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A Tragic Requiem: Ethical and Psychic Dissonance in *Qala* (2022)

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Abstract: *Qala* (2022), directed by Anvita Dutt, is a layered exploration of childhood trauma, patriarchal motherhood, and female subjectivity, situated within the emerging feminist new wave in Indian cinema. Contemporary scholarship has extensively interpreted its eponymous protagonist Qala as a victim of patriarchal violence, drawing on feminist psychoanalytic frameworks including those of Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow. However, this paper explores the underexamined ethical dimensions of the tragic narrative, arguing that the film is a commentary on how victims reluctantly negotiate, internalize, and reproduce structures of violence and erasure. The paper is structured as a twofold inquiry, at one level exploring how gendered expectations, enmeshed identity, and emotional neglect fracture Qala's psyche. At another level, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's ethical criticism, the paper illustrates how shame, guilt, betrayal, dilemmas, and moral culpability intensify Qala's psychic decline and articulate her dilemmatic conscience. Through an analysis of the cinematic form, the paper shows how soundscape, lighting, and mise-en-scène are utilized to externalize psychic and ethical dissonance. The film is framed as an Aristotelian tragedy to illustrate that Qala's anagnorisis transforms the narrative into a cathartic rendition of the aftereffects of trauma, patriarchal violence, and residual guilt.

Keywords: *Qala (2022); Hindi cinema; patriarchal motherhood; cinematic ethics; trauma*

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A Tragic Requiem: Ethical and Psychic Dissonance in *Qala* (2022)

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Introduction

Feminist New Wave cinema is not an entirely new phenomenon in film studies and has long dominated Western cinematic tropes. However, its emergence and success in Hindi cinema deserve closer inspection. In contrast to the social realist traditions of parallel cinema in India, mainstream Bollywood has traditionally operated within a commercial framework that often privileges gendered modes of spectatorship, positioning women as passive and sexualized objects of visual pleasure for the male gaze. Besides theater screenings of commercial hits like *Stree* (2018, 2024), *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), and *Queen (2014),* OTT platforms such as Netflix, Hotstar, and Amazon Prime have facilitated the emergence of nuanced viewership that caters to the female gaze and centers female narratives. Feminist new-wave cinema, by definition, explores female subjectivity and women's narratives through the lens of female filmmakers, giving women's narrative voices center stage. Riding the highs of evolving spectatorship, Anvita Dutt, alongside Clean Slate Filmz, has made her second contribution to the feminist new wave in Hindi cinema with her film *Qala* (2022), following her experiments with the feminist power of horror in *Bulbbul* (2020). In her work *Return of the Monstrous-*

Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema, Barbara Creed defines the feminist new wave as films directed primarily by women telling stories of women who:

> are in revolt against male violence and corrosive patriarchal values, including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anthropocentrism …. Their journey is feminist in that they have the courage to revolt and enter the dark place to see the corruption at the heart of the symbolic order. Feminist New Wave films tell their stories from the point of view of the female protagonist – it is her story told in her voice. (2022, p. 2)

Qala (2022) is a new-wave feminist film in which Dutt explores the titular character's revolt against patriarchal violence and the morally corrosive misogyny that pervades the film industry, serving as a microcosm of the power asymmetries and gendered violence within Indian society. The film also delves into the mindscape through grotesque imagery and contrasts between light and dark color palettes to bring forth the psychosocial dissonance of female subjectivity. Existing scholarship on the film has explored recurrent feminist motifs, such as madness and abjection (Panda & Rai, 2026), the probing of patriarchal motherhood (Argha Bhattacharyya, 2023), and the psychoanalytic scrutiny of mother–daughter enmeshment and mental health stigma (Agarwal & Kumar, 2023). However, scholarship on the tragic-narrative structure that externalizes ethical quandaries and elicits a moral response in viewers remains absent. This paper argues that current psychoanalytic explorations of the film overpower and undermine the ethical claims that are abundantly articulated through the tragic structure of the cinematic narrative, in which moral guilt is shown to heighten Qala's psychological decline.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Psychoanalysis is pivotal to the exploration of Qala's mindscape. At another level, the film is also an exploration of how trauma incapacitates Qala's moral judgment. Compelling her to internalize and reproduce the same violence, emotional indifference, and opportunistic manipulation, of which she was herself a victim. Critics like Kumar et al. (2026) argue that Bollywood narratives of female resistance reveal complex paradoxes in which authority is asserted by subjugating both men and women, making them ideal case studies for interrogating whether such portrayals genuinely challenge or reproduce patriarchy (p. 70). On a similar note, Qala's rebellion is not a straightforward resistance to patriarchy, but a complex negotiation with power structures, and a subversive quest for agency. This negotiation, however, is contingent upon what philosophers have called "the problem of dirty hands", "moral remainder", or "ethical trade-offs". The film's ingenious play with cinematography, its neo-expressionist visuals and gothic symbolism, strikingly shows how patriarchy impairs women not just socially by dictating gender roles but also mentally through repression to the point of psychosis, which often gets rebranded as hysteria (Chodorow, 1978). In this regard, it is pivotal to explore "enmeshment" in Qala, not merely as a private psychological suffering but as a product of broader sociocultural intersections of gender, caste, and respectability. Embedded largely within moral-psychological frameworks, with side glances at Uma Chakravarti's (2018) work on "Brahmanical Patriarchy", Jasodhra Bagchi's (2017) feminist reflections on motherhood in

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

India, and Charu Gupta's (2020) exploration of the "moral panic" in colonial India pertaining to women's visibility in public, the paper foregrounds how patriarchal power is reproduced through familial and cultural institutions. A meaningful engagement with South Asian feminism better equips the analysis of maternal subjectivity formation and the moral-psychological fractures in Qala's identity.

Central Themes and Existing Scholarship on *Qala* (2022)

Widely praised as a stunning feminist psychodrama (Bhatia, 2022), the film follows the tragic events in the life of Qala, played by Tripti Dimri. Born into an illustrious *Gharana* (household, foundational unit of Hindustani folk music) of classical singers, Qala, being an only child, shoulders the responsibility of carrying forward a prestigious family legacy. Notions of honor and legacy operate differently in *Gharana* culture, where lineage is traced not only through biological kinship but also by artistic heritage and *Guru-shishya* (mentor-mentee) family traditions. Under such inverted and nonuniform structures of descent, titles of stylistic custodianship, such as "Pandit" or "Bai," can sometimes bypass biological heirs, landing in the hands of the most capable and representative artist of the *Gharana*. While *Pandit* is the masculine title for a classical musician and singer in India, Agarwal and Kumar (2023) point out that the feminine equivalent, *Bai,* does not command the same prestige (p. 4). The dual burden of gendered expectations from Qala is inferred from her mother's comments:

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

> Talent and training can be the same as boys', but you're a girl. You'll have to work much harder and defend your honour a lot more … your name should have *Pandit* before it, not *Bai* after it; only then will you become someone. (Dutt, 2022, 00:09:03)

Qala's mother, Urmila Manjushree, formerly a classical *Thumri* singer (a semi-classical genre of Hindustani music), navigates the complex terrain of being a talented woman in a culture and an industry that are outwardly progressive and reformist yet remain patriarchal. She bequeaths to her daughter a morally ambiguous world of glamour and patriarchal control that profits from women's labor while refusing to render them visible or acknowledge them as equals. Typical of South Asian societies, Urmila's relationship with Qala is marred by internalized patriarchy, and she finds her daughter incompetent in safeguarding the prestigious musical lineage she was born into. Urmila's cultural sensibilities are informed by patriarchal Indian customs in which a daughter is regarded as *Praya Dhan* (someone else's keepsake) and is to be given away through the rite of marriage, or *Kanyadaan* (the gift of a virgin daughter in marriage), to the groom's family (Dey & Tripathi, 2022). In disregard of her ambition and her desire to return to Himachal with her, Urmila decides that Qala should marry Prince Devindra Narayan, citing the patriarchal logic that a daughter belongs to her husband's household, while sons live with their mother in the paternal home. The alienation Qala suffers at the hands of her mother stems from a personal history of harm that is shaped by sociocultural factors that engender patriarchy and villainize strong women who aspire for roles outside of domesticity.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

In the embryonic stages, a medical complication associated with monozygotic twin gestation results in the loss of Qala's twin brother. This commonly occurring biological event is recast as a culturally mythologized narrative of female malevolence, in which Urmila perceives Qala as a dark feminine force that has robbed her of the supreme duty and prestige of birthing a male heir (Srivastava, 2026, p. 335). Such an intersection of religion, culture, and gendered expectations is reflected in Jasodhara Bagchi's (2017) crucial discussions on unequal access to daughters with regard to nutrition, health, and affection within Indian households, as well as the imposition of motherhood on Indian women. In her works, foregrounding a theological and cultural interface, Bagchi interrogates patriarchal motherhood as a structure that mystifies women's bodies as sacred and "divine" forces, or *Shakti* (the divine energy of the mother goddess). Ironically, such powerful religious portrayals of motherhood are contrasted by stark realities of disenfranchisement of women, sexual policing, and patriarchal reinforcement, where women view giving birth to a son as the only aspirational model for accessing power. Through heightened contrasts of darkness and light, avian imagery, metaphors and cultural references to Qala as the "cuckoo-bird that never builds a nest of her own, always grabs what rightfully belongs to other birds" (Dutt, 2022, 1:08:15), the film builds upon this ambivalent mother–daughter duo, while illustrating how gender disparity in patriarchy pitches women against each other.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Contextualizing *Qala* (2022) as a Feminist New Wave Film

In her study titled "Return of the Repressed", Barbara Creed (2022) coins the term "monstrous-feminine" and notes that feminist new wave cinema of the new millennium utilizes horror, science fiction, cultural folklore, and dark satire to frame women's revolt against patriarchal oppression (p. 11). In its more radical portrayal, it dispenses imaginative justice to wronged women by drawing on cultural, posthuman, and supernatural sources of feminine power. Another important aspect of feminist new wave cinema is its genre-bending nature and its exploration of abjection, which makes the trope more visceral, intimate, and well-suited to feminist revolt. Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) explores the trope of maternal monstrosity, accentuating the psychological grief of single motherhood and the horrors of repetitive domesticity. Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) confronts the banality of evil, exposing how rape and violence against women are not perpetrated by "monstrous" men but the regular "promising young men" who benefit from structural impunity. Its subversive use of feminine aesthetic and soft color pallets contrasts sharply with the traditional melodramatic treatment of the rape-revenge genre that centers on reproducing the graphic violence of the act instead of throwing light on the sociocultural structures that engender rape culture (Creed, 2022, p. 53). It reclaims power by reversing the predator-prey dynamic and actively seeking to terrorize the "nice guys" who prey on vulnerable women. Other examples

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

include the vampiric tropes of Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), which place women at the center of action and vengeance without the scopophilic pleasures of framing for the male gaze. In these films, women are the key drivers of plot progression, seeking revenge, challenging the male gaze, and questing for power and agency, rather than playing the damsel in distress.

In Indian cinema, the rise of the feminist new wave is evident in shifting tropes that explore women's narratives and revisit folkloric narratives of female malevolence, as seen in films such as *Pari* (2018), *Stree* (2018), and *Bulbbul* (2020). However, monstrous retribution is not the only trope of the feminist new wave. Subtler forms of revolt against phallocentrism are also evident in films that increasingly humanize women's narratives, portraying them as individuals capable of desire, agency, moral failure, and retribution, contrary to the self-sacrificial and visual-pleasure tropes that have traditionally dominated South Asian cinema. Emerging examples from Hindi, Malayali, and Pakistani cinema such as *Bol* (2011), *English Vinglish* (2012*), Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Pink* (2016), *Thappad* (2020), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Kamlee* (2022), *Joyland* (2023), *Laapata Ladies* (2024), and *Ekko* (2025) are examples of subtle explorations of gender justice, female autonomy, female gaze, intersectionality, queer desire, and cultural narratives of female malevolence and power. Situating *Qala* (2022) within these contemporary female-centric cinematic narratives, the paper

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

explores the psychological thriller as an extension of the feminist new wave cinema in India. However, by placing greater emphasis on the narrative's emotionality and ethical quandaries, it explores themes of shame, guilt, and tragic retribution, bringing its tragic vision to light. Existing scholarship on the film has largely focused on trauma, mental illness, and feminist representation, but has insufficiently explained how the film constructs ethical subjectivity through cinematic form and tragic structure. In discussing the film as an Aristotelian tragedy, in which patriarchal motherhood produces psychic fragmentation, ethical dissonance, and the disintegration of the protagonist's identity, the paper takes the debate further than psychoanalysis, where existing scholarship has left it.

Methodological Framework

The paper employs interdisciplinary frameworks of feminist psychoanalysis, ethical criticism, and film studies as complementary interpretative frameworks that examine the interrelationship between psychic formation and moral consciousness in Qala. Tracing her psychosis, the paper argues that Qala's mental health deteriorates progressively in relation to her *anagnorisis,* the realization of having morally wronged Jagan. Drawing on insights from literary ethics, the paper shall explore how the unfolding of tragedy and the protagonist's acceptance of guilt is an exercise of moral imagination and attunement.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Additionally, content analysis is employed as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 24). Since films operate as multimodal texts consisting of visual, auditory, linguistic, and symbolic elements, cinematic elements such as imagery, sound, mise-en-scène, and narrative are treated as meaningful units of analysis. Repeated viewings of the film facilitated thematic coding and helped identify recurring narrative, psychological, ethical, and cinematic patterns relevant to the study's aims. Some of the major analytical categories that were selected for discussion include the themes of patriarchal motherhood, enmeshment, emotional deprivation, ethical dilemmas and psychic dissonance. These themes are used as interpretative lenses to examine the relationship between psychological trauma, ethical decline and tragic structure.

Particular attention has been given to selecting and discussing scenes from the film that convey the tense relationship between the mother and daughter. The moments that symbolize ruptures in identity, moral reasoning, and psychic decline are also examined through a reading of relevant imagery. The cultural narratives about embryonic malevolence and the nesting cuckoo bird, embedded in the plot, are discussed as prognostic symbols of survivor's guilt that follows Qala to her death.

Patriarchal Motherhood, Psychosocial Repression, and Enmeshment

In her seminal work, *The Reproduction of Mothering,* Nancy Chodorow (1978) drew on

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Freudian hypotheses concerning Hysteria, the Oedipal Complex, and Female sexuality and rearticulated these ideas to explore the role of the mother in the internalization of patriarchy, the socialization of gender roles, and identity formation. Chodorow explores the trope of the mother–daughter relationship and offers insight into the impact of mothers on a daughter's identity formation. Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, unravels the other end of the spectrum by foregrounding the argument from a mother's perspective. In her crucial work on motherhood studies, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), she critiques the societal institution of motherhood and coins the term 'motherhood mandate' to describe the social pressures to conform to traditional maternal roles. This conformity often leads to a conflicting relationship between mothers and daughters marked by ambivalence.

Applying the concepts of the two theorists in the context of *Qala* (2022), previous papers have elucidated the mother–daughter dyad as a complex bond between a dominant mother and a submissive daughter, foregrounding themes of patriarchal motherhood, ambivalence, repression, and identity formation. Although these frameworks are indispensable, understanding how ancestral angst and internalized patriarchy are reproduced within familial structures, thereby reinforcing the phallocentric symbolic order, requires meaningful engagement with South Asian feminist theories. This paper underscores the importance of

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

South Asian feminist discourses, such as those expounded by Uma Chakravarti, Charu Gupta, and Jasodhara Bagchi, that foreground how gender, caste, class, and the colonial legacy shape women's identity formation in India.

Set in the 1940s, the film unfolds as a period drama using the temporal setting of late colonial India to interrogate and deflate the celebratory narratives of colonial modernity, social progress, and gender consciousness. Although set after the first-wave feminist movements in the West, the film still exposes the deep-rooted and culturally entrenched misogyny as well as the persistence of patriarchal structures among the seemingly educated, high-class Indians. In her works, Charu Gupta (2020) reflects on the "paradoxical gendered legacies" of colonial India, which were heavily imbricated with Victorian morality and caste consciousness (p. 199). Borrowing from notions of Victorian morality, women's singing and performing came to be denigrated as courtesan culture. Besides Victorian notions of femininity and chastity, caste-coded distinctions between classical and folk art scrutinized the performing woman through the moral optics of accessibility. Mazha S. Muhammad (2025) notes that the visibility of the female body in Hindustani music has historically been regulated by the authority of the male elite. The sanitization of *Thumri*, dissociating it from *Tawaif* (courtesan) culture to render it palatable for the elite, is an example of how patriarchy marginalizes and sanitizes art forms into categories of respectability (p. 89). While classical music and dance came to be respected

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

because of their accessibility to a select, elite audience, the popular, folk, and commercial forms of art came to be marginalized and stigmatized as impure, immoral, and freely accessible, suitable for the "lower classes" and not the genteel public.

Under such gender-, class-, and caste-encoded patrilineal structures, the performing arts become a site of contestation between the sacred and the profane. Therefore, female artists from musical *gharanas*, even when capable, are seldom given equal access to opportunities and are often denied public exposure as "custodians of honour". This contestation between the pure and the impure, the classical and the popular, the respectable and the immoral is evident in the contrasting choices of Urmila and Qala. Instead of validation, Qala's success in the film industry, which was regarded as mass entertainment in colonial India, is turned into a badge of humiliation when she is called a courtesan. Charu Gupta (2020) notes the ambivalence betrayed by Reformist claims in print and the media about the status and conduct of women in the public eye, and their wariness of the subversive potential of completely doing away with gendered segregation through *purdah (*the practice of veiling for concealment from the public gaze) (p. 199).

This tug-of-war between modernizing yet refraining from transgression, which dominated pre-independence India, is beautifully portrayed in the film through the character of Urmila and

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

her "Pandit-not-Bai" optics of delimiting success for women. She does not observe the veil in the traditional sense by concealing her body and face, but instead practices and preaches the withdrawal of women from the public gaze through similar patriarchal logics of accessibility, respectability, class-consciousness, and dishonor. She is a trained classical singer and musician who restricts herself to teaching and mentoring only, never performing in public, lest she bring "dishonour" to her *Gharana* (musical lineage). On the surface, she appears to be a modern and progressive woman who enjoys occasional drinking, smoking, and socializing with men, but her view of women in the film industry as courtesans gives away her inherent misogyny. This progressive exterior, which is also perceptible in her adoption of Jagan Batwal irrespective of his Dalit caste identity (the Batwal are a recognized Scheduled Caste), is contrasted with her internal disgust toward her daughter for not abiding by her regressive playbook. Caste thus surfaces even where Jagan's narrative is made expendable to amplify Qala's tragedy.

The adoption of Jagan may be misread as a progressive decision where Urmila gives up on caste hierarchies and brings into the *Pandit* household a humble Dalit boy, affording him a better life. Instead, this progressive exterior that underlies deep sociocultural anxieties. As discussed earlier, the *Gharana* lineage is a fluid system, and Jagan's rising popularity and artistic competence are the missing link that can help revitalize the dying musical legacy of Pandit Deewan Manjushree. Instead of Urmila helping Jagan, it is the other way round, where

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Urmila can finally actualize her aspirations by giving her household a male heir. Her visceral disgust when Qala proposes to marry Jagan (who is not her biological brother, therefore legally marriable) exposes the caste anxieties that underlie her progressive exterior. It reveals the entrenched "moral panic" associated with hypogamy, where women are mere transmitters and never carriers of the line, yet their social mobility is restricted through discourses of caste pollution or dishonor (Chakravarti, 2003, p. 30).



Figure 1: Qala flaunts her prestigious Golden Vinyl Award from her home in Calcutta.

The film's exposition sequence (Dutt, 2022, 00:02:20; see *Figure 1*) establishes its central tropes through a carefully curated visual language. Qala Manjushree is introduced on screen as the doyenne of playback singing and a recipient of the coveted Golden Vinyl Award, embodying artistic prestige and social recognition. An overhead shot visually frames her in the

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

golden glory of triumph and prestige at her Calcutta residence. This image is constantly contested throughout the nonlinear plot, with flashback techniques revealing that, for Qala, success emerges not as fulfillment but as a fragile performance that conceals unresolved traumas. Tropes of enmeshment and repression are also conjured through the image of a moth embroidered on Qala's saree, which reinforces the strangulated, flightless moth image in the opening credits and is articulated within the narrative frequently through costume design (bug-inspired corsets) and jewellery (studded in Qala's earlobes and her mother's bird-shaped brooch). The play with warm and cool color palettes further heightens the contrasts between her present agency and the vulnerabilities of her past. The narrative repeatedly returns to her cold and desolate childhood home in Himachal, where a younger, emotionally vulnerable Qala is presented in sharp contrast to her later public persona. The change in setting immediately articulates a sharp visual shift from the golden glow to a dark room, foreshadowing the repressive memories of her childhood. These temporal and visual fragmentations establish an important visual and psychological tension between external success and internal disintegration, presaging the psychic fractures that shape the trajectory of her decline.

The mother–daughter relationship in the film operates as patriarchal subject formation, where maternal affection is weaponized and made contingent upon performance, approval, and inherited expectations. Nancy Chodorow (1978) notes that female subject formation depends

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

on a simultaneous process of identification and differentiation from one's mother (p. 177). In Qala's case, this process is disrupted because her mother, who is also her mentor, occupies dual and oppositional roles in her life, resulting in the contradictory pulls of identification and differentiation, often leading to a perception of 'overwhelming enmeshment' (Boyd, 1989, p. 292). Played by Swastika Mukherjee (Urmila Devi), the mother is portrayed as a flagbearer of patriarchy in practice. We first encounter her on-screen as a postpartum mother saddened by the demise of her newborn, a pain which is accentuated by the knowledge that the twin who lived was a girl while the one who died was a boy. Influenced by post-partum depression or by ambivalence, she attempts to strangulate her daughter. This motif of strangulation recurs in imagery of moths and butterflies, and lyrical references to avian creatures who appear enmeshed in wires, unable to fly, or seem to fly to their death. Much of the cinematic imagery is marked by this antipathy toward the daughter throughout the plot. The cinematic landscape of Qala's childhood is set in the cold, hostile, snow-clad mountains of Himachal Pradesh in North India, which seems to be a metaphor for the lack of maternal warmth in her life. The scene in *Figure 2* depicts the domineering mother, clad in traditional Himachali attire, training a young, vulnerable Qala in the art of singing and playing the *Tanpura* (a musical instrument).

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu



Figure 2: A domineering Urmila trains and admonishes Qala.

The contrasts in their body language, where Urmila stands ramrod straight with stiff shoulders, and Qala sits with stooped shoulders, looking up to her mother as an ideal, articulate an asymmetry of power in which the mother exercises control, dominance, and repression over a docile and impressionable Qala. At the slightest error, Urmila subjects her daughter to rigorous punishments, such as locking her out in a snowstorm, and verbal abuses like "neither beauty nor brains, the least you can do is work hard!" (Dutt, 2022, 00:18:09). This traumatizes Qala, who questions her self-worth and becomes dependent on her mother's approval to the point that she fails to form a separate self-identity. The contradictory roles of Urmila as a mother and mentor, especially as a single parent, transform nurturing into surveillance and emotional deprivation into a mechanism of control. Instead of adding emotional resilience, Urmila becomes a tool of patriarchal violence, punishing, policing, and shaming her daughter for

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

dishonoring the familial legacy by choosing the film industry. A professional *thumri* singer, Urmila's disgust for the film industry emerges from familiarity with its sexually exploitative and misogynistic internal structures. Her patriarchal values are reflected in her insistence on teaching Qala her father's musical style, even though she clearly shows promise in her mother's *thumri* style. She prefers her adoptive son, Jagan Batwal, for a singing debut in the film industry and not her daughter, so as to prevent her daughter from becoming a *Bai* (a courtesan who sings to entertain). The distinction between music as sacred performance and music as profane entertainment is of great significance for her South Asian sensibilities, which associates women in the industry with courtesan culture.

Qala's enmeshment becomes even more complex and entangled as she transitions from girlhood to womanhood. In the absence of a father figure, she is forced to rely solely on her mother for socialization and identity formation, leaving her with no choice but to internalize her mother's opinions. This enmeshment between the mother and daughter is externalized in several scenes of the film. Qala shows a clear preference for her mother's singing style and imitates her mother's style of dressing, adorning tissue sarees in dark color palettes. Even her seduction style is a verbatim imitation of her mother's, which at once looks eerie and unnatural on her timid personality. In their study, Raja and Souter (2010) note that mother–daughter

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

relationships are simultaneously powerful and painful (p. 857). Enmeshment, therefore, does not always play out as hostility and can sometimes also be a bond of empathy. Urmila is shown jolting out of bed in Himachal as her daughter's mental state deteriorates in Calcutta. She even caresses her womb on hearing Qala'ss disturbing interview on the radio, metaphorically soothing the abandoned child that was once part of her. The mother–daughter dyad is thus enmeshed in their shared pain. Qala's psychosexual identity remains repressed under the weight of her mother's tutelage while Urmila hammers her patriarchal beliefs and insecurities into her. Urmila irreversibly represses the individual Qala could have flourished into, had she not been burdened by patriarchal legacies and received gentle parenting.

A deeper understanding of Urmila emerges from Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as lived experience and as an institution. Her maternal repression emerges from the internalization of patriarchal values concerning respectability, inheritance, and artistic lineage. Her repeated insistence on introducing Qala as "*Deewan Manjushree ki Beti*" (the daughter of Deewan Manjushree) invokes what Rich identifies as "the power of the father", where legitimacy and social identity derive from masculine lineage. Rich argues, "Cathexis between mother and daughter –essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story of all patriarchal cultures and literature that privilege the word and authority of the father" (p. 225). Even Qala's acceptance speech later reproduces this inherited logic when she says, "this award

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

is my mother's dream and my father's legacy" (Dutt, 2022, 00:03:17), indicating how patriarchal values have become psychologically embedded within her own consciousness. The theme of patriarchal motherhood is most evident in the sequence where Qala's debut performance is followed by Jagan Batwal's soulful rendition of Kabir Sangeet. Jagan Batwal, an orphan and a Dalit, trained in a humble *Gurdwara*, delivers a crowd-pulling performance, a feat that Qala's rigorous training in *thumri,* the family's renown and legacy, fails to achieve. The visuals zoom in on Urmila's closed eyes and tapping hands as she is mesmerized by Jagan's singing, an effect that Qala has always yearned to produce in her mother.



Figure 3: Qala is distraught by her mother's appreciation of Jagan.

Conversely, her hands are shown folded as she scrapes her elbow, a self-soothing mechanism she has developed since childhood whenever she is distressed because of her mother. The scene in *Figure 3* depicts Qala sitting in the limelight, distressed as she looks

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

toward her mother, who is elated by Jagan's performance and gives him a standing ovation and her heritage silver brooch (Dutt, 2022, 00:26:45). The silver brooch, shaped like a bird, pinned to Jagan's collar, is a metaphorical nod to the audience, conjoining the (would-be) mother-son duo as "birds of a feather" in contrast to Qala, who is portrayed through alternative entomological imagery. As *Figure 3* suggests, on a day meant to celebrate her induction into the family legacy, the spotlight seems to pass right through Qala, shining on Jagan, whom she deems unworthy. This shift from light to darkness is aided by cinematic play with dark settings, costume design in which Qala is dressed in gray and black while Jagan is clad in white, symbolizing Qala being relegated to oblivion, with her dream and her inheritance being given over to Jagan. As noted by critics such as Justin Ponder (2017), cinema has a longstanding tradition of associating light with goodness and darkness with evil. Halos illuminate saints to signify their holiness, and shadows befall villains to represent their depravity (p. 17). Jagan's innocence is framed cinematically through the imagery of the swan and the peacock, rendered visible in the songs "Udh Jayega" and "Amma Puchdi hai". In both songs, the birds are depicted in distress at the hands of fate, and the lyrics foreshadow Jagan's demise. The avian imagery serves as a rich visual lexicon drawn from Hindu mythology, where birds act as vehicles of the gods and have come to culturally symbolize beauty, purity, and wisdom. In contrast, Qala is portrayed through the symbols of moths, fireflies, cuckoos, and butterflies that signify her self-

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

consuming passion, hope, opportunism, and fragility, respectively.

Ultimately, Qala's psychosocial repression results in an ethical trade-off that later induces Jagan's suicide, the guilt of which haunts her into psychosis. In her self-narrative, Jagan is villainized as the star that obliterates everyone around it, a sentiment she expresses as a warning to Sanyal Sahab: "When you'll get thrown out because of Jagan and no one will look at you, listen to you, or even recognize you, then you'll understand my plight" (Dutt, 2022, 00:52:20). Her words convey the weight of self-erasure and oblivion that women suffer from under the weight of patriarchal repression. However, it is difficult to pitch the conflict of interest between Jagan and Qala as a purely gendered conflict, because their identities are informed by complex terrains of caste and class hierarchies. Qala is an unmistakable victim of patriarchal violence, but as a Dalit and an orphan, Jagan comes with immense social precarity. For him, singing is not a medium of social ascension and prestige like Qala or Urmila, but a source of survival and livelihood. From his statement to Qala: "C'mon, I don't sing for your mother, for me it's like breathing, I sing for myself" (Dutt, 2022, 01:29:10), we infer the significance of singing in his life. When he loses his voice to mercury poisoning by Qala, it's not a tragic misfortune or gentle sidelining. It is a form of caste violence and an engineered redistribution of who gets to bask in fame and national prestige and who is relegated to the margins once

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

again. Jagan's character exploration in the plot is minimal, and his subalternity hasn't been emphasized as much, inviting criticism for relegating Dalit characters to mere catalysts in the protagonist's central narrative. The film abundantly articulates the portrayal of Qala as a victim of patrilineal wars of succession, but contemporary scholarship has failed to address that Jagan, as well, was a victim of patriarchal and caste violence rather than a perpetrator.

The absence of a separate self, enmeshment, and childhood trauma make Qala incapable of sharing her mother and her dream with Jagan. Like moths that fly into flames, not because they are self-destructive, but because their navigation systems based on dorsal flight response are compromised in the absence of moonlight. Qala is cinematically likened to a moth with compromised ethical navigation, flying toward the world of glam and glitz with nothing to anchor her mental stability.

Moral Guilt, Psychosis, and Tragic Retribution

Moving a step further from existing scholarship, this paper argues that the narrative does not portray psychosis merely as an outcome of childhood trauma. The tragic architecture of the narrative embeds psychological collapse within the failures of moral consciousness. Through its tragic narrative, the film demonstrates how guilt, shame, and ethical compromise destabilize the protagonist's sense of self. In this way, the film moves beyond feminist psychodrama to become an Aristotelian tragedy with feminist overtones, articulating that psychic disintegration

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

in the film follows from moral collapse. Such critical discussions on the emotionality and morality of the cinematic medium, resulting from the ethical turn, have gained currency recently through discourses on film as an ethical encounter with the Other, theories of spectatorship, questions about representation, and cinematic imagination. The ethical turn advocates a mode of criticism that investigates works of literature, art, and other cultural productions as a form of moral attention to human life while navigating the slippery contours of human emotions and moral reasoning. Ethical critics like Michael Eskin (2004) argue that our moral education has not fundamentally been entrusted to ethics but to the myriad fictions that interpellate us ethically throughout our lives. It is "the nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives perused from early childhood that ensure the formation of the variously conceived good person" (p.574). The narrative architecture of the film under discussion is laden with ethical overtones that demand exploration not only of the themes of guilt, morality, and ethical realignment but also of how they are externalized through the narrative structure.

In her seminal work, *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), Martha Nussbaum draws heavily on Aristotelian virtue ethics, his conception of tragedy, and the notion of eudaimonia, while discussing the fragility of human life in the face of the incursions of luck. It is especially prescient in illustrating how the genre of tragedy effectively displays the tragic conflict between

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

two sets of values that lay equal claim to moral action. In the film, Qala's ambition and her desire for validation from her mother clash with humanistic values of non-harm to others, resulting in a psychic and ethical dissonance that plays out vividly and poignantly across the cinematic landscape. Additionally, Nussbaum's metaphorical imagery likening human flourishing to the growth of a plant is particularly prescient and foregrounds the importance of "care from intelligent keepers" and "external fostering" for a eudaimonistic life (p. 1). The absence of a stable and nourishing parent, or, as Nussbaum says, "confirming associations," and failures of upbringing in Qala's life result in a lopsided maturation. In contemporary ethical discussions on fictional narratives, notes Nora Hamalainen (2016), a person with narrow imaginative capacities is portrayed as morally limited, capable only of acting according to rules and the limited perceptions afforded by their creative imagination (p. 29). In a trauma-affected psyche, Qala's moral imagination limits her from identifying Jagan not as a perpetrator but a victim of legacy wars instigated at the behest of her mother. Drawing on Nussbaum's insights into moral perception and imagination, the film is evaluated as an Aristotelian tragedy to highlight how it frames moral guilt and narrative empathy and offers ethical insight into the experience of repression and liberation at the cost of moral harm. "Emotions," claims Nussbaum (2001), "are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are highly complex and messy parts of a creature's reasoning itself" (p. 3). The emotional

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

turbulence experienced by Qala is therefore neither a straightforward neurochemical disorder, as argued by Bhattacharyya (2023) and Agarwal and Kumar (2023), nor an expression of inherent villainy, as her mother suspects. The ambiguity of her emotional and moral state, visually suggested by her gray costume design, stems from her emotional vulnerability and a deprecating environment that refuses to acknowledge her individuality or dignity, or to nourish her sense of self-worth. The biopsychosocial reality of a performatively male-dominated pre-independence India is only the overt trigger for her psychosis (Bashir & Mishra, 2023, p. 1), whereas the cinematic treatment that juxtaposes the identical suffering of Jagan and Qala frames psychic dissonance as the reckoning of her guilt and the arousal of her repressed moral consciousness.

The film perfectly fits the configuration of an Aristotelian tragedy. We witness a highborn protagonist capable of great success who suffers from a fatal flaw or hamartia (Qala's desire for validation), encounters an ethical dilemma, and experiences a sudden reversal of fate or *peripeteia* (the arrival of Jagan as a contender for Qala's legacy). *Hamartia* is defined by Aristotle as a state of "in-betweenness" or a fatal error of judgment rather than outright villainy. It isn't Qala's ambition itself that becomes her hamartia, but her willingness to subordinate ethical judgment to the pursuit of validation. The film repeatedly demonstrates that her desire

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

to be seen by her mother gradually eclipses her responsibilities toward others, particularly Jagan, whose misfortune and precarity as a Dalit are far greater than hers. In this respect, the narrative complicates dominant feminist readings that position Qala alone as a victim of patriarchal structures and throws light on how victims of oppression transition into reluctant agents of harm. Ethical critics such as David Parker (1994) argue that the absence of evaluative frameworks or value judgements entails a profound psychic disorientation, an individual without them would not simply be morally shallow or unpredictable, but frighteningly disturbed, perhaps pathological (p. 7). Such pathological disposition becomes evident in the poisoning sequence, which becomes the ethical turning point in the narrative where innocence and culpability are not only juxtaposed but also trigger Qala's psychic disorientation. She smashes her mercury maze toy to poison Jagan's milk, which symbolizes her loss of innocence.



Figure 4: Dark thoughts take over, and Qala considers ethical transgression.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Whereas an unsuspecting Jagan, still latched to milk, which symbolizes his spiritual purity and childlike innocence, succumbs to the ploy. Interestingly, for both victims of the tragedy, Jagan and Qala, harm comes from a person entrusted with care, protection, and nurturing. The depiction of ethical quandaries in the film reaches a neo-expressionist peak during the poisoning sequence. The mise-en-scène, framed by chiaroscuro lighting, jarring camera angles, and deep, decaying color palettes, and costume design, like the corset shaped like a bug's exoskeleton, conveys the inherent entrapment of the atmosphere and helps externalize the strings pulling Qala toward moral-psychological entropy. The dreamlike montage, aided by a mute dancing chorus, visualizes the competing claims that overwhelm her subjectivity: her mother's insistence on domesticity through an arranged marriage after years of training her for the spotlight, the nullification of her artistic identity following Jagan's rise, and her desperate attempts to secure her mother's recognition through emotional and sexual self-sacrifice. She is shown swinging from left to right, swayed by the dancing chorus, who use black feathers as props (Figure 4). The black feathers reinforce the cuckoo's avian imagery and signify the impending ethical transgression. The split-second scene depicting a mother offering a glass of milk to a grown son symbolizes the forcibly imposed "sister-as-mother" dynamic in South Asian cultures. Qala seeks escape from this erasure, in which she is parentified into subservient chores, such as fetching warm milk for the protege son. She rejects this nullification

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and, among the competing claims, picks the one that ensures her self-preservation. Emerging from the cloud of black feathers is a girl with deeper self-resolve who has metamorphosed from subservience to agency, symbolized by the gray moths that emerge from it (Dutt, 2022, 00:50:30).



Figure 5: Jagan shields Qala from snow, symbolizing solidarity in mired circumstances.

The maze and gargoyle motif, as shown in *Figure 5*, recurs frequently not just as prop design but as a visual rendering of the dilemmatic trope that traps Jagan and Qala. Gargoyles that architecturally symbolize the boundaries between order and chaos occur as moral warnings in the film. It flashes on the screen every time Qala is about to misstep and land deeper into a mire of ambiguities. First, it appears in the garden maze at her home in Himachal, when Urmila invites Jagan to live with them. Later, it flashes outside the recording studio in Calcutta, where Sumant Kumar sexually exploits Qala, signifying the cycle of abuse that is to follow. When it

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

first appears (Dutt, 2022, 00:31:20), we see Jagan shielding Qala from the falling snow, which continues to symbolize the desolation and childhood trauma in Qala's life that eats away at her peace. The mise-en-scène makes an overt commentary on Jagan's positioning as an agent of solidarity, empathy, and perhaps even benevolence. The maze reappears again, as a toy in the poisoning sequence, and finally, when Qala's maladaptive gullibility leads her to seduce the producer, Sumant Kumar. The maze is symbolic of her labyrinthine struggle for agency, and finally, when she is free of her mother's tutelage, Jagan's shadow, and Sumant's exploitation, her moral guilt catches up to her and unsettles the myths of success she has lived by. Qala's suffering is a classic case of residual guilt, which Bernard Williams (1965) terms "moral remainder": the inability of the moral agent to transcend the burden that lingers after making a difficult ethical choice from among all competing claims (p. 179). The residual guilt culminates in *anagnorisis*, the tragic moment of recognition. Unlike conventional redemption narratives, *Qala* offers no meaningful possibility of moral repair. Recognition arrives only after irreversible harm has occurred. Ironically, as her hallucinations become persistent, her fractured morality begins to prey on her fragmented psyche. Qala begins to see snowfall, one of the film's most persistent visual motifs, everywhere. It gradually transcends its association with Qala's traumatic childhood and acquires ethical significance. As visions of snow begin to appear in spaces where they do not belong, the boundary between hallucination and reality collapses. The

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

intrusion of the snowy landscape into urban interiors transforms trauma into a haunting presence that cannot be contained within the past. Jagan's recurring apparition neither shields her from the snow like he once did, nor mentors her to choose what she finds valuable rather than what her mother validates. It simply appears as a residual proof of her guilt and a reminder of the life that was sacrificed at the altars of her hubristic ambition.

The ethical dimensions of the tragic narrative are rendered visible through the film's portrayal of psychosis. Invasive hallucinations that haunt Qala bring about an anagnorisis, and reiterate her mother's disparaging prophecy comparing her to the cuckoo bird that profits from the labor of others. Qala's mindscape was always riddled with imposter syndrome engendered through her mother's repeated abuse, which served as a fecund ground for psychic dissonance. However, the recurrent apparitions function as more than symptoms of mental illness, and operate as cinematic manifestations of moral knowledge that her conscious mind is unwilling to acknowledge. In tune with Nussbaum's conception of emotions as evaluative judgements, guilt in *Qala* is not framed as a purely irrational feeling but as a form of ethical recognition. Nussbaum (1999) argues that abandoning rational reflection in order to care about a character's psychology is not only pernicious but also intellectually unwise (p. 534). Qala's fractured perception, therefore, transforms into a site of convergence for her traumatized psyche and her moral consciousness. Toward the very end, her regret is materialized through the imagery of

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

mercury splattering into sleeping pills, proverbially suggesting that the harm she had intended upon Jagan has found its way into her life. She chases after the hallucinations/apparitions of her past self, revisiting the site of trauma, begging her past self, "Don't do this! Don't do this! Don't do this!" (Dutt, 2022, 1:47:20), but the moment for redemption and repair is long past. In the absence of an occasion for moral repair, which is a crucial element of Aristotelian tragedy, *catharsis* (a release of pent-up emotion) emerges from her articulation of fear, noise, and internal rupture, mirroring Jagan's earlier expression of anguish (Dutt, 2022, 1:05:52), creating a tragic solidarity between both victims. In this configuration, the film suggests that violence ultimately reproduces itself within the subject that commits it, transforming external harm into internal torment. Along with the recurrent symbols, the film's use of dim lighting, fragmented mirrors, shadows, and distorted soundscapes visually registers the erosion of Qala's moral and psychological coherence. These aesthetic choices do not merely illustrate madness; instead, they materialize the burden of unresolved guilt.

The final act of suicide functions as the *catastrophe* or the tragic ending of the ethical and psychological conflict. Rather than presenting death as liberation, the film frames it as the culmination of an unresolved struggle between ambition, guilt, and moral responsibility. In Aristotelian terms, the ending evokes pity and fear not because the protagonist is punished, but

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

because the audience witnesses the catastrophic consequences of choices made within an unjust social order. The tragedy lies precisely in the fact that Qala's desire for love, recognition, and artistic fulfillment, which are valid demands for human flourishing, set her on a trajectory of total entropy in the absence of ethical frameworks. In the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, eudaimonia is not a product of an individual's desires or inherent tendencies, which are valid whatever they may be. Similarly, Nussbaum (1986) notes that eudaimonia results from the actions of moral agents rather than their desires; living well, therefore, is a product of ethical action rather than aspiration (p. 378).

The film's closing sequence intensifies this cathartic effect by using the Himachali folk song “Amma Puchdi.” Functioning as an ethical counterpoint to the narrative, the song imagines a mode of care and conflict resolution absent from the relationship between Urmila and Qala. Framing the dialogue between a worried mother and a sleepless daughter, the song foregrounds compassion rather than domination. The veiling peacock from the song symbolizes Jagan, and the sleepless daughter alludes to a guilt-ridden insomniac Qala. The folk narrative implicitly exposes the failures of maternal recognition that structure the tragedy. The song, therefore, serves not merely as a cultural motif but as a reflection on alternative ethical possibilities that the characters were unable to realize. Through this juxtaposition, the film

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

transforms personal suffering into a broader meditation on responsibility, recognition, and the devastating consequences of emotional neglect and ethical transgression.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the film's tragic vision emerges from the intersection of trauma and morality. Anvita Dutt's direction does not foreground film as entertainment but deliberately functions as an ethical inquiry into the conditions of human flourishing under patriarchal constraints. By linking guilt to psychological collapse, *Qala* challenges binary oppositions of victim and oppressor and instead presents moral subjectivity as a fragile and contested process. This unique articulation of moral-psychological frameworks, which occupies much of ancient Greek literature and abounds in Shakespearean tragedies and the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, William Golding, Toni Morrison, and others, is finding currency in the cinematic medium after years of absence from the vocabulary of film studies.

Rather than reading *Qala* (2022) solely as a psychoanalytic case study, this article situates it within the ethical turn and attends to the cognitive effects and affective residue of moral injury and asks questions not only about what is shown but also about what is thought through the cinematic form (Sinnerbrink, 2019, p. 196). Through a sustained engagement with ethical criticism, the paper illustrates that patriarchal motherhood may explain the origins of Qala's psychic wounds, but it does not absolve her of culpability in redirecting that moral injury toward

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.900 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Jagan, who was an undeserving victim of patrilineal wars like herself.

The paper foregrounds philosophical questions about the relationship between the cinematic medium and spectatorship, prompting an assessment of what the narrative asks of the spectator. The narrative architecture evokes an empathetic response to what Qala has endured without nullifying what she has done to Jagan. The film's powerful appeal lies in its insistence that trauma can explain wrongdoing without excusing responsibility, thereby transforming a story of female suffering into a profound exploration of the incommensurable cost of personal flourishing and ethical obligations to the other.

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