embrace the Krishna who did not shirk from his masculine duty of protecting the nation and putting the sword in the hands of her men could provide the grounds for the emancipation of India from colonial rule.\textsuperscript{14} Thus it is arguable that in choosing to represent Wajid Ali Shah as one who enacted the role of Krishna the lover-God, Ray meant to suggest that the King had clearly abdicated his responsibilities and had forsaken all interest in politics. Was such a king worthy of the trust reposed in him? That Wajid Ali Shah is also shown enacting Krishna in a Kathak dance, where the performers are women as much as men,\textsuperscript{15} certainly suggests that Ray could not hide his anxiety and ambivalence about a figure who refused to surrender to accepted notions of masculine and feminine behaviour.

In a similar vein is the discussion that takes place between General James Outram (the resident at Lucknow to whom had fallen the delicate task of inducing Wajid Ali Shah to consent to his own abdication) and his assistant, Captain Weston. Having been informed that Wajid Ali Shah consumed the better part of a certain day praying, presenting gifts to the keeper of the pigeon-house for producing a pigeon with one black and one white wing, listening to a new singer, flying kites from the palace roof, taking a few naps, and finally reciting a new poem on the loves of the bulbul (nightingale),\textsuperscript{16} Outram is desirous to know what kind of king is this Wajid Ali Shah. And that is not all: as Weston apprises him, Wajid Ali is “fond of dancing” — “with bells on his feet, like nautch-girls”, as Outram adds that he even composes his own operas. What time he has to devote to his 400 concubines and 29 ‘muta’ wives (women taken in temporary marriage for enjoyment), not to mention affairs of the state, remained uncertain. And what kind of king do those “various accomplishments” make him? “Rather a special kind, sir, I should think,” says Weston, to which Outram replies sharply: “Special? I would’ve used a much stronger word than that, Weston. I’d have said a bad king. A frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king.”\textsuperscript{17}

If effeminate it is for a king to take pleasure in the company of dancing women, play Krishna to merry gopi s, keep a harem larger than the royal stables, and take solace from music, poetry, and other frivolous pursuits, then Ray’s Wajid Ali Shah is surely effeminate. The famous chronicler of Lucknow, Abdul Halim Sharar, whose work Ray was to draw upon to a very considerable degree, was certainly inclined to think of Wajid Ali Shah as a dissolute king, “naturally inclined . . . towards sensuality and the pursuit of pleasure and amusement”. Beautiful, fallen women, singers, and dancers, Sharar was to add ironically, were to become the pillars of the state, “favourites of the realm”. The king, on Sharar’s account, had a special talent for putting his talents to grotesque use, such as adopting the style of the masnavi and, in consequence, “versified his love-affairs and hundreds of the amorous escapades of his early youth. He made them public throughout the country and became to a conventional, moral world a self-confessed sinner.”\textsuperscript{18} Ray himself was repulsed by Wajid Ali’s proclivity to openly give vent to his “sexual transgressions”, and when Ray’s collaborator Shama Zaidi wrote to him offering to translate a work by Wajid Ali in which the King had documented his sexual exploits from the age of eight, Ray replied, “Don’t tell me all this because then I’ll dislike him even more.”\textsuperscript{19}

The matter of Wajid Ali Shah’s purported ‘effeminacy’ cannot, however, be allowed to rest here. The debate has undoubtedly been a rather peculiar, if not an unfortunate one, similar to the most astounding discussion between Amartya Sen and some others on whether Sir William Jones, the eighteenth-century Orientalist who brought the writings of the ancient Hindus to the attention of the Western world, was a “good man” or not.\textsuperscript{20} Nonetheless, it has not been without use, as the debate provides a point of entry to the more delicate and complex question of whether Ray has rendered Indian culture itself as feminine. What potency can the charge of Wajid Ali’s ‘effeminacy’ have, after all, when all the Indian men in the film fail to acquit themselves in a ‘manly’ fashion? To place my query in the language of the Victorians: where, in
this film, is the honour of Indian men? *Shatranj ke Khilari* itself appears to reinforce this point towards the end, just as the British march to occupy Awadh, and when Mir Roshan Ali, having been brought to an awareness of the fact that his most loyal wife has been amusing herself with a younger man, declaims with some despondency: “If we can’t cope with our wives, how can we cope with the British army?”

The masculinity of our two *jagirdars* (noblemen) undoubtedly appears to be in question. This first becomes transparent when Mirza and Mir, having finished their prayers, are about to sit down for a game of chess when they are interrupted by the affable Munshi Nandlal, a character not found in Premchand’s story. Ray admitted to having created him in order to signify the friendly relations that existed between Hindus and Muslims in the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, who was quite at ease with Hinduism although he was a “devout Muslim” himself. The Munshi serves as a foil for a number of other critical interventions by Ray. While the Munshi is desirous of speaking to Mir and Mirza about the rumours now afloat about the impending annexation of Oudh, he realises that their attention is riveted upon chess, and that he can only draw their attention to the manoeuvres being undertaken by the British by way of speaking about chess. Much to their astonishment, Mir and Mirza learn from the Munshi that the British do not play chess by Indian rules. When did a conqueror ever abide by the customs and laws of the people whom he has subjugated? Where the pawn in Indian chess moves one square, in the English form of the game it moves two squares. To the English, the minister of Indian chess is the queen, the consort of the king and mistress of the board. What use would a culture of Oriental Despotism have, one might ask, for a queen? In the society of the West, however, the fortunes of a woman can change rapidly: one moment she is the tycoon’s wife, at the next moment she is the flotsam and jetsam of man’s lust for youthful beauty. Thus each pawn, upon reaching the other end of the board, can be exchanged for a queen. It is perhaps fitting that an indolent people, for whom time moves slowly, should not want to hasten their game. When, at last, the Munshi is able to bring the discussion around to the political situation in Awadh, and adverts to the possibility of a war, Mirza makes pretence of being a man of intrepid character, resolutely masculine. He asks Mir, who at first does not comply, to take down a large sword from a display on the wall. When Mir does finally fetch it and removes it from its scabbard, it is plainly evident that he has never handled a sword before. Whatever else Mirza and Mir may be, they are not warriors. Nonetheless, Mirza now tries to establish a representation of himself and Mir as the progeny of officers in the army of King Burhan-ul-Mulk, officers so “formidable they stuck terror into the enemy”, and whose blood now flows in their own veins. The affect is everything; and indeed the clumsy demonstration acquires a special poignancy, for the discourse is directed at a Brahmin, a member of a race of men to whom, in the colonial scheme of things, the ethos of the warrior would have been all but incomprehensible.

**Chess Versus Sex**

The juxtaposition of this scene with almost the very next one, which takes place in the living room and *zenana* of Mirza’s house, moves us closer towards an understanding of the political and aesthetic structure of *Shatranj ke Khilari*, and Ray’s deployment of the metaphor of the chess game, to underscore the nature of sexual negotiations in Indian society. With chess as her rival for her husband’s attention, Khurshid must summon all her skills to take her husband away from his game and have him to herself for the night. Yet another round of that accursed game is in progress, and Mir has just given Mirza check. At this crucial point, Mirza receives a summons from his wife. Her complaint appears to be the stereotypically feminine one: a