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Nature, Culture, and Indian Cinema: Analysing *Qala*, *Bulbul*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* through Sherry B. Ortner's Theoretical Lens

Ms. Kajal Singh
Postgraduate Student
Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune

ABSTRACT

Indian cinema, a vibrant and dynamic form of artistic expression, has long provided a unique lens through which to explore cultural narratives, gender roles, and social structures. This research examines how Sherry B. Ortner's theoretical framework of the nature-culture dichotomy, as articulated in her seminal essay Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture? intersects with Indian cinema, focusing specifically on the films Qala*,* Bulbul*, and* The Great Indian Kitchen*. Ortner argues that women are symbolically equated with nature due to their biological and reproductive roles, whereas men are aligned with culture, intellect, and progress. This distinction is not a biological inevitability but a cultural construct that reinforces gendered subjugation. By analysing the visual and narrative structures of* Qala*,* Bulbul*, and* The Great Indian Kitchen*, this paper explores how these films reinforce, question, and subvert traditional gender binaries, ultimately challenging the patriarchal constraints imposed upon women.*

Keywords: Nature-culture dichotomy, gender hierarchy, patriarchy, cultural exclusion, female resistance, ecological symbolism

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Introduction

Ecofeminism, as a critical framework, challenges entrenched dualisms in Western philosophy, especially the hierarchical distinction between nature and culture. This dualism, rooted in patriarchal thought, elevates culture as the domain of reason, order, and progress, relegating nature to a realm of chaos and irrationality. Within this framework, women are closely associated with nature—defined by their physiological roles, reproductive labour, and perceived

emotionality—thus justifying their subordination alongside the exploitation of the natural world. Ecofeminism argues that these interconnected oppressions stem from the same logic of domination, which perpetuates ecological degradation and gender inequality.

Emerging in the late 20th century alongside feminist and environmental movements, ecofeminism offers a comprehensive critique of patriarchal and capitalist systems that underlie these forms of oppression. Thinkers like Val Plumwood and Karen Warren emphasise how patriarchal binaries establish parallel systems of devaluation, pairing terms like "female," "nature," and "emotion" as inferior to "male," "culture," and "reason." This approach highlights how deeply cultural norms normalise ecological destruction and gender subjugation. In India, these insights resonate strongly as gender and ecology are intertwined in its socio-cultural fabric, reflecting both unique and global patterns. The Chipko movement, for example, demonstrates how women have led resistance against ecological harm, embodying the interconnected struggles of environment and gender that ecofeminism seeks to examine.

Vandana Shiva's work amplifies this intersectional perspective by critiquing Western development paradigms, which she argues displace traditional, sustainable practices rooted in women's ecological knowledge. Shiva emphasises that women are vital custodians of biodiversity and ecological balance, offering a narrative that counters mainstream ideas of progress, which often erase indigenous and feminine ways of engaging with nature. For Shiva, these approaches are not merely alternatives; they are essential for envisioning a just and sustainable world. Her claim that "nature is shakti, the living force that creates, sustains, and renews life" challenges the mechanistic worldview critiqued by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*, which links the commodification of women and the environment.

Indian cinema's engagement with ecofeminism is also deeply intertextual, drawing on the nation's mythological and cultural heritage. Vandana Shiva's insights into women's ecological roles intersect with cinematic portrayals that critique and celebrate these roles. The symbolic use of natural elements like fire, water, and earth within these narratives underscores the deep connection between the ecological and the feminine, challenging binaries that confine women to the margins of both culture and nature.

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By integrating ecofeminist theory, cultural critique, and cinematic analysis, this research highlights how Indian films articulate the dual oppressions of gender and ecology. These films reveal entrenched hierarchies critiqued by ecofeminism while also showcasing moments of defiance and transformation that suggest more equitable futures. Like the ecofeminist movement, these films reimagine the world by dismantling the binaries that sustain systems of domination.

Sherry B. Ortner's essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' presents a critical analysis of the near-universal pattern that positions women as closer to nature and men as representatives of culture. This binary, Ortner argues, serves as a foundational ideology in patriarchal societies, framing women's roles around biological determinism while elevating male -associated domains of intellect, culture, and rationality. This framework finds profound resonance in Indian cinema, where gendered hierarchies, domestic oppression, and cultural expectations frequently shape female protagonists' experiences.

This paper focuses on *Qala* (2022), *Bulbul* (2020), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) as case studies for exploring how Indian cinema engages with Ortner's theory. While *Qala* examines the exclusion of women from artistic and cultural spaces, *Bulbul* reconfigures the traditional association of women with nature, transforming it into a source of empowerment, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* illustrates the oppressive cycle of domestic labour, reinforcing women's confinement to nature through everyday routines. All three films offer a nuanced commentary on patriarchal constraints and female resistance, using visual, ecological, and symbolic elements to reinforce and dismantle the nature-culture binary.

Sherry B. Ortner's Theoretical Framework

In the work of Sherry B. Ortner and her essay titled, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', Ortner's concepts of gender, nature, and culture are interconnected, allowing her to present a critical assessment of the way women's place is constructed by patriarchal forces throughout the globe in various cultures and societies. With this essence, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how Ortner's theory integrates ecofeminist perspectives on the experiences of feminist filmmakers in representing women in Indian films like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Qala*, *Bulbul*, and *Three of Us*. These films, employed as case studies, provide a narrative recreation of women's lives,

including their stand against patriarchy, therefore exploring the link between gender, environment, and culture.

Ortner argues in this essay that there is a nearly universal cross-cultural pattern in which women are symbolically equated with "nature" associated with biological functions, the "species life," and in contrast, men are associated with "culture," the sphere of creativity, control, and transcendence over nature. According to Ortner, such a distinction puts women into a subordinate symbolic position even within varied cultural milieus. She also maintains that, "woman's body and its functions are more involved with 'species life'; and her traditional social roles leave her … in close contact with a natural existence" (Ortner 76). This argument alludes to the fact that patriarchal societies tend to limit women's identities to mere biological or reproductive and caregiving roles, therefore placing women's value into how biologically effective they are rather than intellectually or creatively.

But what is also important is that Ortner's concept is as much one of differentiation as of hierarchy. As she puts it, "the secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact" (Ortner 73). She argues that such a status does not result from any kind of inherent inferiority but from cultural definitions valuing cultural production, overwhelmingly male-associated, above reproductive and domestic labour. Her essay presents a framework for critical critique of these cultural constructs, revealing the structures in which symbols and roles are structured to reinforce male dominance over women. In this respect, the positioning of men in regard to culture further locates them as agents of civilisation, progress, and control, whereas women are placed in the domestic and natural realms, symbolically valued but practically restricted. It is rooted in the work of Ortner that critiques both interconnected women and nature's oppressions. Ecofeminists, such as Greta Gaard, further establish Ortner's argumentation: showing how through the symbolic connection between women and nature, that they end up being exploited, devalued, and controlled within capitalist, patriarchal systems (Gaard 6). In this symbolic alignment, women are once again made to take their place naturally alongside nature; at the same time, practices that have come to favour the productive contributions of men over those of women reproductive ones-being dismissed as biologically "inevitable" and culturally less valued.

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Although Ortner's essay is by and large anthropological, it serves as a critical precursor to the niche of ecofeminist critique, which indicates why the latter argues that women as well as nature are marginalised, exploited, and seen just as resources for extraction. From this ideology, ecofeminists come out and argue that patriarchal structures exploit natural resources in a manner disregarding balance with the environment, and hence they exploit female labour, reproductive and domestic, without stipulating the value it provides. In this aspect, Carolyn Merchant for example widens the critique to the point she is further suggesting that the mechanistic view of nature, therefore women, views something to be mastered and subordinated by it (Merchant 41). The Ortner standpoint also connects to the ecofeminist critiques over "species life" wherein they devalue women's caregiving, nurturing work with respect to ecology and more precisely in the economy and culture.

The Indian films to be used in this thesis resonate well in Ortner's framework because they continually depict female characters struggling with societal expectations so that they might stand closer to more domestic and caregiving work, sacrifice, and service. For instance, in *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the labour conducted by the lead female within the household illustrates how Ortner's thesis was correct, where "natural" responsibility and domesticity are secondary to "cultural" pursuit. The cooking, cleaning, and care-giving-in other words-the mundane daily routines are relegated to an unvalued sphere, although they are essential tasks. The film exhaustively repeats these acts in such a manner as to envelope the viewer into the experience of the protagonist, which underlines how her identity and worth are systemically tied to her ability to sustain the household. In this, Ortner follows the argument that "woman's body and its functions are more involved with 'species life'" (Ortner 76), and as such, the portrayals reveal how women's domestic and nurturing roles have become sites of cultural confinement rather than contributions.

Whereas in *Qala*, the protagonist's struggle to find acceptance in a male-dominated realm of music illustrates, too, Ortner's opinion that women, even when they venture into areas conventionally affiliated with men, are not normally accorded the same power. Ortner defines a paper in which it is observed that "even when a woman does attain recognition, she is usually perceived as the exception rather than the rule" (Ortner 78). Qala's artistic journey is more complicated by the societal expectation and the burden of the parent, confined within a nature-

bound identity. Her struggle brings out into the light that even in the realms of art and culture making circles, women struggle against forces that try to keep them from exercising their independence and exercising their free will.

Bulbul uses vivid ecological symbolism to capture the protagonist's transformation and eventual transcendence. The protagonist's inverted feet, a haunting visual that connects to South Asian chudail (witch) folklore, further symbolises her deviation from societal expectations. Traditionally, the chudail represents a woman who has transcended conventional roles and, through supernatural power, becomes a threat to patriarchy. Bulbul's inverted feet echo this folklore, presenting her "perversion" from cultural norms as a physical manifestation of her divergence from femininity as defined by society. Sherry B. Ortner's perspective on the nature-culture dichotomy sheds light on this symbolism; Ortner posits that "woman's association with 'nature' is used to justify her control and confinement" (Ortner, 1974). In *Bulbul*, however, this symbolism is reclaimed not as a mark of shame, but as an assertion of power and identity beyond cultural boundaries. Red tones and inverted feet become metaphors for Bulbul's transformation, reflecting her evolution into a potent, liberating force intertwined with the supernatural. Her journey, represented through natural elements, challenges the nature-culture binary and associates' femininity with a complexity that resists simple categorisation. *Bulbul* thus subverts the patriarchal lens, suggesting an ecofeminist view where the protagonist's agency aligns with an empowered natural identity rather than a subjugated one.

Qala: Gendered Exclusion from Culture and the Ecological Symbolism of Confinement

Qala tells the story of a talented female singer seeking recognition in a male-dominated industry. The protagonist, Qala, is subjected to relentless scrutiny and emotional abuse by her mother, Urmila, who systematically undermines her daughter's achievements while privileging a male protege, Jagan. Urmila functions as the gatekeeper of culture, reinforcing patriarchal values that diminish women's participation in artistic and intellectual fields. This dynamic mirrors Ortner's assertion that even when women enter cultural spaces, they are perceived as anomalies rather than rightful participants.

The film employs stark visual and ecological symbolism to reinforce Qala's struggle. The recurring motif of moths drawn to light serves as a metaphor for her relentless pursuit of validation in an environment designed to reject her. The oppressive, cold interiors of her home contrast sharply with the vast and expressive natural landscapes visible through windows, symbolising the freedom she longs for but remains barred from. The use of water as a recurring symbol, whether as the frozen lakes outside or the water reflections that distort Qala's own self-image, reinforces the fluidity of identity and the constraints imposed upon women who seek to cross the boundaries of nature into culture. Qala's eventual psychological collapse underscores the severe toll of cultural exclusion, illustrating Ortner's argument that patriarchal societies devalue women's creative contributions while reinforcing male dominance in artistic domains.

Bulbul: Nature as a Space of Transformation and Reclamation

In contrast to *Qala*, *Bulbul* reclaims and subverts the symbolic association of women with nature. The protagonist, Bulbul, is introduced as an innocent young bride subjected to patriarchal violence, married off as a child and later tormented by her abusive husband. However, rather than remaining a passive victim, she undergoes a supernatural transformation, becoming a chudail—a vengeful spirit associated with the forest and the wild. This shift challenges the traditional natureculture binary by reimagining the nature-aligned woman as a source of strength and retribution rather than subjugation.

The film's use of deep red hues and moonlit landscapes reinforces Bulbul's alignment with nature. Traditionally, supernatural women like the chudail are depicted as threats in patriarchal folklore, embodying fears of female agency. *Bulbul*, however, inverts this trope by positioning the chudail not as a monster but as a protector of other women, punishing those who perpetuate violence. The thick forests, the ancient trees, and the shifting shadows of nature are not mere backdrops but active participants in her transformation, symbolising the reclamation of a space that patriarchal culture had sought to tame. This narrative realignment echoes ecofeminist interpretations of Ortner's theory, which argue that women's connection to nature can be a source of empowerment rather than limitation.

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The Great Indian Kitchen: Domestic Labour as an Ecological Cycle of Oppression

While *Qala* and *Bulbul* critique patriarchal culture from artistic and supernatural perspectives, In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, directed by Jeo Baby, the protagonist's daily routine in the kitchen—cooking, cleaning, and managing household waste—symbolises the repetitive, unacknowledged labour women perform within traditional households. The protagonist's husband and in-laws assume her responsibilities are "natural" extensions of her role, treating the kitchen as an extension of her identity and confining her to its bounds. This dynamic reflects Ortner's concept of reproductive labour, where women's contributions are devalued precisely because they are seen as inherent, "natural" duties that do not merit appreciation or reciprocation (Ortner, 1974). The film's close, almost claustrophobic focus on the protagonist in the kitchen underscores the suffocating nature of these expectations, portraying the kitchen as a space of physical and emotional confinement. The husband's ignorance of minimal maintenance issues, such as the leaking tap and improper disposal of vegetable waste, further illustrates how patriarchal indifference exploits both the woman's labour and environmental resources. Rather than fixing the tap or properly managing waste, the husband's indifference reinforces a pattern of assuming women will address the resulting inconveniences. This negligence reflects Gaard's ecofeminist argument that patriarchal systems exploit women and nature as boundless resources available for male benefit (Gaard, 2014). The protagonist's eventual refusal to comply with these demands and her departure from the household represent a powerful act of resistance against these structures, signaling that neither her labor nor environmental resources are inherently disposable. Her rebellion disrupts the patriarchal assumption that her role is an inexhaustible resource, challenging the cultural conditioning that frames women's domestic work as both natural and unending.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Sherry B. Ortner's nature-culture dichotomy, *Qala*, *Bulbul*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* reveal the ways in which Indian cinema interrogates gendered hierarchies. Each film presents a different manifestation of the ways women are tied to nature and denied entry into cultural production. *Qala* demonstrates how patriarchal gatekeeping suppresses women's

contributions to the arts, reinforcing their exclusion from culture. *Bulbul* shifts the perception of nature from confinement to agency, reimagining nature as a site of female empowerment rather than subjugation. *The Great Indian Kitchen* highlights how patriarchal conditioning reduces women to the role of perpetual laborers within the household, ensuring their entrapment in a never-ending cycle of unpaid, unrecognised work.

These films expand Ortner's argument by showing how nature is both a site of oppression and a potential space for resistance. While *Qala* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* expose the rigid structures that confine women within traditional roles, *Bulbul* challenges these constraints by reclaiming nature as a force of feminine power and transformation. The analysis of these films illustrates that the nature-culture dichotomy is neither static nor universally oppressive; rather, it is a site of contested meanings where women navigate, resist, and sometimes overturn the structures imposed upon them.

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