

# Ambition, Alienation and Atonement: Unraveling the Mother-Daughter Conflict in Anvita Dutt's *Qala* (2022)

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## ABSTRACT

Written and directed by Anvita Dutt, *Qala* (Transl. Art) is a 2022 Indian Hindi-language fictitious period psychological drama film released in Netflix. In *Qala*, the mother-daughter relationship takes centre stage, highlighting the destructive effects of ambition and emotional alienation. This paper examines the complex dynamic between Qala, an aspiring singer, and her widowed mother, Urmila, a strict and controlling figure whose high expectations leave Qala in a constant struggle for validation. The film explores how Urmila's conditional love, driven by her own unfulfilled desires, creates a deep emotional rift between them. Favoursing a surrogate son, Jagan, Urmila's rejection of Qala fosters intense feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and isolation, leading to a psychological unraveling in her daughter. The themes of ambition, gender roles, and parental influence are explored through a cinematic lens, where the weight of societal expectations adds further tension to an already fragile bond. By analyzing key scenes, symbolic elements, and the psychological impact of parental pressure, this paper reveals how *Qala* offers a nuanced portrayal of generational trauma, where love is eclipsed by control, and approval is conditioned on success. This paper also uses Nancy Chodorow's theory of the reproduction of mothering to analyze the complex mother-daughter relationship and the emotional consequences of toxic parenting and the long-lasting scars it leaves on the mental and physical health of both individuals and their relationships.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mother-daughter relationships, are often imagined as a bond filled with warmth, affection, and nurturing—a relationship built on love and support. However, in a patriarchal society, this bond can become especially complex, shaped by societal expectations, gender roles, and generational pressures. It can be marked by emotional power struggles, unspoken resentments, and the weight of cultural norms, revealing a dynamic that is both deeply loving and profoundly complicated. In Indian cinema, the complexities of mother-daughter relationships have rarely been explored. Renowned writer and director, Rituporno Ghosh, in his films *Unishe April* and *Titli*, offered poignant portrayals of the emotional and psychological intricacies within this relationship. In *Qala* (2021), Anvita Dutt followed Ghosh's footprints and delved into this dynamic presenting a hauntingly complicated mother-daughter relationship marked by emotional power struggles, unspoken resentments, and the

crushing weight of societal and personal expectations. However Dutt's work tends to focus on symbolic representations, while Ghosh is more grounded in emotional realism with a focus on character development.

Set in the 1930s and 40s, the film narrates the tumultuous story of a renowned singer named Qala (played by Tripti Dimri) and her mother, Urmila (played by Swastika Mukherjee). In this film, the mother-daughter relationship is marked by emotional distance, rejection, and the relentless pressure of unmet expectations. Instead of providing comfort and security, the mother becomes a source of psychological anguish for her daughter, challenging the conventional image of maternal love and revealing the darker, more complex sides of such relationships. The film seamlessly weaves together past and present, creating a narrative that shifts between different moments in time. This dual timeline allows the audience to uncover the emotional layers of the story, as the events of the past gradually reveal the deep-

rooted tensions that shape the present. Through this structure, *Qala* intricately explores the psychological complexities of its characters, highlighting how unresolved trauma and buried emotions resurface over time. At the beginning of the film when Urmila eagerly waits to hold her newborn twins, the doctor hands her the baby girl and informs that her son died in utero. The doctor also explains that in the womb when one baby is stronger than the other, it sucks the food of the other (Dutt, 2022, 6:14). Urmila's hatred for her daughter, Qala, starts from that very moment and she even tries to suffocate her daughter by pressing a pillow against her face. From her childhood, Qala is given rigorous musical training under the strict supervision of her mother. Qala's musical training is deeply tied to her family tradition, as her late father was a renowned singer. Urmila's strict guidance reflects a desire to preserve and continue this legacy but she also warns Qala not to be a courtesan. In one scene she says, "Your name should have Pandit before it. And not Bai after it" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 09:26-09:32). Qala always looks up to her mother and tries her best to earn the validation of her mother but it is vain. The goal of her life is to make her mother proud though Urmila hardly shows any affection to Qala. Even in the present day when Qala is a famous singer in Kolkata and wins the prestigious "Golden Vinyl", she only thinks about her mother. Whatever she does, she does it for her mother. Unfortunately amidst all these achievements and success, Qala is haunted by a dark past. She keeps seeing the vision of Jagan (played by Babil Khan), her mother's surrogate son, whom Qala sabotaged by putting mercury in his milk to cause him to lose his voice out of jealousy. The visions of Jagan, combined with her mother's careless attitude toward her, have a profound impact on Qala's deteriorating physical and mental health. Jagan's haunting presence embodies Qala's guilt and self-loathing, as he repeatedly accuses her of usurping what he believes is rightfully his. These intrusive visions contribute to her growing anxiety and emotional instability, leading to a decline in her mental well-being. Qala continues to seek her mother's help, viewing it as her last hope but Urmila neither talks to Qala over phone nor meets her. Her mother's indifference worsens Qala's feelings of isolation and inadequacy. This toxic combination of guilt and neglect manifests in Qala's physical symptoms illustrating how deeply intertwined emotional struggles can affect one's overall health. Ultimately, Qala kills herself because of this unresolved trauma and familial neglect. Though *Qala* is critically acclaimed after its release, it remains relatively underexplored in academic discourse. Despite its recognition and praise for its cinematic artistry and narrative depth, it has not yet achieved the level of academic scrutiny that many other works in the same genre or theme have received. This gap in scholarly attention leaves *Qala* as both a celebrated and an enigmatic work, one whose full cultural, social, and cinematic implications are still waiting to be unpacked in more formal academic settings. Since *Qala* is a recent film, there is limited scholarly discussion on it. However, it masterfully portrays a complex mother-daughter relationship, highlighting emotional power struggles, generational trauma, and societal

expectations. The film's nuanced depiction of maternal control, unspoken resentment, and the psychological toll of unmet validation offers a rich area for exploration.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The particular areas of this paper are viewed through the lens of Psychoanalysis. The core method is based on intensive analysis of the primary source, Anvita Dutt's *Qala*, while books on literary theories, criticisms, interviews and articles have been used as secondary sources and major interpretative tools.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The mother-daughter relationship in *Qala* challenges the conventional expectations of maternal love and nurturing. Instead of portraying a bond built on mutual care and affection, the film reveals a relationship fraught with emotional neglect, conditional love, and psychological manipulation. Urmila's emotional distance and obsession with preserving the family's musical legacy profoundly shape Qala's sense of self. Urmila teaches Qala classical music with the authority of a Guru but she never treats her daughter with the warmth of a mother. The more Qala wants to get close to her mother, the more Urmila distances herself from Qala. The only thing Qala strives for is her mother's validation but she only receives hatred and negativity from her mother. It seems that Urmila does not see Qala as her daughter rather the killer of her unborn son. Urmila's preference for a son over daughter is very clear from the beginning of the movie. Urmila's indifference toward Qala stems from her deep-seated belief that only a male heir could truly uphold the family's musical legacy, reflecting her internalization of patriarchal norms. This mindset drives her to push Qala relentlessly, treating her more like a vessel for preserving tradition than as a daughter deserving love and nurturing. Such toxic behaviour deeply affects Qala and her mental well-being.

### A. *Jagan's Entrance into Urmila and Qala's Life*

While Qala and Urmila's relationship was already fraught with tension, the arrival of Jagan Batwal only serves to further complicate it. Urmila rigorously trains an adolescent Qala for her debut performance. She mercilessly scolds Qala and even locks Qala out in the snow as a punishment. At the performance, Qala receives praise from others but Urmila does not offer a single word of approval for her daughter. Throughout the film, Urmila is never seen to use any word of encouragement for Qala. However when Jagan, an orphan boy of Qala's age starts to perform, Urmila is awestruck by his divine voice. Urmila even gives Jagan a standing ovation and presents him with one of her brooches (Dutt, 2022, 26:45-27:05). Qala's jealousy is palpable as she notices the way Urmila looks at Jagan. To further fuel Qala's jealousy, Urmila takes Jagan under her wing and brings him into their home. In Jagan, Urmila sees the male child she never had. She even stops training Qala and appoints Qala as Jagan's caregiver. Once dedicated to eight hours of daily practice, Qala's role has now changed to simply bringing milk to Jagan and playing the tanpura while he practises with Urmila. In doing so, Urmila shifts all her attention to Jagan,

effectively sidelining and neglecting her own daughter. This deepens the emotional divide between mother and daughter, leaving *Qala* feeling ignored and unworthy in her mother's eyes.

Urmila's preference for an outsider, Jagan, over her own daughter highlights her patriarchal mindset and the deep emotional neglect in their relationship. By elevating Jagan and disregarding her own daughter, Urmila creates a sense of abandonment and rejection in *Qala*, fostering jealousy, insecurity, and a longing for approval. This favoritism distorts the natural bond between mother and daughter, emphasizing achievement and talent over familial love and connection. *Qala*'s struggle to earn her mother's approval reflects not only a personal need for validation but also societal pressures regarding gender roles. *Qala* was already struggling to get her mother's attention and validation and now the arrival of Jagan further exacerbates her relationship with her mother. Bhat writes in her paper, "The favoritism creates a source of conflict within the family. The emotional turmoil and tensions suggest that unresolved family issues may contribute to mental health challenges" (Bhat, 2024, p. 149). Vyavahare discusses how Urmila's decision of choosing an outsider as the deserving successor of her family's legacy brings out the raw and ugly side of the protagonist, *Qala* (Vyavahare, 2022). After Jagan comes into the picture, Urmila decides to marry *Qala* off as pursuing a career in music was not suitable for respected woman back in those days. Such behavior makes *Qala* feel unnoticed and ignites her insecurities. In one scene *Qala* witnesses her mother seducing a famous music director, Mr. Sanyal, so that he gives Jagan a break in the film industry (Dutt, 2022, 42:09). *Qala* is shocked and traumatized to see the length her mother can go for Jagan. *Qala* feels she is unnoticed by her mother while the mother sees through her daughter's insecurities and strongly believes that it is only fair to empower Jagan who is more talented. *Qala* resorts to questionable ways to accomplish her dream but it comes at a price. She is haunted and traumatised by her past. "Qala resorts to questionable ways to accomplish her dream but it comes at a price. She is haunted and traumatised by her past" (Vyavahare, 2022, para. 3). Vyavahare also mentions how the film is about a "mother-daughter dance of psychological warfare as *Qala*'s ambition clashes with her mother's disdain" (Vyavahare, 2022, para. 4).

In *Titli*, Rituparno Ghosh explores the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of admiration, disillusionment, and self-discovery. In *Titli*, the daughter, *Titli*, who idolizes her mother, Urmila, is forced to confront a more human and flawed version of her when she witnesses her romantic and sexual past. Similarly, in *Qala*, the protagonist's perception of her mother shatters when she sees her seducing Mr. Sanyal—not for herself, but to advance Jagan's career—deepening *Qala*'s feelings of rejection. While both daughters experience a loss of idealization, *Titli* allows space for understanding, whereas *Qala* spirals into irreparable emotional devastation. Both films challenge the myth of the selfless mother, but *Titli*

moves toward reconciliation, while *Qala* highlights the lasting pain of maternal neglect. The maternal rejection in *Qala* is absolute, leading to *Qala*'s tragic downfall, making Dutt's portrayal of the mother-daughter dynamic far more brutal and psychologically complex than Ghosh's exploration of disillusionment and eventual acceptance. *Titli* emphasizes communication as a means of resolving tension between mother and daughter, whereas *Qala* is marked by an overwhelming absence of dialogue. In *Titli*, despite moments of conflict and disillusionment, the mother and daughter eventually engage in conversation, allowing for understanding and reconciliation. In contrast, *Qala* portrays a mother who withholds not only love but also communication, leaving *Qala* in a constant state of silent yearning. The lack of verbal exchange in *Qala* deepens the emotional abyss between them, making the mother's rejection feel even more absolute and rendering *Qala*'s suffering inescapable.

### **B. Ambition leading to Alienation**

*Qala* portrays how unchecked ambition, particularly when driven by the need for acceptance, can result in profound emotional and social isolation. In *Qala*, the theme of ambition leading to alienation is central to *Qala*'s journey. *Qala*'s intense desire to gain her mother's approval and become a successful singer drives her to extreme lengths, creating a widening gap between her and those around her. Her ambition, fueled by her longing for validation, results in emotional isolation as she feels increasingly disconnected from her mother, Urmila, who shifts her attention to Jagan. This relentless pursuit of success alienates *Qala* not only from her mother but also from herself, leading to psychological distress. The pressures of meeting external expectations ultimately fracture her sense of identity, culminating in a tragic downfall. *Qala* learns about the glitz and glamour of the music industry from Jagan. When Jagan shares his dream of winning the "Golden Vinyl" with *Qala*, she says, "I, too, want to accomplish all that. As for the Golden Award mother wants, I will get it for her" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 43:35-43:49). But to her utter surprise, Urmila takes *Qala* to Kolkata and plans to marry her off without even consulting with her. She also plans to stay in Kolkata with Jagan for the betterment of his musical career. When Urmila arranges a party and invites the big shots of the music in order to introduce Jagan, *Qala* requests Urmila to let her perform as well. "Do you know what kind of girls sing in front of these film industry people?" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 46:17) Urmila chides *Qala*. This moment is pivotal for *Qala*, as she realizes the double standards that exist—what is acceptable for boys, like Jagan, is deemed inappropriate for girls. This reinforces the patriarchal mindset Urmila harbors, which restricts *Qala*'s ambitions and deepens her sense of alienation. When *Qala* expresses her longing to return home with her mother, Urmila says, "A mother's home is where the son lives. The daughter lives with her husband" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 47:15). Disheartened, *Qala* suggests that her mother marry her off to Jagan so that she can stay with her. Urmila reprimands *Qala* for even considering the idea of



marrying Jagan, her own brother. It is evident that Urmila's relationship with Jagan is rooted in her unresolved grief over the loss of her biological son during childbirth. This profound loss has left an emotional void in her life, which she attempts to fill through her surrogate attachment to Jagan, whom she perceives as the son she never had. Her desire to nurture and support him reflects a yearning for fulfillment that extends beyond traditional maternal instincts. However, Urmila's fixation on Jagan also reveals deeper psychological issues, including her struggle with identity and self-worth in a patriarchal society that often marginalizes women. By prioritising Jagan's needs and ambitions over those of her own daughter, Urmila perpetuates a cycle of emotional neglect, contributing to a fractured familial dynamic. This situation illustrates the complexities of maternal relationships in the context of loss and societal expectations, highlighting the impact of unresolved trauma on interpersonal relationships and family structures.

Qala understands that Jagan's presence makes her nonexistent in her mother's life. He gets everything that Qala strives for. Qala grapples with feelings of inadequacy and resentment, particularly as she perceives her mother's favoritism toward Jagan. This favoritism is exacerbated by Urmila's patriarchal mindset, which values male success over female ambition. She decides to take matters in her own hands by replacing Jagan. Before Jagan's performance at the party Qala serves him a glass of milk but secretly adds mercury to it so that he cannot sing. When Jagan loses his voice during his performance, Qala takes the stage and starts to sing. Though the night was supposed to be a celebration of Jagan's talent, Qala cunningly steals the spotlight. This pivotal scene serves as a critical turning point in the narrative, illustrating how jealousy can corrupt one's values and lead to irrevocable consequences. Qala attempts to reclaim her place within her mother's affection and the larger narrative of their lives, ultimately revealing the complexities of ambition, rivalry, and the quest for recognition. Urmila takes Jagan and Qala back to her home in the mountains, where she focuses on nursing Jagan back to health, hoping to restore his voice but his condition worsens day by day. When a famous music director, Sumant Kumar, visits their house to meet Jagan, Qala seduces him in the same manner she once observed her mother doing for Jagan. Qala decides to sacrifice her honour in order to secure a position in the music industry. Mr. Kumar promises Qala to give her a chance which comes at the cost of her dignity. Even later in the film, he is seen exploiting Qala again and again. Though Qala feels disgusted, she convinces herself to carry on with the relationship for the sake of her career. With his favour Qala later becomes a famous singer much to her mother's disdain. Qala too sacrifices her honour to strengthen her position in the industry. These moments reflect Qala's desperation to create her own identity in a male-dominated world. By mimicking her mother's tactics, Qala reveals the complicated layers of her upbringing and the influence of Urmila's actions on her self-perception and ambitions. This seductive encounter not only illustrates

Qala's longing for approval but also highlights the cyclical nature of learned behaviors within the mother-daughter dynamic. In her quest for acceptance, Qala finds herself entangled in a web of manipulation and desire, showcasing the lengths she is willing to go to escape her feelings of inadequacy and overshadow her perceived rivalries. Ultimately, this scene deepens the narrative's exploration of ambition, identity, and the impact of familial relationships on personal choices. Before leaving Mr. Kumar refers to Qala as a "cuckoo" in front of Urmila, a metaphor to praise her singing voice. Urmila taunts Qala by saying, "You are a cuckoo that never builds a nest of its own. Always grab the nest of other birds" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 01:08:03-01:08:12). Urmila accuses Qala of robbing Jagan of his opportunities mirroring what she once did to her twin brother in her mother's womb. As the story progresses it is shown that Jagan hangs himself after losing his voice. When Qala sees Jagan's dead body, she is haunted by the sight and even after many years, she continues to grapple with overwhelming guilt. In one scene of the present day when Qala is already a famous singer and lives alone in Kolkata, she is seen anxiously washing her hands again and again (Dutt, 2022, 01:12:37). This scene is surely a homage to Lady Macbeth's guilt-driven behaviour in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Qala's ambition alienates her from her mother and also her own innocent self.

### C. *Mother-Daughter Relation Through the Lens of Chodorow*

Nancy Chodorow is an American psychoanalyst and sociologist best known for her work on gender, motherhood, and the mother-daughter relationship. She gained prominence for her influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Chodorow, 1978), where she explores how the mother-daughter relationship dynamically shapes women's identities and experiences in a patriarchal society. Viewing the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory reveals the complexities of emotional dynamics, identity formation, and the impact of societal expectations. Chodorow argues that the mother-daughter bond is foundational in shaping a daughter's sense of self and femininity.

Chodorow posits that the mother-daughter relationship is foundational in shaping a daughter's identity. In *Qala*, Urmila's relationship with her daughter is fraught with tension and jealousy, primarily stemming from Urmila's obsession with Jagan, whom she sees as the male child she lost. This fixation on Jagan leads Urmila to neglect Qala, demonstrating how the mother's emotional unavailability creates a void in Qala's life, affecting her self-worth and sense of identity. Qala's desperate need for her mother's approval and attention highlights Chodorow's assertion that daughters often seek validation from their mothers, which becomes a source of conflict when that validation is withheld. Qala once wanted to be like her mother. She wanted to stay under the wings of her mother. But when Jagan comes into the picture she feels the need to create her

own identity in order to prove her worth to her mother. Chodorow (1978) writes, "Turning from mother (and father) represents independence and individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world: It is by turning away from our mother that we finally become, by our different paths, grown men and women" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 82). According to Chodorow's theory, since girls are more closely connected to their mothers, they often have a harder time growing up than boys. To grow into a healthy adult, the girl needs to separate from her mother, but this creates anxiety for both. The mother may struggle to let go, causing the daughter to feel anger, guilt, and stress as she tries to gain her independence (Chodorow, 1978). After Jagan's death when Qala comes to her mother and asks permission to go to Kolkata for recording, Urmila turns her back and says, "Leave. Get out ... This house cannot lodge a cheap singer" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 01:18:06-01:18:17). Qala, probably for the first time talks back to her mother and says, "Then how does this house lodge you? As a mother you should love me. But you do not" (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 01:18:24-01:19:08). She accuses her mother for never valuing her no matter how much she tries. Urmila's relentless pursuit of controlling Qala's life aligns with Chodorow's idea of how mothers project their own desires and unresolved issues onto their daughters, often at the expense of the daughter's emotional well-being. Finally, Qala takes matters into her own hands and decides to leave for Kolkata on her own to pursue her singing career. Initially, Qala faces emotional alienation from her mother, which eventually escalates to physical alienation.

In her book Chodorow mentions Fliess who believes that certain mothers are "asymbiotic" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 100) during the early period when their child needs a sense of unity with them, meaning they fail to offer the empathetic connection and security required. Later, when their daughters start to develop independence, these mothers become "hypersymbiotic"—they refuse to allow their daughters any room for individuality or separation. Instead, they view their daughters as extensions of themselves, controlling their daughters' life and treating them as if they are one person. This blurring of boundaries leads the daughters to internalize their mothers' mental and physical distortions, resulting in neurotic behaviors and a failure to fully differentiate from their mothers. The relationship remains undifferentiated, with the daughters' sense of self and reality being shaped by their mothers. In Urmila and Qala's relationship one can clearly see asymbiotic and hypersymbiotic dynamics. Initially, Urmila fails to provide the emotional intimacy and nurturing that Qala desperately seeks, withholding the necessary bond and validation during her formative years. This is the "asymbiotic" phase, where Qala is left struggling for her mother's approval and affection, especially when Urmila shifts her attention to Jagan, the surrogate son. As Qala grows older, instead of encouraging her independence and individuality, Urmila becomes "hypersymbiotic". She refuses to let Qala differentiate herself, treating her more as an extension of her own desires and ambitions of than as a separate person.

Urmila's control over Qala's life—especially her music career—reflects how she imposes her own goals onto her daughter, stifling Qala's individuality and freedom. This leads to deep emotional conflict, as Qala tries to escape her mother's control while simultaneously seeking her approval, resulting in guilt, anger, and psychological distress. This dynamic echoes how unhealthy mother-daughter bond that inhibits individuation and leads to emotional instability.

Chodorow believes that adolescent girls often stay emotionally connected to their mothers, focusing on their relationships with them while also exploring heterosexuality (Chodorow, 1978, p. 140). This attachment is not biologically driven; rather, it stems from the mother's role as the primary caregiver, which is different from the father's less active involvement in their lives. In the case of Qala, she grew up with only one parent. She never experienced her father's love or affection. So her dependence on her mother is even more pronounced. This lack of paternal presence deepens her emotional reliance on Urmila, as she seeks validation and support solely from her mother. The absence of a father figure not only intensifies Qala's attachment to Urmila but also complicates their relationship, as Urmila's expectations and ambitions for her daughter become intertwined with Qala's sense of self-worth. In this film the mother-daughter relationship is further complicated by the absence of a father, amplifying the challenges both Qala and Urmila face in achieving individuation and autonomy. Unlike Sigmund Freud, Chodorow believes that the mother's role is more important in a child's ego-formation (Chodorow, 1978, p. 131). Chodorow also claims that girls usually stay connected to their mothers, both in how they act and how they feel. They often think about issues like how to separate from their mothers, how to form their own identities, and how to manage their feelings of needing support. The film does not provide any information on Qala's romantic life. It can be said that her problematic equation with her mother and the sexual exploitation by Sumant Kumar, withhold her from being involved with anyone. This lack of emotional independence, unresolved issues with her mother and her exploitation create barriers that prevent Qala from forming meaningful connections with potential partners. Chodorow argues that a girl's feminine identity develops from her close relationship with her mother. Through this personal connection, she learns what it means to be a woman in her everyday life (Chodorow, 1978, p. 176).

In the film, Qala grapples with a multitude of psychological challenges. The emotional turmoil stemming from her separation from her mother, coupled with her perceived role in Jagan's suicide, significantly contributes to her mental distress. Furthermore, her ongoing struggle to navigate a competitive, male-dominated industry exacerbates her vulnerabilities, gradually eroding her sense of self and resilience. Chodorow in her book claims, "But children seek to escape from their mother as well as return to her" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 195). Children often find themselves in a complex emotional dynamic with their mothers. On the

other hand they seek independence, on the other hand they yearn for the comfort of maternal connection. This push-pull relationship manifests as a desire to break away from their mothers to explore their identities and assert their autonomy, while also craving the emotional security and nurturing that their mothers provide. As they grow older, this tension becomes more pronounced; they may rebel against maternal authority yet find solace in their mother's presence during challenging times. Qala too seeks her mother's help as her last ray of hope when she realizes that she is gradually losing her sanity. She calls Urmila but as soon as Urmila hears Qala's voice, she cuts the call. Qala once left her maternal home in order to find success and earn her mother's love. But lastly she realizes that no amount of success can soften her mother's stone-cold heart. Her urge to return to her mother illustrates how children navigate their journey toward individuation while remaining tethered to the maternal bond.

#### D. Atonement of Qala and Urmila

Rituporno Ghosh's *Unishe April* and Anvita Dutt's *Qala* explore complex mother-daughter relationships but with contrasting resolutions. In *Unishe April*, the daughter resents her mother for emotional neglect but ultimately reconciles, finding healing through shared grief. In *Qala*, the mother harbors resentment toward her daughter, Qala, whose desperate quest for validation ends tragically without reconciliation. While *Unishe April* offers hope, *Qala* highlights the devastating consequences of unresolved maternal rejection. The atonement of Qala and Urmila is a poignant exploration of regret and the irreversibility of their fractured relationship. As Urmila grapples with her shortcomings as a mother, she ultimately realizes the depth of her mistakes; however, her realization comes too late. By the time she understands the extent of Qala's suffering and the impact of her actions, it is too late, leading to Qala's decision to commit suicide. This culmination of events highlights the themes of lost opportunities for reconciliation and the devastating consequences of unresolved emotional conflicts.

Qala's journey in the music industry was not a bed of roses. Apart from working hard, she was forced to sleep with Sumant Kumar time and again in order to survive in the industry. Nonetheless she keeps working hard, driven by the dream of one day making her mother proud. The day she wins the "Golden Vinyl", she calls Urmila seeking her approval and love. However, her hope is shattered as Urmila refuses to talk to her. She keeps hallucinating Jagan, who blames her for stealing his success, Qala's guilt intensifies. In one vision, when Jagan asks if she's truly happy, Qala responds that it doesn't matter because her mother is still unsatisfied (translated from Hindi, Dutt, 2022, 01:37:26). This emotional burden leaves Qala devoid of any desire to continue living. Even her success, which was supposed to be her escape, becomes the reason of her undoing. Desai (2022) and Kumar (2022) both point out this "imposter syndrome" of Qala. Kumar writes in his article, "But, in the process, Qala starts loathing her imposter self and descends into a

vacuum. But the noise of her soul continues to trouble her" (Kumar, 2022, para. 2). Rani in her article mentions how Freud emphasizes that childhood experiences shape an individual's personality, as seen in *Qala*. Success and wealth mean little if guilt and emotional turmoil control one's life. The story underscores that true comfort comes from family or supportive relationships, not material success. This highlights the crucial role of parenting style in shaping an individual's development (Rani, 2023). Desai believes that Qala's personality is an amalgamation of the "people around her" (Desai, 2022, para. 7). Her mimicking of her mother while seducing a man and copying Jagan's words to explain her situation to the doctor, prove that Qala lacks individuation. She tries to handle her trauma by taking sleeping pills every single day. Even the doctor fails to detect her illness since it is more psychological than physical. Finally Qala takes her life in the same manner as Jagan. Throughout her life, she struggles with feelings of inadequacy, guilt over Jagan's death, and the deep desire to gain her mother's approval. Her decision to take her own life can be interpreted as her way of seeking redemption for her perceived wrongdoings, including Jagan's demise. It reflects the culmination of her internal battle with guilt and failure, making her death a tragic attempt to reconcile with the emotional void left by her relationship with her mother.

Urmila's negligence towards Qala and unnecessary comparison of Qala with Jagan compel Qala to sabotage Jagan's voice. Eventually this leads to Jagan's suicide followed by Qala's. By the time Urmila softens and reaches Qala's Kolkata home, Qala had already hanged herself. Ironically it is only after Qala's death that Urmila begins to feel the maternal love towards her daughter she had failed to show. As Urmila looks at Qala's pictures and videos after her death, tears reveal her regret and guilt for neglecting her daughter when she was alive. This delayed realization of her affection highlights the devastating consequences of their broken relationship, leaving Urmila with profound regret over her inability to provide Qala with the emotional support she desperately needed. Anvita Dutt, the director of *Qala*, with an interview with Gayle Sequeira shared that she intended to challenge the idealized notion of motherhood through *Qala*. According to her research, many women who are dealing with anxiety or depression, trace it to their relationships with their primary caregiver. She emphasizes the importance of women accepting themselves without making comparisons (Dutt, 2022, para. 8). In *Qala*, Urmila's harmful comparisons drive Qala to self-loathing and finally self-destruction. In one way, Urmila is the real culprit behind Jagan and Qala's tragic demise. In the last scene Urmila's tears over Qala's death symbolize of her regret and realization of her maternal neglect as Qala's voice plays in the background. Unlike Jagan and Qala, Urmila survives but her experience of living with guilt serves as her form of atonement.

*Qala* depicts how the absence of maternal affection and validation profoundly impacts the daughter. The mother's indifference and emotional coldness create a situation where

the daughter's identity and sense of self-worth are entirely dependent on external validation, which ultimately leads to her tragic downfall. Chodorow's framework is particularly useful here, as it highlights the psychological damage caused by a lack of maternal warmth and connection, especially for daughters who internalize the emotional abandonment. This study also emphasizes how *Qala* demonstrates the destructive power of neglect, which underlines the need for a more subtle understanding of the mother-daughter dynamic—one that does not glorify motherhood, but critically engages with its failures and consequences.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Indian cinema often portrays mothers as goddesses, embodying ideals of selflessness and sacrifice. However, in *Qala*, the director subverts this trope by presenting a flawed and emotionally distant mother, thereby challenging traditional representations of motherhood. This departure from glorification not only breaks stereotypes but also fosters a deeper understanding of maternal relationships. Though the film's ending is tragic, it effectively highlights critical issues such as mental health, emotional neglect, and the profound impact of parental validation on an individual's psychological well-being. By doing so, *Qala* contributes to a broader discourse on the complexities of familial bonds and the consequences of unmet emotional needs. Ultimately, the story serves as a poignant reminder of the need for open communication and empathy within familial bonds to prevent cycles of pain and regret. The death of Qala and the emotional weight carried by Urmila, stemming from her guilt and regret over her treatment of Qala, serve as a critical exploration of the repercussions of maternal expectations and comparisons. By portraying the destructive consequences of these dynamics, *Qala* emphasizes the need for compassion, understanding, and acceptance within familial relationships. The film ultimately leaves viewers contemplating the legacy of unaddressed emotional pain and the importance of fostering healthy, supportive connections to prevent the cycle of suffering from continuing across generations.

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