



## Spooking the Real and Patriarchal: Reading *Bulbbul* and *Qala* as Female Fantastic Cinema

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### Abstract

The issue of representation of women in Hindi drama and its horror counterpart has attracted much debate. Confined to passive roles following the dictates of patriarchy, a transformation in women's representation has been slow to manifest, notwithstanding the arrival of the so-called 'New Woman' on the screen. The fantastical Hindi horror, like other popular genres, has faithfully reflected and naturalised dominant social norms. The present study aims to understand how some recent fantastic films, namely *Bulbbul* and *Qala*, subvert the patriarchal gaze and narrative domination prevalent in Fantastic. In doing so, the paper tries to look at the manner in which these films reshape the male-centred narratives of the fantasticas they forge an alternate space where a new female subjectivity can be foregrounded.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema, horror, *Bulbbul*, *Qala*, fantastic, female

Women's representation in popular Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, has been gaining attention for some time, though in most readings, film criticism usually takes one of the two routes. The first is the good old feminist critique which unwraps the unconscious, hidden mother/whore binary in the typical construction of women in Hindi films. In such critiques, the film(s) in question is/are read to create the *sanskari* or rooted heroine by

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projecting the atypical woman as immoral, often as a vamp. Given the popular film's natural and obvious allegiance to or connivance with patriarchy, the cultural function of the generic realist and horror film has been to naturalise the oppressive patriarchal social order as normative. Critiques draw our attention to these hidden status-quoist political dimensions of Hindi films. The other route in feminist film criticism is the unravelling of a visual narrative tradition which creates representational space for alternative flexible imaginations of the good woman while limiting themselves to social dictates. This constitutes the seizing of forgotten films that challenge normative social order by constructing heroines within the borders drawn by patriarchy that contest received ideas of the good and the bad. In the reading that follows our analysis is propelled by the idea that the representation of women in cinema has undergone a transformation, wherein the representations can be examined as "negotiating a strategic resolution of the contradictions that women experience in their lives as a result of the contrary pulls of the ideological categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity'" (Rajan 127).

When we think of the growth and development of Hindi cinema from the 1920s onwards, the portrayal of women was largely as passive creatures. Nandakumar defines this phenomenon, as he states, "There was a stigma associated with Indian women acting... and in order to conform to social norms (directors) might have been pressured to portray Indian women leads as characters who live within the confines of society even in the films" (22). This stereotypical depiction of women witnessed a slight change with the transformative depiction of women in the 1960s to 80s, who were gradually getting educated, bold and outgoing. But despite the metamorphosis, the representation of women never really challenged the conservative social ethos. Butalia iterates how the problem in women's depiction was not one of irreverence but that it lacked agency, as seen in *Mother India* (1957). The woman depicted in the cinema of the period is never really liberated; she is thoroughly bound to her home and family, and is a husband-worshipping, self-sacrificing, sexually chaste woman. Rajan comments on these depictions in cinema as she states that women "are made to serve as harmonious symbols of historical continuity

rather than as conflictual subjects and sites of conflict" (129). Gokulsing and Dissanayake further observe this depiction of women in films, "Their need to preserve honour is expressed through elaborate codified behaviour patterns that require the women to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband" (79). With the women's movement gaining strength in the 1980s, women filmmakers like Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjape, and Arun Raje attempted to make women and their issues visible, and bring female subjectivity to the forefront with women characters firmly rooted in specific socio-historical periods (Dutta 73). But these cinemas remained in the margins, in terms of popular viewership, with the dominant cinema with a male lead swallowing up the women-centric cinemas. Commenting on the narrative handicap that marred the portrayal of women characters, Dutta states, "It is a disconcerting observation that a language of cinematic violence appropriates women filmmakers and disallows any alternate subjective vision to underpin the narrative" (75). The cinema post-liberalisation in the 1990s attempted to portray women differently with women sharing significant chunk of cinematic space and propelling the plot ahead with their roles. Films like *Dushman* employing the avenging women genre though, tried to provide women with more agency, yet as Lalitha Gopalan points out, the avenging women is a masculine invention where the woman, generally a victim of rape, never upsets the social imaginary. Despite several efforts, women's representation has failed to garner a major change. Quoting the example of *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, and its failure to challenge the voyeuristic male gaze that forces the depiction of women in a particular manner, Dutta opines, "the two female personae do not articulate a new subjectivity but remain limited as the filmmaker's imaginary feminine" (76). The film makers' complicity with the patriarchal structures of society in which men are bestowed with the power of gaze, and women become the object of gaze has been heavily criticized by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking 1975 essay titled, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where Mulvey states, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19).

The female continues to be the vassal of desire of men post the liberalisation of India in 1990s. Women continue to be the object on which the male could project their fantasies and fulfil it through them. Women's portrayal, in the dominant modes of representations in India, has mostly shied away from what Rajan had termed the "sites of conflict" with the demand for the rights of women always being at odds with the society that champions the traditional. Within the nationalist discourse of Hindi cinema that bound the depiction of women to the family paradigm, the points of resistance were limited and did not have the ability to subvert the existing formula of representation of women completely. In such a scenario, when the depiction of women's interests is subservient to the demands and wishes of the traditional patriarchal societal structure that holds family values to be the primary objective of a woman, it becomes an emergent need to create an alternate space for women's rights to flourish. The female fantastic in cinema attempts to provide that alternate space to create a discourse specific for women that subverts and challenges the normative patriarchal discourse ruling the roost in traditional cinema. The paper intends to understand how the problematic representation of women finds a vent through the use of the female fantastic in two Hindi cinemas, *Bulbbul* and *Qala*. The study, in doing so, not only questions the traditional misrepresentation/absences of women from Indian cinema but also highlights the absence of agency for women depicted in the reel. The paper will further look into the fantastic in cinema in light of the historical, cultural, and social determinants that shape it, and attempt to assert how the female fantastic provides women in cinema with the much-needed agency to act upon the absent/secondary characters of women, while helping them recover the reel spaces that has for so long been denied to them.

Fantasy has always been an alluring subject area in all areas be it art, literature or cinema. Its association with what is often termed the subconscious expression of desire has made the genre elusive and difficult to theorise upon. The genre of fantasy has always stood in opposition to realistic writings, subverting what we term 'normal' in realistic writings. Fantasy writings have refuted the laws of traditional characterisation, chronology, and the laws of unity. Rosemary Jackson in her book, *Fantasy: The Literature of*

*Subversion*, dubs fantasy as “the literature of desire” (2). As a mode, fantasy is best defined by its relationality, the relation that fantasy has to the real, not in antithesis to it, but is “the inverse side of reason's orthodoxy. It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinises the category of the ‘real’” (Jackson 12). The genesis of the fantastical can be found in the Gothic writings as it has been time and again theorised that the fantastic has links or often coincides with the uncanny (Roas np; Boccuti np) and emerged with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Published in a high era of rationality and reason, the novel made inroads into the fortress of stability, coherence, pushing towards an incoherent world, where meanings and certainties are dissolved. Most critical renditions of these writings have been liberal humanist in character, dubbing them as “escapist” and “transcendental,” which have been attempting to move away from the mundane realities that surround the lives of the time to create an alternate superior life. However, most of these criticisms attempt to develop a reading of this genre in isolation of the social, cultural, historical, and gendered factors that play a significant role in helping understand the significance of fantasy. David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980) attempts to provide a corrective as it states, “Gothic fiction demonstrates the potential of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable, but the very act of speaking it is an ambiguous gesture” (417).

The gothic tradition gradually underwent changes, with the trope of terror, horror and supernaturalism mingled in the early Gothic, which aimed more at social justice, giving way later to more radical changes in the narrative where the larger issues of social transformation are taken up. In the nineteenth century, the Gothic, witnessed an uneasy blending in the realistic novels. In novels like *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Wuthering Heights*, the Gothic penetrates the realistic in order to challenge/rant at the bourgeois patriarchal order of the society, giving birth to the idea of the fantastic that tended to reproduce and challenge prohibited desires within the accepted structures of the society like family and marriage only to return to the accepted norms of patriarchal society. Jackson comments, “Fantasy, as a literature of the ‘uncanny’ in this period, brought to the surface unconscious desire and threatened to dissolve

those taboos” (76). The more clearly “Fantastic” writers of the nineteenth century present a strictly topsy-turvy world which has no connection with reality. These fantastical writings, however, have almost always been dominated by men, and even if women employed the fantastic in any manner in their literary works (as we see above), it would still remain subservient to the existing order of the society, shying from challenging or creating a novel space altogether. Men's way of thinking, writing, and imagining have largely shaped the fantastic. Women have been marginalised figures in this portrayal of the fantastic, an aberration whose very existence was defined as a passive victim or as an embodiment of evil, seducing the innocent and condemning them to death. The fantastic element got a feminist makeover when women took to creating the fantastic in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which is often termed neo-fantastic literature. Natalie M. Rosinsky, in her book *Feminist Futures*, comments on the feminist turn in the fantastic as she opines, “the fluid reconfiguration of perceived physical reality, validating temporal simultaneity and spatial relativity, is redolent of the “feminist consciousness” (106).

It is the existence/assertion of this feminist consciousness subverting/feminising the temporality and spatial unity in the fantastical of the post-modern age that the study is located. Though the concept of the fantastic existed since the time of the Gothic, the idea of the female fantastic first appeared when the Belgian writer and Critic, Anne Richter, coined the term in her anthology. Richter proposes a rather essentialist view of the female fantastic featuring the primordial woman who, through this writing, finds a suitable vent through it, while it also acts as a medium of assertion and celebration as she states:

the feminine imaginary expresses a persistent nostalgia, its connivance with elementary nature, which is now underestimated. (...) The revelations of current fantastic literature bring us back to the path of life and wisdom. For the demands of nature that she embodies are not only material but also spiritual. The exacerbation of the intellect has completely cut off the so-called civilised man from intuitive discernment. In the face of the disasters with

which this excess threatens us, does not salvation rest on the restoration of feminine values? (195)

The essentialist definition of the female fantastic received some flak at the hands of critics like Gloria Alpini and Danielle Hipkins who espoused the view that the celebration of the woman as an irrational subject might "involve the risk of perpetuating the male habit of reducing the feminine to the expression of the irrational/Eros as opposed to the masculine/rational/Logos" (261). However, despite the criticism, the concept received some support from later critics like Monika Farnetti, who believed that the definition of the female fantastic through its championing of the irrational transgresses the symbolic patriarchal control through Western language and thought that was made and controlled by man. Two other seminal works make use of this essentialist view of the female fantastic, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (2000) by Lucie Armitt and Zoé Jiménez Corretjer's *El Fantástico Femenino en España y América* (2001). Both the writers depict how through their fantastic writings and creation of fantastic women characters, the traditional systems of logic and rationality established by men are subverted. The female fantastic then creates a parallel discursive arena where patriarchal ideals and criticism can be challenged and often subverted. The female fantastic is essentially centred around women, portraying their status in society, often pointing to adultery, incest, and lesbianism, among other things that challenge the male hegemonic status in society, while depicting everything from a feminine perspective. Reading a fantastic cinema allows us to metaphorically look beyond the signification system established by the patriarchal society, to look for hidden meanings beyond the surface layer that enables an understanding of the familiar things in a novel context. Through the female fantastic, an alternate space is created where the female can define and assert herself, where the patriarchal norms take a backseat even if temporarily. While a lot of scholarship already exists on the female fantastic in literature, the space is largely unexplored when it comes to the depiction and use of the female fantastic in Hindi cinema. Cinema with strong women leads have always been a part of Hindi cinema, *Mother India* (1957), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Fire* (1996) , *15 Park Avenue* (2001), along with a

spate of recent films like *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2013), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Mary Kom* (2014) and *Mimi* (2021) have ventured to challenge the stereotypical plot structures of conventional Hindi cinema that worship the male lead. These films have attempted to create an alternate narrative that allows women characters to drive the plot ahead and rule over a universe that is still male-centric. However, despite their best attempts the films fall short of actually liberating the women characters from the gender norms of society, and hence cannot be dubbed as a female fantastic. Though the fantastic element in women centred films have been slow to enter the picture, there have been some films who have attempted to experiment with this form, an aspect that the study will focus upon. The paper attempts to theorise upon the rise of the female fantastic in Hindi cinema through a study of two Hindi cinemas, *Bulbbul* (2020) and *Qala* (2022), as the representation of the female fantastic.

The fantastic in Indian cinema has largely been cast in the form of horror cinema which have acted as a medium where the normative can be upended, opening up spaces for the alternative portrayals. However, even in these films, the women characters have, at best, been second fiddle to the male protagonists. The women characters, when represented, would be the demoness or the seducer whose mindless and purposeless existence is only to seek revenge. The women in such fantastic cinemas occupy the binary of the witch/damsel in distress, both of whom are at the mercy of the male protagonist. Often these women, young and attractive, are projected as the wish fulfilment of male fantasies. Never does the representation of any of the categories of women characters provide space to question the values of a traditional patriarchal society. Though a popular way of the analysis of horror has been through the popular idea of Kristeva's 'abject', yet the depiction of women in Hindi cinema also does not comply strictly with Kristeva's notion of the 'abject'. This relationship between woman and the abject can be discerned from Kristeva's comments on the representation of women in horror fantastic as she opines, "woman is specifically related to polluting objects, which fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual. This, in turn, gives woman a special relationship to the abject" (10). In Hindi horror-fantastic cinema, we



visualise the other woman/witch as the abject, while the woman acts as a foil, where "traditional gendered perspectives are reinforced, normative femininity is deified and the monstrous other feminine, commanding sovereign female desire and controlling gaze, is annihilated" (Mubarak 382). The body of the woman becomes the site where the battle between the monstrous and normative feminine is played out, and the normative feminine wins the battle upholding the patriarchal norms once again.

The present study explores how the films in question, *Qala* and *Bulbbul*, problematise Kristeva's notion of the abject, and Mubarak's "MonstrousOther Feminine" by subverting the patriarchal notion of normative feminine and overturn their subjugation to an established order. The films in question also upend the atypical tropes of Indian horror cinema followed right from the 1940s with films like *Mahal*, *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Poonam ki Raat* (1965), *Ye Raat Phir na Ayegi* (1966), *Sau Saal Baad* (1966), *Anita* (1967), the Ramsay Films of the 1970s and 1980s along with the new age low-budget horror of Ram Gopal Verma and Vikram Bhatt till the early years of the twenty-first century. Though the horror fantastic cinema in the twenty-first century had tried to take into purview the changing gender equations in Indian society and has attempted to depict women in a more favourable light, it still had its shortcomings. Hindi cinema has attempted to examine horror fantastic through psychological lens in films like *Bees Saal Baad* (1958), *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2004); these films have tried to bring in mental illness to justify the presence of horror, but the result was a failed experiment and ultimately, it is the subjugation to the male commands that cures the protagonists of their mental illness, thereby conforming to the established gender norms with women being cast in witch/ honourable women binary. It was *Stree* which broke the horror-fantastic mould by unsettling the fixed gender identities that shape the fantastic cinemas. With *Bulbbul* (2020), the genre moves a step ahead, sheds the horror element and takes the form of the fantastic. *Qala* (2022) has a mild brush with horror elements, shapes itself and enters completely in the fantastic genre. In the process, both films rewrite the manner in which horror-fantastic cinema depicts women. They unshackle the women

characters from the burden of the binary representation of witch/honourable women while also liberating, substantially, if not completely, the Hindi fantastic cinema from being reliant on the trope of horror. Both feature films transgress the boundaries laid down by the patriarchal horror-fantastic codes, and surge ahead while breaking the masculine rational and logical code of conduct laid down by a society governed by male norms. The study intends to analyse how the feature films in question are also instrumental in bringing about a revolutionary depiction of female characters that establish a world of their own, run and dictated by their choices and commands.

### **The Foregrounding of the Fantastic in *Bulbbul***

*Bulbbul* (2020), set in nineteenth-century Bengal, is the story of its eponymous heroine, Bulbbul, who married at a very young age and develops an attraction for her brother-in-law, leading to violent retribution from her husband, the landlord. The film, on the surface level, comprises all tropes of horror, witch, murders by a witch, witch-hunting and an all-encompassing eeriness. The society depicted in this horror film is strongly patriarchal, and no deviation from the patriarchy-dictated normative behaviour goes unnoticed and unpunished. Following the traditions set by a conservatively patriarchal society in Bengal Presidency, Bulbbul, at a tender age, is married off to a much older man, Indranil, the landlord of a massive estate. The male-dominated society becomes apparent to the viewers when the partisanship of a deeply hypocritical society that holds different standards of morality for a man and women come to the forefront. While Indranil has an illicit physical relationship with his twin mentally deranged brother's wife, Bulbbul is not allowed to cultivate a friendly bond with her brother-in-law, Indranil's younger brother, Satya. 'Putting women in place', a dominant cultural practice associated with the establishment of male supremacy and hegemony, finds its outlet in Mahendra violently indulging in wife-beating, so much so that Bulbbul suffers a grave injury (her feet turn inside out). Following the incident, she is also raped by her husband's twin.

It is after this violent episode of patriarchal retribution that we see the element of the female fantastic manifest in the film through the character of Bulbbul. The colour of the moon in the film changes to red, signifying the loss of innocence of Bulbbul, an innocence that predominated in the first half of the film, and referring to the fantastic element in the film. The world is bathed in red whenever Bulbbul is out to avenge all those women who suffer the same fate as her. The fantastic depicted here "denounces female cultural models imposed by patriarchal power" (Roas 8). Bulbbul metamorphoses into a non-conformist woman who subverts the power structures established by a conservative society. For one, Bulbbul befriends the doctor who had cured her when she had suffered violent physical abuse. She sheds the patriarchal dictates of purdah and develops a deep bond with the doctor, who apparently did not share the moral dictates of the patriarchal society. Satya, fulfilling his patriarchal duties, reprimands her, "*purdah bhinahi kara aapne!*" (You didn't cover your face in a veil!) Bulbbul also acts like the lord of the house so when Satya returns after his education in London, he comments on her boldness, "*Thakur, thakur khel rahe h boudi!*" (Are you pretending to be the landlord or sister-in-law!) From a sweet, docile, gentle girl, Bulbbul metamorphoses into a superwoman who has to take on the garb of a witch to scare the dominating, torturous males in society.

The episodes of men lording over their wives are showcased throughout the feature film. The harmless-looking Master Dinkar, Satya's wagoner are all part of the same tribe that believes that the wife's body is the site for performing patriarchy by physical violence. Bulbbul takes on the task of avenging the wrongs meted out to the women in her society because she knows that the patriarchal males will never find faults with their own behaviour. The film challenges the rational/patriarchal approach to the understanding/viewing of women like Bulbbul/women in general as a witch/evil force as it rationalises/champions the irrationality often attributed to women. The film employs "a humanisation of the image of the witch, now somebody who has been battered by patriarchy and is out there to save the other women from its evils" (Mukherjee and Gunwant 45). The witch in the film subverts the cultural logic and order that society expects from its women, and in

the subversion, the film establishes a novel manner in which to view the actions of women in society. The way in which the trope of witch has been used by the film speaks amply about how it aims to subvert the received notions of witchcraft by a patriarchal society. The association of witchery with women is strongly challenged by the film, which takes place on two planes: First, the film challenges the existence of witches, and second, the film tries to establish that witches are the product of the evils of society, not a supernatural manifestation. The film demonstrates that witches do not exist; it is the violence perpetrated upon her, physically and emotionally, by the male trio that results in her transformation into a character who avenges the wrongs of the other women of the village. In the dark of the night and the dense parts of the jungle, Bulbbul puts into employment her adeptness in climbing trees (earlier in the film, she displayed great skill at it) and her pent-up anger against the male privileges and insensitivity, and her inside-out feet caused by the severe physical torture at the hands of her husband to fight against the injustices meted out to women giving rise to the rumour that a *chudail* (witch) lives in the jungle.

The film goes a long way towards dispensing any superstitions associated with witchcraft and putting in place a feminist explanation of the existence of such beliefs. The episode of Bulbbul being physically abused by her husband to the extent that she is bedridden with crushed bones in her feet over the suspicion of having an affair with her brother-in-law Satya is interconnected with one of the most significant scenes where Bulbbul reveals herself as the witch with her feet inside out, thus challenging the popular beliefs of people that associate witches with such characteristics. The scenes also challenge the popular belief associated with witches by portraying that it is not inherent evil, but being exposed to evil forces that may lead to physical deformities in them, like in the film, Bulbbul's feet is turned inside out. Also the film debunks the popular myths that witches hunt humans without any provocation, as the film depicts to the viewers that bulbul, the witch, was only avenging the women being ill-treated by their husbands by murdering those men in the dark of night. The woman committing murders in the dark of the night inhabits the domestic spaces of a normative woman quite safely. The ordinariness of the

woman confined to the domestic spaces by the patriarchal forces ironically upends those very norms and dictates and confines her. Bulbbul encapsulates the stereotypical binary employed in the depiction of women. She moves from the submissive female to the female as a monster, and in doing so, upsets the balance and structure of the society dictated by patriarchal norms. The red colour frame used whenever Bulbbul is out to subvert and challenge patriarchy becomes synonymous with the horror that the film-makers want to create in the minds of the audience only to break the illusion later when it is revealed that the horror faced by the audience is an extension of the horror that Bulbbul goes through when she is physically abused by her husband and later raped by her brother-in-law. The scenes shift between the red and white colours symbolically shifting between rationality and subversion of it. Living the life of a normal woman in the day and taking on the form of an avenging woman by the night, Bulbbul's body becomes the site where the abject and the desirable peacefully reside, with the abject trouncing and defeating the normatively desirable woman of patriarchy. In upending the established patriarchal normativity, creating spaces for alternate norms and order, inhabiting the liminal space between reason and unreason, challenging the societal dictates of a docile woman by taking on the form of an avenging woman, using the tropes of conventional horror films to denounce the oppression of women and fighting against the marginalised status that was ascribed to these women, the film in question transcends the boundaries of an ordinary horror to become a female fantastic.

### **The Hidden Fantastic in *Qala***

*Qala* (2022), a story set in pre-independent India, revolves around the life journey of its eponymous heroine *Qala*. A coming-of-the-age film, it takes the reader on a journey of a gothic tale of the fight for motherly love turning into violent ambition and resulting in life-long guilt. Though the story does not fit into the typical model of horror cinema (without witches and ghosts), the film abounds in gothic elements, in fact walking the thin line between gothic and realistic, and would undoubtedly fit the mould of a female fantastic. The female and the fantastic are found aplenty in the depiction of

the film. The fantastic can be discerned in the setting of the house where *Qala* lived with her mother as it has a strong Gothic feel; the architecture of the house is Victorian Gothic, with a surreal location in the middle of a snow-capped no (wo)man's land. The appearance and clothes of her mother have an old-world charm; the chunky jewellery, the heavy clothes, and the bearing of the mother all inspire a feeling of the surreal. The way the film plays with the light and dark inside the house reminds one of Walpole's awe-inspiring Gothic settings. Brightness eludes the viewers, and the long silences are accompanied by dull candle light; daylight serves only as a harsh reminder of bitter truths. The scenes of Qala's childhood also overlap with her period of innocence and is characterized dominantly by rich black and white frames evoking the gothic. Though the house is no match for the mansions commonly found in gothic films, the interiors of the house smacks of a grandness that old Hindi horror films like *Kohraa* (1964) reflect; the curved staircase, the spluttering candles to ward off the darkness, rocking chairs, windows with curtains overlooking swamps, mist and snow. Films like *Mahal* (1949), *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), and to an extent *Madhumati* (1958) depict such Gothic elements. However, the horror films mentioned above comprises a male hero, hapless and caught in the web of mystifying elements, *Qala*, depicts a woman fighting her own demons. While the old hindi films use the template of *punar janam* (reincarnation) to a large extent, in *Qala* the guilt gives way to hallucinations and psychological imbalance in the protagonist sparking elements of horror in the film. A film with an absent father figure and populated with women characters who are not passive material beings but drive the story forward becomes a crucial element in the film. *Qala*'s mother, *Qala* and her secretary are the three personas around whom the story revolves. The film also employs other women characters in order to break the stereotype and prejudices associated with certain professions.

As in the case of protagonists of fantastic literature in general, *Qala*'s life is brimming with solitude and alienation: "She sank into utter solitude, surrounding herself with a rampart of silence" (Richter 132). The solitude of *Qala* is depicted through minimal use of dialogue, silence punctuated by classical music and *taranna*. The solitude is further accentuated through the darkness and gloom that

characterizes the first section of the film. The house situated in the middle of a snow-covered field bereft of people symbolically refers to the alienation that she faces in her life. The loneliness that surrounds her life as a young woman persistently defines even when she succeeds as a singer in a music industry dominated by men. The darkness predominant in the house is reflective of the darkness within the mother's heart caused due to the loss of the male offspring at childbirth. Her only hope and aim in life appeared to be to please her mother, which she seemed to be unable to. Her mother, Urmila, a perfectionist, when it comes to music, is unable to deal with the mediocrity that Qala seems to exhibit. The twin brother of Qala, who unfortunately died at childbirth because he was the weaker one in comparison to Qala, seems almost like an invisible spirit hovering over the entire house. His loss at times appears to trump any efforts made by Qala to enliven the spirits of her mother. This phantom brother of Qala has transformed into the brooding silence and mournful stillness that is apparent in the house. Throughout the film, it seems Urmila displays a coldness and indifference towards her daughter, venting the anger that she was strong enough to take away all the nutrition and cause her twin brother to die. In one instance, in a display of anger, she also attempts to smother Qala with a pillow. And this absent son makes a return through the character of Jagan who exhibits all the characteristic traits that Urmila would have desired her son to possess. Conveniently an orphan, Jagan is easily absorbed into the household, and the creepiness gives way to mind-numbing patriarchy. Urmila, now that she had a son she could not keep alive, puts all her energy into making him a singing star; Qala's ambition is smothered. What she had been instructed in her childhood to limit her musical learning to the confines of the home now materialises for Qala. She is forced to act as a loving sister and is taken to meet appropriate boys for marriage. Qala, however, is disdainful of both roles and is more bent on receiving public recognition for her singing. And so, the unimaginable happens. Jagan loses his voice in a very public performance that was meant to bring him huge accolades and a promising career in the music industry of Hindi cinema. Unable to bear the loss of his voice, Jagan is pushed to do the extreme when he chooses to take his own life.

Despite this, Qala seduces a music director and grabs an offer of singing for a Hindi film. The patriarchal society reaps its dividend by sexually exploiting Qala. Overcoming all obstacles, Qala succeeds in making a name for herself in the music industry. But her mother seems unable to forgive Qala for her transgressions and for murdering her brother(s), twice. The film also showcases how women were subjugated in the film industry. The courtesans would be the only female singers, and women from reputed households could not be a part of the industry. However, no such rules applied to the menfolk. The film also depicts the attitude that the film harboured towards the female singers, and as a viewer, one is repeatedly reminded of Urmila Devi's admonishment to Qala, "Remember! Don't become a courtesan!". The dehumanisation of women entering the public sphere is quite telling. Qala's action in deciding to put her musical ambitions over her sexual innocence, which the patriarchal society would not like her to do, unravels the patriarchal dictates of society. In choosing a musical career, Qala subverts the conventional norms of society and foregrounds her identity and wishes, prioritising her life over societal dictates. She freely mingles with the infamous courtesan singers of the music industry and throws the gauntlet to the domineering males who would like to control and show Qala her place as an inferior creature in society. Qala establishes herself as a reputed singer who also wins a prestigious award for her singing; in doing so, Qala challenges the conventional and rational decisions made by women in their lives and ventures into the unknown. Her adventure into the unknown is the biggest upends the established order of a male-dominated society. And the continuous pressure that this position puts on Qala can be estimated from the delusions that she suffers from. Her life seems to be a storehouse of sadness, a melancholy that causes her to "lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (Kristeva 5). At the same time, however, her breakdown and separation from reality is her obvious choice, glaring and inescapable (5). Qala earns a lot of accolades from society, and yet she is ignored by her mother, and that seems to become the centre of her delusions. While her boldness in choosing her career path might have been a celebration of the irrational over the male-sanctioned rationality, in her mother's estimation, she was a ruinous woman, and her irrationality was never accepted by her mother. She



was, in her mother's eyes, an abject who could never become a normal, subversive woman. In taking the less chosen path, in subverting the conventional dictates of a heteronormative patriarchal society, the film brings the female subversive role combined with the fantastic to the foreground. As Rosemary Jackson puts it, the fantastic becomes an excellent form of subversive social opposition that counters the ideology of the moment in history in which it arises:

It is possible to discern it [the fantastic] as a desire for something excluded from cultural order -more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries. As literature of desire, the fantastic can be seen as providing a point of departure. (176)

### **Redefining the Fantastic**

The characters in both feature films refuse to be abject; in fact, they are both very desirable nor do they metamorphose into normative gendered beings toeing the patriarchal line where they are the subjugated ones. *Bulbbul* transforms into a so-called witch to avenge the wrongs meted out to women in general, and Qala is indeed a witch as someone who has decided to go against the heteronormative society. In doing so, both of the films attempt to manifest as a female fantastic. Armitt states "[the fantastic text], endlessly open and thus non-containable...therefore pose as a dangerous threat to establish notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity" (11). Armitt seems to point out that marginality becomes a chief point of exploration for all of these films, which works to show how females are marginalised with respect to a deeply patriarchal society. In exploring the marginalised positions of women and then subverting the marginalised to bring it to the centre, the films in question fit the mould of the female fantastic. The irrational, in terms of the subversion of patriarchy, in these two films comes to the limelight and urges the viewers to question what has been unconsciously accepted as normal. The fixed, normative

and rational is taken for a toss, while the female-driven norm rules the roost. Both films depict very strong women characters who very bravely stand up to a male-dominated society and challenge their confinement to the domestic sphere of the household, though films that break the conventional patriarchal narrative of cinema to create new narratives of identity and establish new codes of social conduct is still wanting. While *Bulbbul* sheds the purdah and turns into a witch warrior, *Qala* breaks the confines of the music industry to establish a name in music. The horror depicted in *Bulbbul*, and the Gothic horror in *Qala* then serve the purpose of these women in defeating the reductionist forces that would limit their lives and reduce it to nothingness. The films depict women eager to venture into the public sphere and upset the hierarchy that has been created by a patriarchal society. *Bulbbul* located in nineteenth-century 19th-century Bengal and *Qala* in the early 20th-century attempt to break the code of passive, innocent women established by the cinema of those times. The films in question then also undertake a revisionist depiction of the women of the colonial society opening up gaps and questioning their monolithic depiction, and looking for gaps in that history that talks of the assertion of women. Hindi cinema is yet to be liberated from the clutches of monotonous patriarchal depiction that would allow women characters to be at the centre of power, challenging and defeating the conventional.

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