

Masculinity and Femininity in *The Chess Players*¹

Sexual Moves, Colonial Manoeuvres, and an Indian Game

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SHATRANJ *ke Khilari* (*The Chess Players*) stands in singular isolation as the only full-length feature film in Hindustani in the oeuvre of the late Satyajit Ray. In making a film where the locale is not his native Bengal, and in which he was to employ a cast not drawn from the Bengali film world, Ray would appear to have been venturing into wholly new territories. His most recent biographer, Andrew Robinson, has furnished in considerable detail the difficult circumstances under which Ray made the film. The most critical detail, and the only one of which we need make a note, is that in the early 1940s Ray had encountered the short story, *Shatranj ke Khilari*, by renowned Hindi writer Premchand, and had at once been drawn to it on account of his interest, as Ray himself was to reveal, “in chess, the Raj period, and the city of Lucknow itself”. None of these three interests are as self-evident as Ray appears to suggest; perhaps only his close friends knew of his passion for chess, and though some of his early films, such as *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960) and *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958), had been set in the colonial period, Ray kept himself remarkably aloof from the course, contours, and consequences of British

colonialism in India.² His interest in Lucknow, a city renowned for its *Nawabi* (aristocratic) style, its heady decadence, its indulgence in music and the pleasures of the palate, is more understandable when we think of *Jalsaghar*, in which Ray was to portray, with more than a mere tinge of sadness and nostalgia, the extinction of the regal but doomed lifestyle of a Bengali landlord consumed by his passion for the music of dancing girls.

Ray’s films usually entailed a not inconsiderable amount of historical and sociological research; his meticulous attention to detail is indubitably one of the most characteristic trademarks of his films. More significantly, films such as *Devi* and *Jalsaghar* were to provide a novel cinematic experience of the passions,

ambience, and texture of Bengali culture — these were cinematic forays into terrain that only Bengali novelists before him had charted. The two films established Ray’s reputation as a filmmaker with an extraordinarily nuanced sensibility. Though the setting in *Shatranj ke Khilari* is mid-nineteenth century Lucknow, the film nonetheless seems to belong with such films as *Jalsaghar* with their marked Bengali sensibility. If, for example, the aging zamindar in *Jalsaghar* is alive only to the sound of music, the two *nawabs* of Lucknow are likewise immersed in chess to the point of being oblivious to everything else. Again, in both films, Ray was bound to engage in the representation of a purportedly feudal mentality. Himself quite an aesthete, attracted largely to high or classical culture, Ray — who once likened his films to Mozart’s symphonies — was drawn to those characters who were possessed of a chaste aesthetic sensibility.

The Game of Kings

Notwithstanding Ray’s undoubted importance as one of the principal architects of ‘world cinema’, his films are only now beginning to be opened up to critical analysis, and I propose here to dwell on Ray’s articulation of femininity, masculinity, and



sexuality in *Shatranj ke Khilari*. At first glance, the film would not appear to lend itself readily to such a focus. The narrative seems rather straightforward, taken largely from history books. If the historical backdrop should at all be obscure to the uninitiated viewer, Ray provides an animated sequence in which such historical details as are indispensable to a minimal understanding of the circumstances under which Awadh [Oudh] was annexed by the British, are supplied. In pursuance of several policies facilitating annexation of Indian states enunciated by Lord Dalhousie, who had become the Governor-General in 1848, the British empire in India had witnessed an enormous growth in the years preceding the rebellion of 1857-58. In 1856, the year in which Premchand placed his story, the British were poised to annex Awadh, on the grounds that its ruler, Wajid Ali Shah, had provided inadequately for the administration of his state and the good of his subjects.³

Wajid Ali's inapt handling of matters of state was, in the official view, "fraught with suffering to millions". As one highly placed English functionary in the government put it, "The king, Wajid Ali Shah, was an apathetic person who took little part in the government of the country, and much evil resulted. There can be no doubt that the people were oppressed by the exactions of his revenue collectors."⁴ However, by the terms of a treaty concluded between the ruler of Awadh and the British Government in 1837, the ruler of Awadh could be compelled to hand over the reins of his administration to the British in the event that he failed to introduce reforms, but could not be stripped of his sovereignty. While the British sought to engage in territorial aggrandisement, they also wished to

retain some semblance of adherence to the rule of law, and *Shatranj ke Khilari* explores the convoluted manoeuvres by means of which the British attempted to annex Awadh without conveying the impression that they were, if I may put it this way, acting out of turn. As is plainly evident, this is the larger chess game against which Ray, having considerably complicated Premchand's story, set forth his own narrative of two noblemen of Lucknow absorbed in their own game of chess, the king of games and the game of kings.

If the chess games of Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali serve metonymically to illustrate the larger battlefield in which are ranged the forces of Wajid Ali Shah and the British, they point also to yet a third game involving complex negotiations between the British and the Indians over meanings and constructions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. Colonialism was constituted, to a very substantial degree, on the bedrock of a homology between sexual and political dominance, but *Shatranj ke Khilari* reflects more than a mere awareness of that. The film indeed suggests that the British sought not only to assume control of a purportedly ill-governed native state, but also to annex Indian notions of femininity and masculinity to their own culturally constituted notions of sexual

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hierarchy. When, towards the end of the film, Mirza Ali and Mir Ali are shown playing a fast-paced game of chess, they have consented to a great deal more than just playing the game as it is played in the West, or even following the rules of *realpolitik*.

Frolicking with Gopis

Let me begin, then, with a controversy that followed the public release of *Shatranj ke Khilari* in India. It drew a sharp rebuke from one Indian critic who found that Ray had, as he thought, accepted the British view of Wajid Ali Shah as a quintessential Oriental monarch, "effete and effeminate," an "ineffectual sybarite."⁵ Had Ray been more acquainted with historical works, this critic suggested, Ray would have known that Wajid Ali Shah was a ruler popular with his subjects and capable of attracting the loyalty of his feudatories. Ray was to reply to his critic at some length, detailing the sources he had consulted at the India Office Library in London, the National Library at Calcutta, and elsewhere. While denying that his Wajid Ali Shah was "effete and effeminate", Ray affirmed that his portrait of Wajid Ali was authenticated by a number of historical works, and he seemed eager to demonstrate that his historical scholarship was not to be impugned.⁶

In a further rejoinder, his critic made the observation that while Wajid Ali's monologues lent force to the view that he was not a meek king, the visuals offered an interpretation of Wajid Ali as an effeminate king.⁷

Surely Ray, the consummate master of the visual medium, had not forgotten that the script could be in one tongue while the camera movements speak another language!

If it is rather odd that, in thinking of a king and of such 'manly' pursuits