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Rhythm Mandal

‘Out, damned spot’: Repression, Revolt, and Guilt in *Qala*



Qala, 2022, Hindi, 119 minutes, Director- Anvita Dutt

The quotation used in the title is borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, uttered by a frantic Lady Macbeth at a juncture in the play when she is engulfed by the guilt of having convinced Macbeth of committing King Duncan’s murder. She starts hallucinating and seeing blood in her hands which she is unable to wash off, symbolic of her involvement in the murder. *Qala* emulates the play in both the overarching themes of transgression and guilt, and also this specific scene, as Qala (portrayed by Tripti Dimri) washes her hand violently in the basin after having crushed a moth. The moth is a visual motif, connecting the image of her adopted

brother, Jagan’s (played by Babil Khan) dead body from a flashback sequence, to the present scenario. *Qala* then hallucinates as a minuscule drop of mercury falls from her hand in place of the dead moth because she had mixed the deadly mercury in Jagan’s milk, leading him to lose his voice and eventually kill himself. Constantly seeing Jagan’s apparition, who accuses her of having taken as well as stolen his life, Qala, too, meets the fate of Lady Macbeth by the end of the film.

Lady Macbeth was one of the canonical figures to have exemplified characteristics of what is controversially labelled as ‘hysteria.’

In literary traditions dating back to the nineteenth century, the genre of Gothic Horror has witnessed the portrayal of hysteria and feminine rage as a counter to the existing structures of patriarchal hegemony. Characterised by overstylised depictions of disdainful themes and encapsulating the experience of ‘Otherness’ and oppression, the traces of the genre can be found in *Qala*, both stylistically and thematically. Works like *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* exemplify the genre’s creative faculties in terms of world-building as well as the traversal into psychological spaces, something that emanates visually in *Qala* as one slips in and out of her imagination through fragmented and abstract usage of metaphor and montage.

Scrutinised within this context of generic specificity, *Qala* explores the narrative of the eponymous character’s journey in becoming a successful playback singer in the Hindi film industry against the backdrop of the 1930s and ‘40s, as she struggles to battle the plethora of patriarchal challenges that are hurled on her since birth, and her personal demons which, too, are a result of it.

While the narration of the film is nonlinear, delving back and forth in time, visually explaining the episodes that lead to her complete breakdown and eventual death, the story is not difficult to follow. J-cuts are deployed throughout the film, marking smooth temporal transitions between the past and the present. The excessive use of visual, aural, and literary motifs along with a soft, but sharply contrasting colour palette, that overtly communicates the emotional state and decrepit nature of the characters, places the film within the Gothic Horror Tradition. In

fact, Dutt’s experimentation with colour goes beyond the mere juxtapositions of cools and warms. During the sequence of Qala’s first public performance, her face is flatly lit, which imitates her hesitant voice, as opposed to Jagan’s confident voice which is lit with a dynamic range of contrasting hues and shadows.



The film is filled with visual archetypes such as insect imagery, smoke, snow, and bird imagery that are prevalent in the Gothic tradition, often symbolising entrapment or decadence. A recurring appearance of the moth and the butterfly in several scenes of the film symbolises Qala’s transgression as she gains the excess she has so long been deprived of, but in doing so, she ends up becoming a literal moth to the flame. In the opening shot of the film, Qala is shown walking towards a golden light diffusing in her room through her balcony, as she stands tall over an ecstatic crowd, showing off her Golden Vinyl, which, too, appears dazzling, as the camera frames her from a low angle, basking in her glory and prowess. It is only in retrospect, and in relation to the recurring images of the moth

that it becomes clear that this blinding light of fame is going to engulf her eventually rather than sheltering her from the stale reality of the agony of her growing years. As the film progresses and Qala's guilt starts overpowering her, the motifs start growing more overt. In one sequence, when Qala is in a recording studio following her fame, she hallucinates, and sees snow everywhere as the sound of an avalanche surrounds her, reminiscent of the visual landscape where she had first found Jagan hanging from a tree. She is unable to hear the instruments and loses balance as she tries to walk on what she perceives as a snow-covered studio floor. This is almost like a psychological peripeteia (reversal of Fate in Greek tragedy) because she had caused Jagan to lose his voice.



Major actions in the film are hinged on aural and visual symbols which are incorporated as abstractions in the narrative. Qala thrives to achieve what Jagan is getting but she is too naive to understand the distinction between the opportunities offered to her and her male counterpart. In a sequence prior to Jagan's performance before significant people from the film industry, Qala hallucinates, culminating in a visual sequence akin to Aranofsky's *Black Swan*, as blurry bodies of people, including her mother, dance around voicing Qala's frustrations, that she has recently come to realise. The images

of two women kissing and a woman feeding a man a glass of milk foreshadow her sexual awakening as well as her poisoning of Jagan, carried out right before his performance. In this sequence, Qala is ultimately bestowed with a pair of black wings, depicting her transformation and loss of innocence. Following this, Jagan's diegetic song sequence, '*Udh Jayega*' directly emphasises this reference to Qala's metamorphosis into a lone swan. When Jagan starts coughing in the middle of his performance, his place is taken by an unperturbed Qala, who sings '*Phero Na Najariya*,' a song, which marks her transformation from the passive to an active woman who asks to be gazed at. Like the Greek entity, Icarus, Qala, upon receiving her wings, moves too close to the sun and is eventually engulfed by it.

This transgression is a direct result of her awareness that she would be married off and thus, be separated from her mother but it is also an eventual result of her complete erasure of identity. In the song sequence of '*Shaukh*,' this notion is portrayed, both visually and aurally when her singing is abruptly interrupted by her mother's gesture, as Urmila encourages Jagan to complete the song instead. As the song sequence, surreally shot on a boat, filling the pro-filmic space with nothing but water and mist, comes to an end and the camera slowly pans away from the boat, all the characters are visible other than Qala, depicting her complete erasure with Jagan's arrival. Thus, all the motifs tie carefully with each other and create meaning in the film.

Besides these easily recognisable ones, there are structural motifs in the film adhering to certain kinds of repetitions, either in action

or expressions of characters, but with slight variation and altered circumstances, depicting a cyclical sense of entrapment. Since an overarching complication of the film is Qala's relationship with her mother and the need for affection and approval, this thematic concern also exemplifies this structure.

In the scene where Qala is born, her mother is shown sitting on a chair in a gloomy room as the camera slowly pans towards her. She is handed over her child as the profilmic undertones turn into a warm golden, and she names her child Qala. However, the room quickly turns back to a cool, desolate, darkness when Urmila realises that her other child, Qala's twin brother, has been killed due to Qala absorbing the nutrition as a result of being the stronger of the two. Ironically, Qala's survival instincts become the bane of her existence to her mother, who can now be seen resenting her newborn. This culminates in Urmila holding a pillow over Qala's face, as though she is about to smother her infant with '*Amma Puchdi*,' playing, as the screen grows dark. Towards the film's ending, Urmila sits on the same chair where she had held Qala for the first time, as the dark room and her expression ominously anticipate Qala's death. When she does discover her daughter hanging from a ceiling fan, she finally looks at Qala with the same motherly affection that she had shown during the initial moments of Qala's birth. As she holds Qala's body closely, '*Amma Puchdi*' plays again, but this time, Urmila mourns the death of the daughter, heightening the tragedy of Qala's plight as she finally achieves what she had strived for, her entire life, almost attempting to be a conceited Oedipal surrogate in her mother's life.

Along with examples of repetition-variation, also lie images of direct mimicking of actions, accentuating the drama. For example, Qala is seen voyeuristically prying into her mother's bedroom one night, as she later learns that this was her mother's way of getting a producer to build Jagan's career trajectory. Eventually, she imitates the act of seduction with her innocent and awkward attributes, allowing herself to secure a singing job as recurring images of demonic statues present themselves with exaggeratedly dark skies, mirroring the ominous reality of women in these industries. Even in the penultimate sequence of the film, where Qala's body is discovered, she has died by hanging herself like Jagan.



Despite its many limitations, *Qala* is an intriguing watch due to its symbolism and an embellished, fragmented depiction of hysterical transgression, common to the Gothic Horror tradition. The horror in the film unravels on two levels. One is the universal experience of patriarchal hegemony and the second is Qala's personal trauma through systematic deprivation, revolt and guilt. The first level of horror is portrayed and transgressed through thematic and formal methods. Qala's sexual identity places her at the median of the two extremities of the Madonna-whore debate, attributing her humane characteristics as opposed to an

archetypal pole reminiscent of a male perspective. Qala's unorthodox female friendships in the film further establish this point and her literally standing at a higher plane than her predator once she proves her mettle, further emphasises this notion.



Formally, the transgression in literary works can be inculcated through the conscious subversion of gaze in visual mediums such as films. In Laura Mulvey's primary works, gaze had been divided into three categories, that of the camera, the pro-filmic characters and the spectator. Much like in the song sequence of 'Phero Na Najariya,' when a woman commands the gaze, both in front and behind the lens, a subversion is witnessed. Even self-referential examples of this phenomenon can be found in the film. In

one sequence, where Qala is being photographed, a female voice can be heard behind the lens. Qala is framed in a camera, and with three consecutive clicking sounds, her image in a camera within the (actual) camera, as depicted in reality of the profilmic space, and one with the crew doing the photoshoot are presented, with the last shot having a frame dominated by women. While a film like *S Durga* (2017) portrays but doesn't seek to resolve the horror of women being trapped in a male-dominated space, contrastingly, by centering her female characters from the inception of the film, Dutt strives to counter the patriarchal anxiety through form and narration.

However, *Qala* eventually succumbs to the horror within, and becomes the tragic heroine who meets her fate. In a decade where a film like *Aattam* (2023), echoes the reality of women in creative industries through the realist form, even as a periodical, situated way back in time, *Qala* thrives to do the same by echoing the universality of the female experience, but through a relatively poetic form.

References:

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