured. Because of this origin, Qala internalises the idea that she is a biological anomaly and a stain on her mother's family tree. The womb, which is typically associated with creation and continuity, becomes a site of mourning and rejection in *Qala*. This reversal emphasises Kristeva's claim that abjection is linked to maternal beginnings, that the mother's body is the first place of abjection, and that the main obstacle the subject must overcome in order to separate. Qala, however, never achieves this status. Her subjectivity is inextricably linked to a harsh, unforgiving, and cold mother's viewpoint. Despite appearing to be a space for artistic expression, the musical theatre is also another setting for physical exposure and discipline. Qala's performances are distinguished by a terrifying vulnerability rather than freedom, as if she sings not from desire but from an obligation to validate her worth. Her voice, paradoxically her greatest strength, serves as both a symbol of autonomy and a reminder of physical vulnerability. She becomes consumed not by the elation of music but by the apprehension of inadequacy. The act of singing, reliant on breath, posture, and physical control, transforms into a ritual that necessitates the repression of emotion and the restraint of the body. *Qala* develops a nuanced cinematic narrative on the female body as a locus of abjection. The

film illustrates the formation and deformation of the female subject through motifs of starvation, illness, self-harm, and maternal rejection, highlighting processes of expulsion, surveillance, and internalisation. The body is not only represented but also interrogated, as both a canvas of expression and a vessel of suffering. The video critiques the gendered circumstances that push women to construct identity while rejecting their physicality by placing the female body under the psychoanalytic concept of abjection. Thus, *Qala* contributes to a wider feminist cinematic tradition that examines the policing, pathologization, and eventual abjection of the female body within patriarchal culture. In a milieu of toxic masculinity, Qala utilized her physique as a strategic asset to further her career upon identifying the objectification of women's bodies inside the profession.

Crisis of self and the split

This film presents a frightening and psychologically intricate narrative focused on the fracture of the female identity. Since the nineteenth century, psychoanalysts have concentrated on a child's identity development in connection with their mother (Kohut 1959, 470). The film basically depicts a protagonist whose subjectivity is not only damaged or unstable, but inherently divided, a character ensnared in the conflict between symbolic constraints and individual desire, between public facade and private suffering. The character of Qala Manjushree in the film illustrates the psychological state of the divided subject, a notion most well expressed in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan's conception of the subject as intrinsically divided among the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders provides a robust framework for analysing Qala's identity crisis, in which the self manifests as a battleground of contradiction, suppression, and internal discord. The crisis of self in the film transcends a mere psychological or personal dilemma; it is profoundly socio-cultural, entrenched in gendered expectations, parental traumas, and aesthetic pressures imposed on the female artist.

Lacan posits that the subject emerges through a primary alienation during the mirror stage, when the child first recognises itself in its reflected image. This image creates an illusion of coherence, unity, and self-mastery; nonetheless, it is fundamentally an external fabrication, a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The true subject is irrevocably divided between the perceivable 'I' and the disjointed urges and desires that elude complete symbolisation. In *Qala*, this Lacanian

misrecognition is depicted both visually and narratively through the persistent utilisation of mirrors and mirrored surfaces. Qala's recurrent, distressing interactions with her reflection imply not narcissistic introspection, but a disconnection from a self-image she cannot validate. The mirror in *Qala* does not validate identity; it subverts it. The woman observing her reflection in the mirror is not identical to the one depicted therein. She constantly conforms to others' expectations and never attains the status of a stable, self-possessed individual. This instability is mostly influenced by Qala's tumultuous relationship with her mother, Urmila. Urmila serves as the principal authority in Qala's life, embodying the role of the Symbolic Lawgiver who enforces the Name-of-the-Father, which represents the socio-symbolic order that establishes meaning, value, and validity. In a significant reversal, the father is absent in *Qala*, and it is the mother who imposes the law, making the maternal perspective a source of deep anguish. Urmila's aloofness, her favouritism towards the deceased male twin, and her commitment to a male protégé (Jagan) effectively marginalise Qala from parental love and symbolic validation. She holds Qala responsible for the death of her male child and is depicted attempting to suffocate Qala with a pillow while she sleeps (Figure 1). She (Qala) is consequently deprived of both affection and acknowledgement. The parental gaze serves as a tool of symbolic castration, incessantly reminding Qala of her inadequacy, unworthiness, and undesirability.



Figure 1. Urmila thinking of strangulating *Qala* (Dutt 00:07:41)

Qala's self-perception is thereby divided between two contradictory extremes: the aspiration to meet the maternal expectation and embody the quintessential daughter-artist, and the enduring feeling of intrinsic inadequacy. This mental division creates a framework of internalised monitoring and retribution, in which Qala emerges as her own most severe evaluator. She is not simply existing under her mother's scrutiny; she has assimilated it, directing it inside as a mechanism of self-regulation. Sandra Lee Bartky (1990, 47) contends in her feminist critique of Foucault that contemporary disciplinary power functions not via explicit coercion but through the internalisation of normative perspectives. Qala displays this dynamic by self-monitoring, suppressing her emotions, and regulating her physicality to adhere to idealised standards of femininity and creative competence. The outcome is a self that is perpetually performing, consistently fragmented, and never complete.

The portrayal of the female artist in *Qala* is notably significant. Instead of providing a platform for self-expression, music transforms into a locus of significant estrangement. Qala's vocal performances are stringently governed by the expectations of her mother, her instructors, and her audience. Her mother always considers her not a true representative of their Thumri Gharana (a vocal genre of Indian music) Thumri Gharana .. Despite the acclaim for her voice, her individuality is disregarded. Her performances focus more on demonstrating her value, affirming her existence, and mitigating her insecurities than on creative freedom. Thus, art in *Qala* serves a disciplinary rather than a therapeutic function. It serves as a mechanism by which the patriarchal-symbolic order perpetuates its control over the feminine body and psyche. The stage, rather than a refuge, transforms into a prison, wherein Qala's voice, ironically her most valued asset, serves as the channel through which her internal discord is rendered loud.

This psychic rupture is intensified by the emergence of hallucinations and auditory delusions, indicating the resurgence of the Real, Lacan's notion of that which exists beyond symbolisation and defies assimilation into the symbolic order. Qala's images of her deceased brother and the voice of the late Jagan epitomise the painful aspects of her psyche that remain irrepressible. They are symptomatic manifestations, irreconcilable remnants that resurface to torment the individual. These times are not simply indicators of mental illness but also metaphors for psychological breakdown, when the Real outweighs the ego's symbolic defenses. In *Qala*, just like the Lacanian stages,

‘Real’ is represented by nightmares, hallucinations, and breakdowns that expose the self’s vulnerability. In Lacanian terms, the Real is the subject’s reality’s border. Furthermore, a precise cinematic language that highlights Qala’s interior collapse is used to represent her fall into psychological agony. In order to visually portray her fractured psyche, the *mise-en-scène* frequently makes use of chiaroscuro lighting, dark interiors, and isolating situations. The theme of confinement and division is reflected in the use of narrow hallways, shuttered doors, and partitioned frames. Cinematic elements like the ghostly whisper of Jagan’s voice, twisted echoes, and shattered noises all help to depict Qala’s subjectivity as unstable and fractured. These aesthetic decisions do not merely embellish the narrative; they shape the protagonist’s psychological landscape, reflecting her dilemma through formal components.

Like a typical profoundly patriarchal cultural environment, Qala’s identity is further undermined by her status as a woman. She must navigate a delicate equilibrium between ambition and humility, visibility and integrity, inventiveness and compliance. These paradoxes reflect what Luce Irigaray (1985, 76) describes as the “mimicry” necessary for women to endure inside phallogocentric systems, embracing roles and aspirations not of their own creation. Qala’s persistent inability to successfully assume these roles designates her as an individual whose identity has been colonised by conflicting narratives. She cannot be the quintessential daughter, the flawless artist, or the selfless woman without repudiating the tumultuous, unresolved aspects of her identity. Her subjectivity is hence never complete but perpetually negotiated, divided, and postponed. *Qala* presents a profound and disquieting reflection on the dilemma of identity in modern femininity. The film intricately weaves together psychoanalytic frameworks, feminist analysis, and visual artistry to create a female subject whose existence is divided between memory and performance, desire and suppression, self and other. The character of Qala transcends the mere portrayal of a lady succumbing to madness; she epitomises the contemporary fragmented subject, an entity shaped by loss, deficiency, and need. Her tragedy lies not in her inability to be complete but in the fact that the surrounding institutions never permitted her to be fractured without repercussions. Qala’s voice, simultaneously her redemption and her downfall, resonates as the reflection of a personality that remains perpetually elusive, not to others, and perhaps not even to herself.

Cinematic form and psychological depth

The film's examination of trauma, remorse, ambition, and identity is intrinsically linked to its formal techniques; it is through cinematic language that Qala's shattered mind becomes comprehensible to the audience. This section analyses how the formal components of Qala, its cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, sound design, and temporal structure, function to externalise internal states, creating a visual and auditory lexicon of mental disintegration. A notable aspect of *Qala*'s formal construction is its employment of *mise-en-scène* to convey psychological ambiance. The film often situates Qala in constricted interiors, elaborate yet poorly illuminated apartments, small hallways, and oppressive performing venues that reflect her internal entrapment. The set design highlights deterioration and desaturation: worn wallpapers, frost-covered windows, and vintage furnishings conjure a realm that is both historically remote and emotionally immobile. These physical arrangements serve as metaphorical vessels for repression, reflecting Gaston Bachelard's (1994, 8) notion of "psychic topography," in which the house symbolises a representation of the self. Qala's physical surroundings express her psychic confinement, placing her trauma into palpable, repressive environments.

Qala utilises a highly stylised visual approach characterised by symmetrical compositions, subdued colour palettes, and shallow depth of field. Photographic Director Using close-ups and mirror reflections, Siddharth Diwan creates a visual contrast between identity and alienation while regularly separating Qala from other people. These methods emphasise how Qala's subjectivity is fragmented: she is frequently portrayed as a lone figure, her image broken by windows, mirrors, and the interaction of shadows. Her shattered mental state is formally reflected in this visual fragmentation, which reveals a confused, troubled, and limitless mind. The movie's psychological depiction depends heavily on the time framework. Memory, hallucinations, and present-tense situations are all interwoven with minimal distinction as the story progresses in a nonlinear manner. The viewer's understanding of chronology is compromised by this contrast between temporalities, which also reflects Qala's personal confusion between the past and present. Her terrible memories—particularly those involving her mother and Jagan—appear as persistent repetitions that thwart narrative conclusion rather than flashbacks. The idea of "repetition compulsion," which refers to the unintentional reliving of

painful experiences rather than their recall, is invoked by these repetitions (Freud 1961, 18). Qala's temporality is essentially psychoanalytic, emphasising recurrence and loss over continuity and progress. Sound design amplifies the psychological depth of the film. Qala's interior landscape is influenced equally by her auditory and visual perceptions. The picture integrates auditory hallucinations, reverberations of Jagan's voice, murmured allegations, and the pervasive drone of anxiety as expressive elements of her psychological decline. These auditory aspects blur the distinctions between internal and external reality, involving the listener in her spiral into paranoia and remorse. The film's integration of diegetic and non-diegetic sound creates ambiguity, complicating the differentiation between reality and hallucination, thus intensifying the emotional instability central to Qala's subjectivity.

Significantly, *Qala* avoids simplistic psychological or medical pathologization of its protagonist. The video immerses the viewer in the subjective experience of psychological disintegration rather than providing a diagnostic depiction of mental disease. This formal immersion compels the audience to experience Qala's bewilderment rather than only witness it from a detached perspective. The picture conforms to Laura Mulvey's (2006, 144) concept of a feminist "cinema of delay", in which narrative advancement is secondary to emotion, fragmentation, and reflection. By halting narrative progression and highlighting visual structure, *Qala* compels spectators to confront the nonlinear, emotionally charged essence of psychological trauma, particularly as it pertains to women subjected to familial, artistic, and societal limitations. The film's climactic scenes, especially those featuring hallucination and self-harm, illustrate the integration of several formal techniques. In a particular moment, *Qala*, clad in an elaborate costume and enveloped in icy blue illumination, plays before an audience that swiftly dissolves into obscurity. Her voice distorts, the camera rotates erratically, and the walls start to constrict. This moment, orchestrated through illumination, auditory elements, and camera dynamics, exemplifies the disintegration of psychic containment. The body ceases to maintain coherence; the film's structure disintegrates, enabling the audience to perceive the protagonist's visceral dread and helplessness. The psychological complexity of *Qala* is inextricably linked to its cinematic structure. The film creates an immersive depiction of inner life characterised by pain, repression, and longing through its careful use of visual

aesthetics, spatial design, temporal fragmentation, and audio layering. *Qala* transcends mere representation of madness, embodying it and transforming cinema into a medium that renders the invisible wounds of the psyche both comprehensible and tangible. Anvita Dutt's film contributes to the growing field of feminist psychology film by using formalism as a radical tool for introspective analysis rather than just as adornment.

Conclusion

Qala, a multi-layered and intricate film by Anvita Dutt, examines how pain, desire, repression, and performance are all intertwined with feminine identity. The psychological and artistic components of *Qala*, according to this study, offer a meaningful investigation of the gendered experience of madness and rejection. The film portrays madness as a collective result of intergenerational abuse, mother rejection, and the internalisation of patriarchal norms, rather than a singular psychological disorder. It is both hereditary and transmissible, conveyed through silence, creative heritage, and the corporeal form. The female body, pivotal to this story, manifests as a contentious and precarious locus of significance: a locus of creation and corruption, allure and deterioration. This study illustrates, through Kristeva's theory of abjection and feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, how *Qala*'s embodiment signifies a broader cultural fear over female agency, creativity, and desire. The maternal link, rather than being caring, is shown as a source of discipline and alienation, wherein the daughter serves as both the target of rejection and the embodiment of the mother's unfulfilled ambitions. The unfulfilled "oldest love story" between a mother and child shapes the existence and psyche of *Qala* (Bhattacharya 2006, 12). Furthermore, the film's formal techniques, its non-linear temporality, immersive *mise-en-scène*, and complex sound design are not only artistic embellishments but vital to its psychological authenticity. The interior world of *Qala* is not explicitly articulated but is instead portrayed cinematically, enabling spectators to perceive her disintegration through sensory and emotional dimensions. This aesthetic approach disrupts traditional distinctions between the internal and external, the actual and the imagined, and situates the viewer into the protagonist's fragmented consciousness. Ultimately, *Qala* transcends being merely a film about craziness; it interrogates the production, representation, and comprehension of madness within a gendered cultural context. It rejects pathologization and instead

embraces a poetic and political expression of sorrow, remorse, and yearning. In this manner, it enhances a feminist cinematic heritage that aims to both depict the psyche and confront the fundamental institutions that disrupt it. This analysis of *Qala*, utilising psychoanalytic, feminist, and cinematic frameworks, elucidates how the film challenges and reinterprets the narrative of the ‘crazy woman.’ It necessitates a re-evaluation of lunacy, perceiving it not as a deficiency of reason or character, but as a mode of expression, a dialect of the marginalised, the rejected, and the voiceless. *Qala*’s evocative melodies and fractured silences beckon us to listen.

References:

- Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Hazarika, Kanki, and Swikrita Dowerah. 2023. Rethinking Gender Discrimination in Modern India: Reading *Qala* from a Feminist Perspective. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23 (2): 704–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2186821>.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Krolokke, Charlotte, and Anne Scott Sorensen. 2006. *Gender Communication Theories & Analyses: From Silence to Performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233086>.
- Lacan, Jacques. 2006. “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 75-81. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Malinowska, Ania. 2020. “Waves of Feminism.” *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, pp. 1–7. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc096>.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2009. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 14-26. 2nd edition., New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Qala*. 2022. Directed by Anvita Dutt Guptan. Clean Slate Filmz. Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81423081>.
- Rampton, Martha. 2015. *Four Waves of Feminism*. Forest Grove, OR: Pacific University.