

Decoding the complexity of Identity and Upbringing in Anvita Dutt's *Qala*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.42>

Abstract

Identity and association are some of the key aspects that govern life of an individual. Human intricacies generate curiosity among academicians which leads them to explore the human psyche. Qala, a Hindi film released in the year 2022 deals with many human follies and intricacies. Set in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it is the story of the eponymous character, Qala Manjushree, who wants to make a career in the music industry. But, amidst the fame and glory of the music world, Qala's suppressed and subdued emotions keeps haunting her. The story deals with the issues of upbringing, identity, gender, patriarchy, mental health and complexity of human psychology, which had intrigued the audience. Through psychoanalytic theory of Freud and John Bowlby's theory of attachment, the paper aims to explore the identity crisis and suffocation of Qala and also her mother, which often is a result of a troubled upbringing.

Keywords: Identity, Upbringing, Psychology, Mental Health, Patriarchy

Introduction

Identity formation and development is a significant process in the evolution of the personality of an individual. Children undergo various stages of identity exploration as they mature and develop. The different patterns exhibited by parents are the parenting behavioural styles that they incorporate in raising a child. The distinctive styles of upbringing patterns such as authoritative, neglectful, friendly, serious etc. affects child's development. The upbringing in itself moulds the identity of a person. Parental influence is a fundamental factor that impacts the identity formation of children. The dynamics of a family is also crucial in the development of the identity. Relationship quality, communication styles, dispute resolution techniques, and general family cohesion are necessary components of family dynamics. A loving and healthy upbringing is facilitated by positive family dynamics, which are characterised by open communication, mutual respect, and support. The absence of aforementioned characteristics leads to an identity crisis or fragmentation in personality.

Another significant aspect that contributes in the identity formation and is part of the process of upbringing is the cultural and societal norms. A child's identity is hugely influenced by the cultural values and conventions prevailing in the society. Not only their identity, but children's morals and belief system are also formed through the cultural and socioeconomic factors. In addition, parent's involvement in the activities of the child, their guidance, support and techniques of discipline also play a major role in shaping their identity. All these factors

impact the psychology behind identity formation and have an overall influence on their social, cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Such outcomes often result in varied kinds of personality formation that may attribute to identity crisis or in some cases existential crisis as well.

Literature Review and Research Gaps

The complex role of parenting in the formation of identity and dealing with pressures, have been intensely dealt by some film directors and scriptwriters. *Dead Poet's Society* (1989) is an American drama film directed by Peter Weir that elaborates on the influence of upbringing and teaching on identity formation. *Udaan* (2010), a critically acclaimed Hindi drama film also captures the effects of abusive parenting on children's psychology. *Dangal* (2016) is an Indian film that showcases the positive impact of upbringing on identity formation. It demonstrates the role of parents once gain in instilling confidence, strength and courage, subsequently making their personalities bolder and stronger. Another film that portrays importance of upbringing and nurturing is *King Richard* (2021). It is based on life of Richard Williams, father and coach of tennis players Serena and Venus Williams. Both above mentioned films elucidate the fact that upbringing and parental support play a significant role in the development of the personality of children.

The impact of upbringing or parenting on identity formation has been researched in the field of psychology. Psychologists and researchers have studied and experimented on children and adolescents, where they have examined the role of parenting on identity formation. In the research paper "Influence of Parenting Styles and Developmental Stages on Identity Formation among Adolescents", 400 adolescents were selected in and around Mysore city, and were given questionnaire which revealed that the identity formation of both early and late adolescents was influenced by parenting styles. The research paper "Identity Crisis Among Early Adolescents in Relations to Abusive Experiences in the Childhood, Social Support and Parental Support" carries a study in which sample of 252 adolescents (82 males and 170 females) were collected from different educational institutions in Palakkad Districts, Kerala. Another research investigation titled "Influence of Different Parenting Styles on Adolescents' Identity Construction" studies the impact of different styles of upbringing on adolescents. Another significant study was carried out that portrays the indirect influence of parenting style on identity formation of teenagers in "Interrelations of Adolescent's Identity Development, Differentiation of Self and Parenting Style". The study "Maternal and Paternal Parenting Styles in Adolescents: Associations with Self-Esteem, Depression and Life-Satisfaction" examines both the styles emphasizes the importance process-oriented agents as part of the broader area in well-being differences among adolescents.

The subject of upbringing and parent-child relationship is dealt in the existing literature but it is yet to be explored by researchers. In the film *Qala*, director Anvita Dutt has dealt with a crucial issue of the role of upbringing in constructing identity. She intends to show the consequences of the problematic upbringing. If wrong ideas are incorporated in a child's mind, it can result in serious mental health concerns. This idea has been dealt in the film, which in itself is a new way of exploring the complexity of identity and upbringing. The intriguing scenario of *Qala's* story, which depicts the overshadowing of motherhood, has piqued the interest of scholars all over the world. A recent study (Agarwal 2023) portrays *Qala's* perspective stating that in the absence of her mother's affection, she became a mentally unstable. In addition, patriarchy influenced Urmila Devi's thought process. In another reported work, a character analysis of *Qala's* mother

Urmila Devi is done on the basis of animus-anima paradigm (Bhattacharyya 2022). Urmila Devi's character demonstrates the extremes of animus and the devastation it causes in her relationship with her daughter. She appears to be a highly egotistical, argumentative, aggressive, and stubborn woman who is oblivious to the incomprehensible plight she causes her daughter. Also, the study has been conveyed from the standpoint of patriarchy in the 1930s and 1940s Indian music industry (Kumar 2022).

The review article "Patriarchy and the Music Industry: Review of the film Qala" by Avneesh Kumar and Lakhan Raghuvanshi, analyses the world of the music industry. As the film is set in the 1930s and 1940s, men dominate in majority of the entities across the country. Music industry is also one such industry where men made all the rules. The female singers were still required to fight the battle in order to make their mark. Qala has to face a domineering male music industry all alone, which was overwhelming. In addition, her mother's attitude was also patriarchal. "The Curious Case of Patriarchal Motherhood in Qala (2022): A Psychoanalytic Approach" by Argha Bhattacharya is another research article that analyses the Urmila Devi's character through psychoanalysis. A mother is a complex character and it has been already known and researched that a mother has a significant role in identity formation of a child. Urmila Devi's character is highly stubborn and confused, and her insecurities are transferred upon her daughter.

The paper intends to analyse the film, particularly from a psychological perspective of which parenting, nurturing and formation of identity are integral elements. It analyses the social conditioning of a parent and its effects on upbringing, which has psychological outcomes. Freud's psychoanalytic theory proposes that childhood and early adolescent experiences have an impact of behaviour of an individual. It could be used to study the character of Qala and her actions afterwards. But most importantly, John Bowlby's Theory of attachment can be applied that suggests that early bonds formed by the children with their caregivers (mostly, mothers) have a monumental impact throughout their life. According to 1951 WHO report in which John Bowlby also contributed:

The steady growth of evidence that the quality of the parental care which a child receives in his earliest years is of vital importance for his future mental health'. According to Bowlby, psychiatrists and child guidance workers believed that it was essential that 'the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute—one person who steadily "mothers" him) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment'. (Vicedo 404-405)

Therefore, a mother becomes an influential figure in the development of the personality of a child. "Motherhood studies today is where feminist studies were in the 1970s, uniquely poised to have a transformative effect in a broader social context but also under siege and at risk of diminishing into divided encampments." (Kawash 973) The film has tried to explore the relation that a mother (a parent) and daughter shares. The director has also demonstrated the problems that can occur if a mother refuses to recognise her child. This could result in identity crisis, insecurity, nervous breakdowns leading to chronic mental issues. In addition, the concept of Patriarchy from Feminist theory can also be used as theoretical context as Qala deals with a patriarchal mother, who prefers a male child over her and believes that a male can carry her singing legacy. Keeping the theoretical context of Patriarchy, this paper employs John Bowlby's

theory of attachment to study the role of upbringing in the formation of Qala's identity: her birth, Urmila's treatment towards her, framing of her psyche and subsequent breakdown.

Birth of Qala: Beginning of her trauma

In order to understand the psyche of a character, one needs to understand the kind of circumstances he/she lived in. Anvita Dutt, the director of *Qala* wanted to explore the relationship between parents/caregivers and children. She wanted to experiment and project the difficulties that can occur in an individual's life due to problematic upbringing. From a distant the life of an individual may appear perfect, but when delving deeper, one can find unresolved issues. In the beginning of the film, the audience is introduced with Qala, winning the Golden Vinyl award for singing. When she is asked about her feeling, she says "It feels like reached home tired... and Ma has opened the door. This is my father's legacy and my mother's dream" (*Qala* 3:17). These dialogues itself suggest her exhausting journey of fulfilling a dream, further wishing for her mother's acceptance.

The trauma in Qala's (Tripti Dimri) life began with her birth itself, when his twin brother is stillborn and the doctor says Qala, being the stronger twin, sucked the nutrients of his brother. Since then, the seed of hatred is sown in the heart of her mother Urmila (Swastika Mukherjee). In Indian patriarchal scenario, a male heir becomes a symbol of pride and celebration which deeply embedded and is transferred from generation to generation. She even attempted to kill her as an infant using a pillow to suffocate her but stopped at last (*Qala* 7:38). Since the film is set in 1930s and 40s, Urmila is also shown to traditionalist in her mind set. She mentions in the beginning of the film "But you are a girl, so you'll have to work harder. You will have to defend your honour a lot more. Your name should have Pandit before it. And not Bai after it" (*Qala* 09:13).

Her obsession with arts, leads her to name her daughter Qala which means arts in Hindi language. While growing up, Urmila trains her daughter rigorously as a singer, saying to her "Brains are zero. Looks are zero. Zero talent. The least you can do is work hard. Even that is too much to ask" (*Qala* 18:09). She punishes her by locking her in freezing snow outside. She is dissatisfied with her talent and believes that she will not succeed as a female playback singer in male dominated music industry. A mother is a caregiver, the first person a child forms an attachment, but here Qala is only receiving destructive criticism and disliking. The natural bond of attachment according to John Bowlby's theory is not establishing, which in turn will have repercussions on the mind of the child. This is in turn will result in identity distortion.

Despite singing well, her singing is neither appreciated nor accepted by her mother. In an event, an orphan named Jagan (Babil Khan) sings and mesmerizes Urmila. She believes that who could fulfil the dream of becoming a successful singer, which she always wanted to become. She starts giving all the attention to Jagan and replaces him with her dead son. In one of the songs "Shauq", renowned singer Chandan Lal Sanyal, Urmila, Qala and Jagan are traveling on a boat. Jagan is asked to sing in order to showcase his talent to Sanyal. Qala also sings accompanying Jagan and is stopped by her mother (*Qala* 39:11). This again depicts Urmila's discouragement of Qala's talent. She even seduces renowned singer Chandan Lal Sanyal to obtain a chance for Jagan to sing. Qala who is witnessing everything is filled with envy against Jagan. While seeing her mother seducing other men, Qala feels that through this path she can get a gateway pass of becoming a singer, and ultimately the love of her mother. In a gathering

organised by Urmila for Jagan to perform, Qala expresses her desire to perform in front of the people from film industry. Urmila responds, “Do you know what kind of girls sing in front of these film industry people?” (*Qala* 46:17). Asserting her patriarchal mind set, she explains to Qala that Jagan can sing in the same event because he is a male. Again, her patriarchal mind is in action.

In the same gathering, Jagan falls ill, and instead Qala sings, garnering the attention of well-known musicians and singer. Jagan’s health deteriorates, affecting his throat. While caring for Jagan, Urmila decides to marry Qala off, to which Qala disagrees. Instead, she seduces famous singer Sumant Kumar and obtains a chance to make a career in singing in Kolkata. Jagan commits suicide and Qala leaves to make a career in playback singing. Jagan’s death creates further barrier between Qala and her mother, where Urmila thinks that Qala has snatched away Jagan’s position, in a similar way she snatched away the life force of her twin brother.

Rise and Fall of Qala’s Career

The film moves in a non-linear manner that depicts the mental exhaustion of Qala. This a technique adopted by writers to illustrate fragmentation and psychological disturbances. She has become the most famous female singer yet there’s emptiness in her heart. She often undergoes nervous breakdowns, where ghosts of the past haunt her (*Qala* 1:11:09). In order to sustain her career in the music industry, she has compromise with her dignity and be in a physical relationship with singer Sumit Kumar. Despite becoming successful in her career and making a dominate mark for the female gender in the industry, her mother still thinks her to be a courtesan and do not accept her. She often has ghosts of the past haunting her and illusions of Jagan threatening her. In one of the scenes, while gazing at her awards, she sees Jagan’s image, who grabs her head, hitting it to the cupboard. He also accuses her of being a “Thief”, snatching away the Golden Vinyl award from her telling her “it’s mine” (*Qala* 13:47). This was a moment of her episodic mental breakdowns where she is unable to understand her mental trauma. In another scene, in front of the doctor, she says that there’s nothing physically wrong but there is a lot of noise in her mind, fear in her heart and something breaking inside her (*Qala* 14:20). Since the film is set in 1940s, mental health issues were neither addressed nor understood, by doctors as well, especially in developing nations like India. It is only through sleeping pills she is able to sleep. As her mental health worsens, she intends to contact her mother. Her plea for help can be heard in the following lines, “Mama, [pants], Mama [sobs]. Something’s wrong with me, Mama. [sobs] I think I need help” (*Qala* 1:14:51). But Urmila cuts the line, leaving Qala alone and helpless. This again showcases her mother’s hatred towards Qala, which leads to further mental health deterioration. She no longer is focused on her singing career. She zones out while singing, hardly remembering where she is in this world. It is also revealed that one of the many reasons of her mental breakdowns is the accumulated guilt as she was the one who poisoned the glass of milk with mercury and gave it to Jagan, out of jealousy (*Qala* 1:46:40), which revealed later in the film. All she wanted was her mother’s attention, but she never expected Jagan to kill himself. Although, she has achieved success and fame by compromising her self-respect and dignity, yet she has not received her mother’s love and support. All her awards, achievements and rewards are in vain, because she cannot and will not be able to achieve the ultimate award: the approval and acceptance of her mother, Urmila. She is unable to distinguish reality with illusion and at a point when she cannot take it any more she commits

suicide, because she feels that is what her mother wanted. Qala's hallucinations about Jagan accusing her of snatching away his place scares her to death. The following description of her distorted visions in a recording room indicates her peak of mental exhaustion where she cannot hear anything (*Qala* 1:40:21):

The image becomes darker when Qala is stuck in her trauma and begins to live in a parallel dimension while communicating with and confronting Jagan. The depiction of mental health and trauma as not only psychological but also physical is one of the most essential and impactful themes in the film. An important scene regarding this theme, in which she sees Jagan's body hanging from a tree while visualizing snow in a recording studio, is a heart-wrenching visual. She isn't able to cope with the games her mind is playing with her, and she finally succumbs to a nervous collapse. (Agarwal 7)

Conclusion

Qala also depicts a similar meaning which is hidden, though meant for the audience to interpret it. On a surface level, it appears a story of the eponymous character who wants to be a successful singer in the 1940s. But when analysed profoundly, it reveals the mind Qala where there is a cry for her mother's approval and identity distortion. Her quest of finding a center, where her mother will accept her and love her, rather than rejecting and condemning her. Again, the story illustrates the story of Qala's deep identity crisis and mental breakdowns in a male dominated world. But the root of her crisis began with the treatment she received from her mother. Since her birth Urmila detests her for an absurd reason. In addition, she believes that a male will be more successful because women were still not part of the mainstream music industry in 1930s and 1940s. Understanding it from the perspective of a society it elucidates the fact that societal norms often govern parents' mind set. Gender discrimination and exploitation do exist in various industries, but it is the role of a parent to support and encourage children rather than make them feel inferior due to their gender. Urmila never believes in the talent of her daughter and feels that if she enters the music industry, she will become a courtesan and will have the suffix of 'Bai'. She will never want Qala to become one. It shows her lack of faith and interest in her own daughters. In a way, Urmila herself lacks clarity and obsessed with idea of her legacy being carried down by his so-called adopted son Jagan, that she forgets her own daughter. Urmila's strict upbringing of Qala results in her rising insecurities, lack of confidence and jealousy towards Jagan. A fragmented personality is grown that lacks clarity to make sane decisions. In majority of the cinema based on parent child relationship, the core problem is the children refusing to follow the life/career path suggested by the parents. The identity crisis arises when they want to pursue a different path, while their parents want something else. In Qala's life, she is doing exactly what her mother always desired her to do, yet her mother is not accepting her recognition and her entire being.

Qala's disturbing visions are indicative of her need for assistance. As her mental health worsens, it becomes difficult for her to distinguish between reality and hallucinations. She starts seeing apparitions in the mirror. Even doctors are not able to understand the cause of her problems. She is trying to do her job of singing, yet is failing due to her psychosis. While giving an interview, she again sees Jagan accusing her living the life which could have been his. Qala cries and utters the word, "Ma is not happy yet" (*Qala* 1:44:24). This illustrates her how much she yearns for her mother's presence in her life. Her only parent, Urmila's approval, acceptance

and love is all she wants, for which she has done every action possible, yet she never came. Her childhood experiences of envy, criticism, insecurity and lack of attachment from her caregiver motivates her to give Jagan the poisoned milk. Freud and Bowlby's psychological framework is reflected in her actions.

Urmila's complete abandonment of Qala results in episodic nervous breakdowns. She is facing an overpowering male world alone. Through Urmila's support, she would have been able to fight and carve a niche for herself. In her final cry for help, Urmila realizes that she will lose her only daughter. But it is too late as Qala has met a tragic end by hanging herself, in a similar way like Jagan. Urmila loses both her children because of her own obsession and problems. It also showcases that children should be given the liberty to choose for their life but at the same time a parent's support and an open dialogue is highly significant. When a child enters this world, it is a huge responsibility of Parents to nurture them in the right direction. The difference between passion and a blind obsession towards any discipline should be explained and that is the responsibility of parents itself. The film also depicts that patriarchy and discrimination in music industry. Patriarchy does not only exist in the society, but it forms a scenario in the mindset of the people. People like Urmila, whose patriarchal mind set causes both physical and mental assault on Qala. Her biasness towards Jagan and non-acceptance of Qala's existence leads to her daughter's sufferings. There is a need to acknowledge the problems prevailing in the society that can have a strong impact on the children's identity. Identity development is fundamental in the life of an individual and parent's role becomes highly crucial in shaping it.

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