

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## Mapping Awadh's History through Satyajit Ray's Cinematic Adaptation of Munshi Premchand's Short Story 'The Chess Players'

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11105883>

**Article History:** Submitted-01/03/2024, Revised-09/04/2024, Accepted-28/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

### **Abstract:**

Satyajit Ray has undoubtedly been a towering figure in transnational cinema. His unique way of dealing with the theme and capturing the nuances of Indian social scenario has no equivalent. As one of the practitioners of Neo realism, he presented the Indian ethos with accurate colours. Most of the films directed by Ray were adapted from the literary works of Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Prem Chand and sometimes from his own literary creation like Feluda series. The present study aims to critically examine the cinematic adaptation of Prem Chand's short story "Shatranj Ke Khiladi" through historical perspective

**Keywords: Film Adaptation, Orientalism, History of Awadh.**

The critically acclaimed Indian director Satyajit Ray gained fame worldwide for his masterful use of the moving image. Ray was born and raised in Bengal. He was a well-known film director, screenwriter, essayist, lyricist, music composer, and illustrator. His classic works include movies like *Pather Panchali*, *Apur Sansar*, *Aparjito*, *Charulata*, *Pratidwandi*, *Jana Aranya*, *Gana Shatru*, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, *Sadgati*, and *Agantuk*. He was a practitioner of Realist cinema.

Satyajit Ray developed an interest in filmmaking after meeting French director Jean Renoir and watching Vittorio De Sica's 1948 Italian neorealist film *Bicycle Thieves* while visiting London.

Vibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's *Apu* Trilogy served as the basis for Satyajit Ray's debut feature film. With new performers, he shot the movie in an outdoor setting. Viewers all throughout the world responded well to his direction. Throughout his whole filmmaking career, Ray produced 36 movies. Munshi Premchand, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Rabindra Nath

Tagore, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Prabhat Mukhopadhyay were among the writers whose works were adapted for the screen by him. *Enemy of the people*, a play by renowned playwright Henrik Ibsen, was also adapted by Ray for his movie *Ganashatru*.

Ray had directed only two films in Hindi- '*Shatranj ke Khiladi*' and '*Sadgati*'. Both were the major short stories written by renowned Hindi writer Premchand.

Munshi Premchanda was renowned for his realistic portrayals of Indian society in his works. Premchanda was a member of the Progressive Writers Movement. He is credited for writing classics like *Seva Sadan*, *Karmabhoomi*, *Godan*, *Gaban* *Nirmala*, etc . Numerous short stories in Hindi were also written by Premchand. His tales illustrated the widespread social inequality in Indian culture. Premchand composed his stories in Hindi and Urdu languages

His story "Shatranj Ke Khiladi" (Chess players) narrates the tale of two nawabs, immersed in the game of chess notwithstanding with the political upheavals. *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* was first published in *Madhuri Magazine*. The story was set up in the historical backdrop of Awadh province during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Premchand starts his story:

It was in the times of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was drowned in sensuality. The big and small, the rich and the poor – all were sunk in it. Some were engrossed in dance and music; some just revelled in the drowsiness induced by opium. Love of pleasure dominated every aspect of life. In administration, in literature, in social life, in arts and crafts, in business and industry, in cuisine and custom – sensuality ruled everywhere. The state officials were absorbed in fun and pleasure, poets in descriptions of love and separation, artisans in *zari* and *chikan* work, businessmen in dealings in surma, perfumes and cosmetics. All were drowned in sensual pleasure

Through his narrative, Prem Chand demonstrates how Awadh culture and feudal system were intertwined with hedonistic pleasures. Premchand goes on to describe the dire situation in Lucknow. as : 'From the king to the pauper – all were engrossed in these pleasures. So much so, that if beggars received money in alms, they preferred to spend it on opium or its extract rather than bread'

Ray captured this cultural vibe meticulously in his movie. A whole glimpse of city yawning in the drowsiness, is sketched vividly. The shift focuses from the subjects to the ruler Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who is projected as a disinterested king inclined towards literary and

cultural pursuit. What Prem Chand depicted through words ; Ray could impressively display that on screen. Since Ray himself was fascinated with the history of Awadh, he accomplished a thorough research. It prepared him to document the rise and fall of Awadh empire with the use of graphics. Whereas Prem Chand's story was centred on the story of Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Ali and their long stretches on the idle game of Chess, Ray expanded it to the history of Lucknow gradually slipping from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. The graphic representation of cherry being consumed by Lord Dalhousie and the resident General Outram's sarcastic attitude towards Wajid Ali Shah are well depicted in Ray's movie.

Ray in an essay on *Charulata* accepts that cinema has its language and grammar quite different from the written medium. So, Ray provides a new dimension to the written story by infusing his own vision and direction.

Ray's focus here goes beyond the text and delves deep into the context. For Ray, every film was an adventure (Jindal) He had a keen interest in the history of Avadh during British Raj. He had read Prem Chand's story thirty years ago before deciding to adapt it into the movie. Ray expanded the story of Meer and Mirza from their addiction to chess to the court of Wajid Ali Shah. The game of chess becomes a metaphor of the British Political strategy.

The film starts with zooming in the pic of chess and its pawn being moved by the two chess players with a commentary on socio-political scenario of Avadh in 1856 with British overruling the Oudh and people immersed in hedonistic pursuits just like nawab of Oudh province, Wajid Ali Shah Wajid Ali Shah inherited a kingship that was virtually bereft of political power. In consequence perhaps, he was a devoted practitioner and patron of the arts, especially music, dance, and poetry. Many notable compositions were created during his reign (Markel). Prem Chand in his story limited himself to the indifferent attitude of Meer Roshan Ali and Mirza Sajjad Ali to their socio-political environment and how their addiction to chess disturbed their relations but Satyajit Ray's main objective was to situate the story of Prem Chand in a historical context of Lucknow. The first four scenes introducing Wajid Ali Shah reflect the distinct shades of his personality- playing flute in Janmashtami followed by Shah beating Tasha(drum) during Moharram Procession swiftly fading in to another scene showing Wajid Ali Shah immersed in pleasures with his concubines and in the succeeding scene he is shown in his court. (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, 5:46-6:53)

The discussion between General Outram and Weston about Wajid Ali Shah shows the Western cultural hegemony over the Orient. Orient is political construct. Edward Said in his

*Orientalism* posits that orient is a political construct as the West in their discourses describes the people living in non-European nations are static and undeveloped in order to prove their cultural supremacy. European scholars underestimated oriental culture as orient is exotic, enigmatic and uncivilized. The orient provides a stage on which western knowledge is constructed. It hindered the real understanding of the orient culture.

Westen informs Outram about the life style of the ruler ...as he offers Namaz five times and then flies kites , attends the dance and also composes poetry (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 10:12-14:51). If studied from a gendered perspective, Outram's masculinity is contrasted with emasculated personality of Nawab. As opposed to General Outram's aggressive, productive and pragmatic masculinity, Wajid Ali Shah was inclined to sentimentality, hedonism and unproductive activities. He is derided by General Outram as effeminate king who is not suitable to rule. Though Ray received criticism from some critics for delineating Wajid Ali Shah as effeminate but Ray denounced their criticism on the basis of the extensive research, he undertook in making the film.

General Outram was appointed resident at Lucknow in the year 1854 after Sulleman. Sulleman had resigned from his post due to his ill health but the reports that is mentioned in the film were Sulleman's disagreement with King on various issues. (Jones, xv) Sulleman had warned King against appointing musicians in the court . He succeeded in annexing Awadh in his capacity in the year 1856. The perplexity of General Outram grows more with his encounter with Wajid Ali Shah.

A scene where Wajid Ali Shah is enjoying Kathak performed by a female dancer, his minister who is ordered by Outram to inform the King about the impending take over by British, removing the king from his throne, arrives with grave emotions .Wajid Ali Shah says,;

'Only Poetry and Music can bring tears to a man's eyes' (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 53:06)

Soon after he receives the news the decree is passed that it is a rumour. Whosoever is found spreading the rumour he would be punished.

In an elaborate scene King is shown in his varying moods from repentance to indignation. He admits that he was not suitable to rule. "The fault was mine ...it would have been better if I had refused to sit on throne'. He recalls that though he was trying his best to

rule he was disarmed by Richmond that he does not need to have his own army. (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 1:01-1:07)

Wajid Ali Shah was a connoisseur of Arts and Literature. He himself was a poet and would compose verses. He was the one who took Kathak to the great heights. Wajid Ali Shah in a scene accepts that he has been an unfit ruler but he also posits some logical questions before abandoning the throne. As Omendra Kumar Singh observes :

In order to invest Premchand's short story with a new meaning, Satyajit Ray in his adaptation creates a new historical character in the form of Wajid Ali Shah. This new character is then encrypted with the possibility of multiple interpretations as Ray installs Wajid Ali Shah at the centre of his film. (Singh, 168)

The refusal on his side for signing the treaty makes Outram puzzled. In a dialogue with Dr Feyrar , Outram describes Wajid Ali Shah as a “ Bundle of contradiction” He sarcastically describes him as “ a devout man who prays five times a day ,never drinks and in his harem keeps a siren of regiment .The King dances, lusts his wives, plays tom tom and flies the kites on the palace roofs and struts along the stage surrounded by frolicking nautch girls” He scoffs at Wajid Ali Shah but Feyrar informs him that in the entire Awadh only he has refused to be treated by an English doctor but prefers quacks . Outram hates the royal embrace and the perfumes used by the king. (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 1:12-1:15) The entire scene in the film substantiates the Western supremacy in their attitude and their construction of the others thus Outram and Feyrar justify the colonization by mocking the lifestyle of the King and his culture.

Whereas Weston who serves as a British official and interpreter for General Outram brings himself to synthesize with the culture as he can understand the language and poetry of Wajid Ali Shah who would compose poetry by the name Akhtar. He has a positive attitude for King and his incline towards the art and literature but Outram snubs him for appreciating Wajid Ali Shah.

Wajid Ali Shah finally decides to descend from the throne and as Ray had shown him singing few lines expressing his sorrow

When We are leaving the city of Lucknow

What should we say what we went through( ...(*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 1:30- 1:32)

He further declares that before General Outram comes to visit him, the cannon should be dismantled, soldiers should be disarmed and the people should not revolt against the British forces. In the last scene of Outram's meeting with Wajid Ali Shah, Ray has used the camera zooming on the eyes of teary eyes of Wajid Ali Shah looking at General Outram and Weston and both of them fail to respond. He unties his turban and hands it over to Outram but Outram refuses it saying that it is of no use. Finally, Wajid Ali Shah refuses to sign the treaty of annexation. Though he could not stop the British marching on Lucknow.

As Premchand writes in his story :

On the other side, the political situation in the kingdom was deteriorating every day. The Company's forces were advancing upon Lucknow. The city was in a great turmoil. People were fleeing to the villages with their families. But our two players were unconcerned. They came out of their houses and sneaked through narrow lanes, hiding themselves from the eyes of the king's men. They wanted to enjoy the benefits from their Jagirs yielding thousands of rupees annually by doing nothing in return. (Premchand)

Ray shifts the focus on the two nawabs who indifferent to this political upheaval, remained engrossed in the game of chess. Ray here introduces a local adolescent Awadhi speaking boy Kallu who reports them about the takeover of Lucknow but both remain unconcerned and start tussle by highlighting their personal life. Ironically Meer Roshan Ali who couldn't dare fight against the British forces, fires on Mirza Sajjad Ali. Their collapsing relationship takes a turn with Meer returning to Mirza repenting for his action. Ironically, he was neither concerned for King's exile nor for the disloyalty of his wife rather he was concerned about his partner Mirza Sajjad Ali. As Chess is employed as a metaphor in the movie, the film ends with the move by Mirza Sajjad Ali declaring sarcastically holding the pawn in his hand, Prime Minister you get aside, queen Victoria is coming"

Though Ray transcreates the story of Premchand, As Linda Hutchinson, the pioneer of Film Adaptation theory envisions Adaptation as a transmedial process rather than a faithful relationship a film respect a book. Satyajit Ray here in this adaptation liberates himself from the confines of text and he situates the text in the historical context. Premchand ends the story with Meer and Mirza killing each other as he writes: "They who could not spare a single drop of tear for their king died defending their vazirs on the chessboard" (Premchand)

Ray shows the impact of political turmoil on the two noblemen who could not see the world beyond their chessboard. The game of the chess serves as an allegory in the entire film. Satyajit Ray introduces a Hindu character Nand Lal who gives his insights about this game as the game evolved and how it is played differently by English man Cullen of La Martinier College. As he says

You are playing with Hindustani Rule

Is there any English rule ?

Yes , In English rule the prime minister is queen and pawn move two squares (*Shatranj Ke Khiladi* 22:30-24:15).

Nand Lal conveys the news of British takeover of Awadh. Those self-indulgent aristocrats are taken aback but Mirza Sajjad Ali cunningly explains the political strategies of British that they need money from Nawab for warfare and other expenses. They extort money from Nawab by threatening them that people are not satisfied with their rule. Nand Lal responds that Residents are not going to settle the issue but rather they have intended to take the control of Awadh but they hardly take that issue seriously.

The voice over technique employed by Ray gives the entire story a unique dimension. The commentary infused with a bit of sarcasm leaves a lasting impact. The commentary in the beginning serves as a commentary on the sociocultural scenario then in the middle commenting on the annexation policy of Lord Dalhousie and finally a scathing sarcasm on the indifferent attitude of people addressing Kallu, the local boy brimming with courage

You are right Kallu. There will be no firing .There won't be any War. Wajid Ali Shah would fulfil his promise. Three days from today on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1856 there will be English rule on Awadh...( *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, 1:51-1:51:56)

Ray apart from the depicting the east-west encounter through the elaborate portrayal of Wajid Ali Shah and General Outram, also featured the female world though the female world. The women characters in his films live in women's quarter. They are imprisoned in their own interiority. If compared to the male counterpart these women characters are shown more pragmatic and more intelligent but devoid of any political financial and cultural agency. Jainab Aalia the mother of Wajid Ali Shah shows her resent to the treaty of abdication and resolves to see Queen Victoria. Her straightforward questions leave General Outram baffled. The wife of Mirza Sajjad Ali though her name has been obliterated rebels against her husband's obsession



with chess and his insouciance for other affairs while Mir's wife starts an affair with Sultan when fails to get the attention from her husband.

## Conclusion

Satyajit Ray did extensive research before undertaking this project of adapting this short story written by Munshi Prem Chand. He delves deep into the socio-political context of Awadh province. This film is an anti-colonial project of Ray. He offered a lense to people to witness the history of British rule in India. Satyajit Ray was a humanist. He never hesitated to embrace the changes which could make society become progressive but as far as colonization was concerned, he always criticized it. Ray was an auteur who meticulously worked on his film. He not only paid attention to the plot but also on the setting costume and music of the film. He through this adaptation gave another life to Prem Chand's short story. Ray's Adaptation serves as a historical illustration to the colonial history of Lucknow

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