

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture - 06
Short Genre and Premchand's The Chess Players

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Premchand's The Chess Players, The title of this lecture is the short story genre and Premchand's other chess players. So the objective of this lecture is to look closely as to what exactly is Premchand's idea of a narrative structure for the short story and see how it is exemplified in this particular short story The Chess Players which is a very well-known short story of Premchand. Now let me briefly give you a bit of information about Premchand.

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Premchand

- ◆ Pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai Srivatsava
- ◆ Born in 1880—died in 1936
- ◆ Novels, and short stories in Hindi and Urdu
- ◆ Sevasadana (1918; “House of Service”), the problems of prostitution and moral corruption among the Indian middle class.



Premchand is actually his pen name and a pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai Srivatsava. He was born in 1880 in Banaras and he died in 1936 in Banaras as well. So he wrote a lot of novels and short stories in Hindi and Urdu and many of them were translated into the English language. His first novel Sevasadana which was published in 1918 is known as the House of Service.

And it talks about the problems of prostitution and moral corruption among the Indian middle classes.

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Premchand

◇ Over “250 short stories, collected in Hindi under the title *Manasarovar* (“The Holy Lake”).

◇ “northern Indian life”.

◇ “a moral or psychological truth.”



He wrote over 250 short stories and many of them were collected in the collection called *Manasarovar*, *The Holy Lake* and it was in the Hindi language and all of his short stories are covered or discussed or explored the issues in society in Northern Indian and the main agenda of his short fiction was to explore this moral or psychological truth.

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Premchand

◇ Social evils

◇ the abuses of the British bureaucracy,

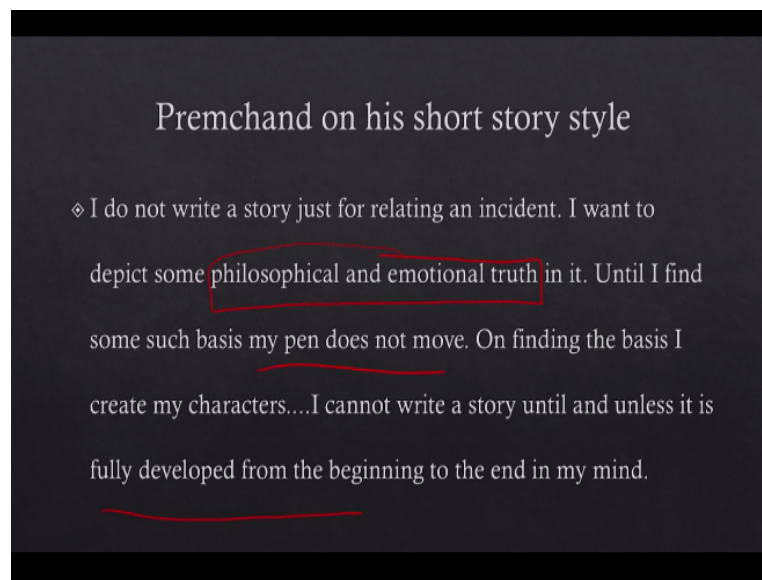
◇ exploitation of peasants by moneylenders and officials.

◇ *Ghaban* (1928; “Embezzlement”), *Karmabhumi* (1931; “Arena of Actions”), and *Godan* (1936; *The Gift of a Cow*).

Many of the concerns in his fiction both short fiction and novels revolved around the social evils in society as well as the abuses in the British bureaucracy because we got to remember that Premchand wrote while he was under the British empire in India and his fiction also talked about or explode the exploitation of peasants by moneylenders and officials in the country.

Some of his well-known novels are Ghaban published in 1928 which meant Embezzlement, Karmabhumi published in 1931 titled Arena of Actions in English and Godan published in 1936 which meant The Gift of a Cow okay. Now let us quickly look at the very important ideas about short story by Premchand. So this extract and the following one tells us what are the motivations behind his short story writing and structure.

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He says that I quote I do not write a story just for relating an incident. I want to depict some philosophical and emotional truth in it. Until I find some such basis my pen does not move. On finding the basis I create my characters. I cannot write a story until and unless it is fully developed from the beginning to the end in my mind.

So this set of ideas tells us that the idea or the emotional and philosophical truth is more important than anything else only if he gets a sense of this kind of psychological and emotional truth does his pen begin to move to write a story. So only after this idea this concern or this theme is there in his mind, he starts to create his characters and also it is very interesting to see that he tells us that he gets the entire story in mind before he even puts pen to paper.

So he says that it is fully developed from the beginning to the end in my mind even before he starts writing. So this idea of philosophical and emotional truth is very, very important in the context of this Premchand's understanding of short fiction.

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Premchand on his short story style

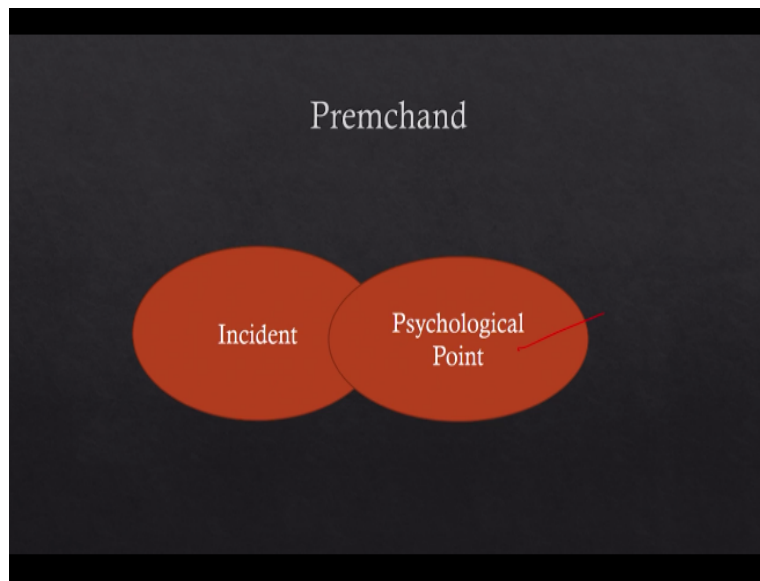
◇ I develop the characters from the point of view that they should be in accordance with the story. I do not consider it necessary to make an interesting incident the basis of my story. If in a story there is a psychological climax, then it may be related to any incident, I do not care....

I develop the characters from the point of view that they should be in accordance with the story. I do not consider it necessary to make an interesting incident the basis of my story. If in a story, there is a psychological climax, then it may be related to any incident, I do not care. So again he tells us that the characters should exemplify some profound truth, some philosophical truth or emotional truth.

They got to stick to this point that he wants to communicate an interesting incident by itself is not a very important aspect to begin a story. He says that if there is psychological climax, if there is a psychological point to his story then any incident can be created to exemplify or to prove or to justify this psychological point that he wants to get across to his readers. So the interesting incident is only secondary to this psychological or philosophical emotional truth according to Premchand.

He says that the incidents are not terribly interesting in themselves. So they become interesting only if they prove a philosophical point.

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So again I am just laying this point clear again to you, so incident becomes less important in relation to this psychological truth that he wants to communicate in the story and which gets exemplified at the climactic point in a short fiction. So this is the most important theoretical perspective for Premchand in writing short stories.

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Short Story Style

- ◇ "merely by using beautiful and smart words, and a brilliant style."
- ◇ "a climax, and that also a psychological one."
- ◇ "move in such an order that the climax should keep on drawing nearer."

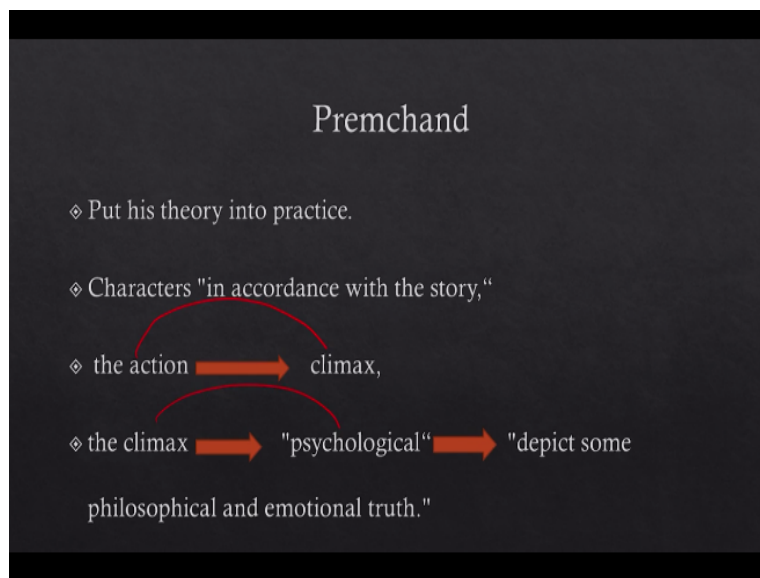
So again let us go back to some of the key ideas in terms of narrative structure. He says that I do not create a short story merely by using beautiful and smart words and a brilliant style. So writing style and the choice of words and the aesthetic merits of a short story become less important become secondary in relation to the other greater ideas or meanings that he wants to communicate to the greater society to the larger society.

And again the climax which should be about a psychological one in a short story is crucial to the narrative or the narrative structure of Premchand's short story and he says that the story should move in such a way that the climax should keep drawing close all the incidents and all the events and all the character behaviour should be created in such a manner that the climax becomes a natural one.

It should be a natural progression towards the climax in a particular short story of his. So these are some of the major ideas that he has about the structure of a short story and the short story should be revolving around or should be focused on one emotional or psychological or philosophical truth and the characters and incidents become secondary to this point and they should exemplify this larger truth, this profound truth.

And if the climax should become a natural outcome of this particular theme that he wants to explore in relation to the various aspects of the short story.

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So Premchand put his theory into practice in his writings, in his short story so he exemplified what he preach and most of his characters way in accordance with this story they kind of justified the greater point the greater theme that he was trying to communicate to his readers and the action were geared towards the climax, the action moved towards climax and the climax as I discussed shortly were about a psychological truth and they did depict some larger philosophical and emotional truths in the society for his readers.

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Story's Climax

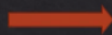
- ◇ In some the climax is apparent to the characters;
- ◇ A turning point in their lives;
- ◇ marked changes in their attitudes or behavior.
- ◇ "My Older Brother"; "The Path to Salvation", and "A January Night"

Now there are 2 categories in terms of the climax in Premchand's fiction. Let us see what are the two different categories in this context. In some short stories written by Premchand, the climax is clear to the characters. If the climax becomes evident even to the characters within the story they nowhere they are heading and the climax becomes a turning point in their lives and it involve certain changes, some marked changes that were happening in their attitudes or behaviour or in their lifestyles.

And some of the stories that exemplified this particular category are these, My Older Brother, The Path to Salvation and A January Night. So we kind of differentiate two different kinds of climaxes in Premchand's fiction and in one kind of climax the fact is realized what is going to hit them, what is going to happen to them and they somehow become changed characters as a result of that particular turning point in their lives.

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Story's Climax

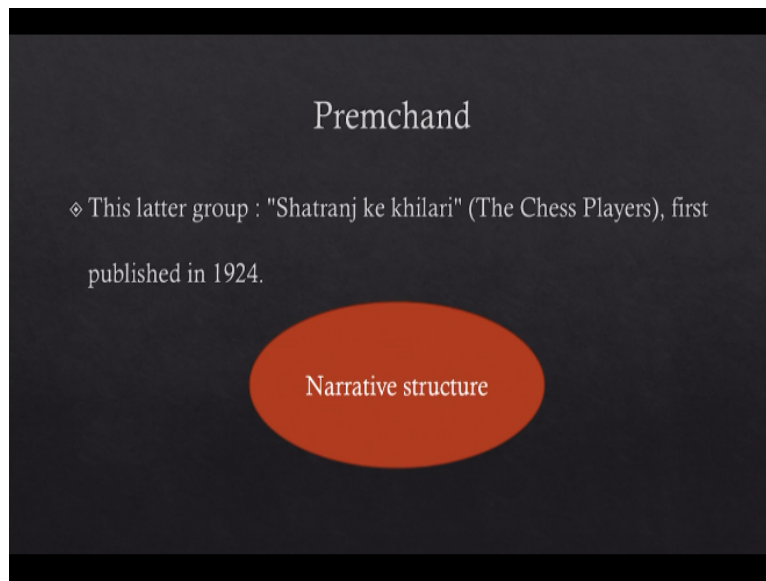
- ◇ the characters do not change,
- ◇ Continue their typical behavior until it reaches some final extreme.
- ◇ striking, so egregious,  the reader forms a real "psychological climax" to the story.
- ◇ "The Shroud" and "The Price of Milk".

In the other kind of climaxes, the characters do not realize what is going to befall them, what is going to happen to them and obviously they do not change the attitudes or behaviours. They continue their typical behaviour, they set manners until it reaches some final extreme and this extreme is so egregious so terribly bad that the readers realize this psychological or this philosophical climax happening in the story on their own.

So this is the second type of narrative structure in his stories. So we have a climax but the characters do not realize what it is going to be and as a result they do not change their attitudes and behaviours because it becomes so extreme and the change happens in the minds of the readers who see the psychological point or this philosophical point laid bad before them through the characters or through the incidents in the story.

And the two examples that I have there on the slide for you are The Shroud and The Price of Milk.

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Now this set of slides that I had shown you just now tells you or gives you a sense about Premchand's short story style and it is a type of style where the theme is as you can sense more important than the form, writing style and diction and the aesthetic merits of a short story are considered to be inferior so to speak than the psychological merits of the story and as I said the two different kinds of climaxes and there is one where the characters realize that something big is going to happen to them.

And so they mend their way somehow or the other depending on the scale of the climax and then there is another kind of climax where the characters are so bad, so egregious, they do not realize the extremity of the things that are going to happen to them and Premchand's The Chess Players fall into this second category. Shatranj ke khilari is the Hindi title for this story The Chess Players and it was first published in 1924 and this story justifies the narrative structure that Premchand proposed in his theory of the short story genre.

Now I want to give you a little bit of interesting information about the story Chess Players before moving onto a closer analysis of it.

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The Chess Players

- ◆ 1977 ; Satyajit Ray film.
- ◆ This film, also called *Shatranj ke khilari*, “ a great deal of critical attention”.
- ◆ Out of Premchand's 288 or so stories, Ray chose this one film.
- ◆ Compare the film with the original story

The transformation

And the interesting information is that that Satyajit Ray, a very famous Indian filmmaker turned this story into a film. He adapted the story into a film which was released in 1977 and it was critically acclaimed it was a big critical hit and it is very interesting to know that this great film maker chose this particular story The Chess Players among the 288 short stories and odd short stories written by Premchand.

And it would be a good academic exercise to compare the film version of The Chess Players with the various translations that are available or one could even read it in its original and see the transformation that has happened to some of the incidents in the film and one can also speculate as to the possibilities as to why such changes or transformations were carried out in the new medium.

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The Chess Players

- ◆ “Lucknow of Nawab Vajid Ali Shah's day”
- ◆ the climax of the story
- ◆ the British annexation of the nawab's whole kingdom of Avadh in 1856.”

Now this is the context for *The Chess Players*. This is an India which is under the control of the colonial empire and the country or the region that we are focusing in this particular story, the country or the region which is a subject for this story is the Lucknow of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's day. So he is the Nawab who is theoretically speaking the controller or the head of this region of the city.

And the climax to the story when the Nawab Wajid Ali is defeated, we can see that that relates to the British annexation of the Nawab's whole kingdom of Avadh in 1856. So we can see a collapse of the history here, the history of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in this particular story.

So we have the Lucknow of 1856 represented in this piece of literature and the climax talks about or the climax discusses the historical struggles of the day and it captures that particular moment in history when Lucknow was captured as part of the region of Avadh itself by the British Empire in 1856.

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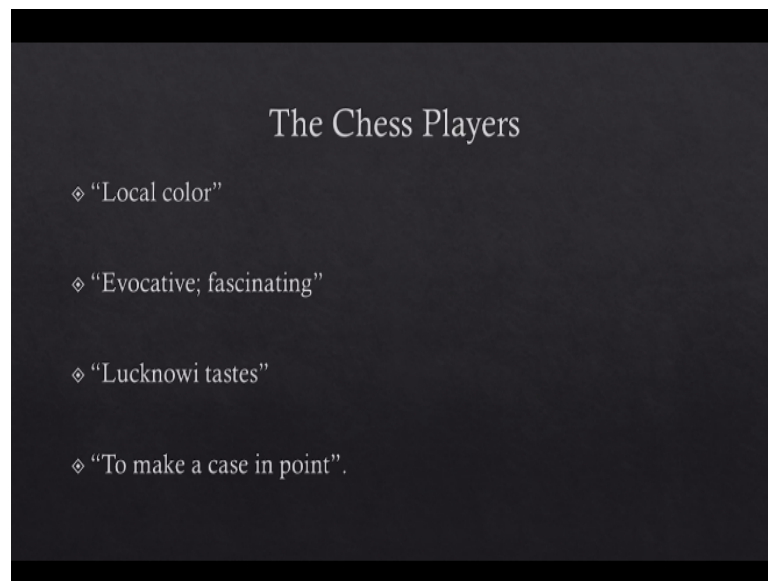
Now *The Chess Players* begins with a list with an inventory and the list is about the various pleasures that are carried out across Lucknow and these luxurious activities included music, dance, opium, smoking, poetry reading, poetry writing, fashion and different kinds of cloth making, cosmetics, cuisine, quail fights, games and all these activities were done in such a fashion that they become a pure pleasure for those involved in them.

So there is element of criticism in the enjoyment of all these luxurious activities and the short story begins with the inventory or the list of such activities that are happening across

Lucknow and we can see that this list is also somehow can be seen as perfunctory because there is not a greater amount of narrative expended by the author or the third person narrator to openly criticize people's indulging themselves in all these pursuits.

There is sarcasm there but obvious criticism is not very clearly stated in the narrative at the beginning of the story.

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Now what is the impact of this list of luxurious or pleasure activities that are happening across Lucknow. It gives you a particular sort of color to the city. There is almost hedonistic atmosphere that is present in this city Lucknow, which is sometimes called as the Paris of the East as well. So these activities or these pursuits or these sensual pursuits gives a very evocative atmosphere to this particular city and is also becomes very fascinating for the readers to think about all these aspects of life in Lucknow.

And they become known as Lucknowi tastes and lots of books have been written about these tastes of the people of Lucknow in that period. Now there is a greater point that the author wants to make through such a beginning which refers to the hedonistic pursuits of the people of Lucknow.

And as the story progresses we can get a sense of what exactly is the greater point or the psychological point that Premchand wants to make through this evocative atmosphere of Lucknow that he paints at the beginning where everybody is enjoying the physical side to life.

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The Chess Players

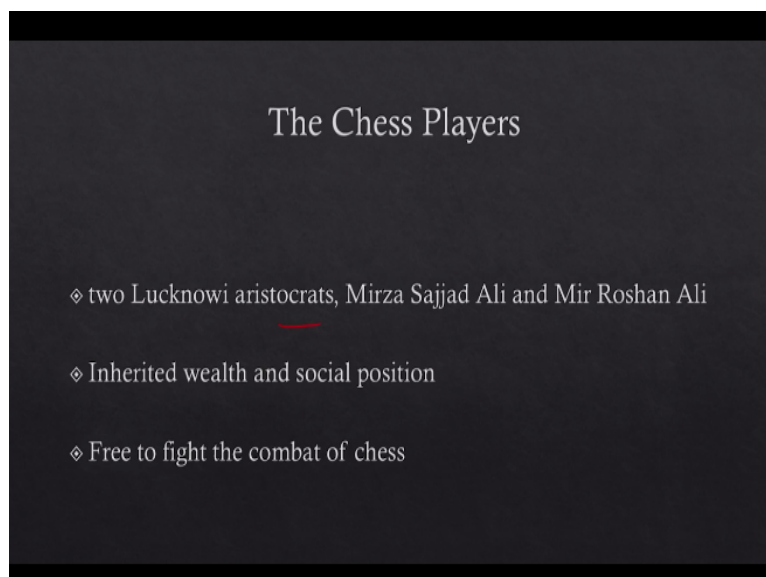
- ◆ Pleasures are undifferentiated
- ◆ “Lucknow’s total, universal *vilasita*
- ◆ “enjoyment, pleasure, luxuriousness, sensuality”

“lumped” together

Now it is also very interesting that all the pleasures that are referred to in the story are clumped together, they all lumped together and there is no differentiation between ones enjoyment of cuisine and ones enjoyment of poetry writing, they are all stated as one item after another in this big list of sensual pleasures and we might want to think about that too, what is the thematic reference in such a undifferentiated statement of pleasure activities.

But all these elements, all these aspects of sensual pleasures and enjoyment are part of Lucknow’s total universal idea of enjoyment or pleasure or luxuriousness or sensuality. It becomes one big heady atmosphere and there are no discriminations as I just mentioned between the various activities.

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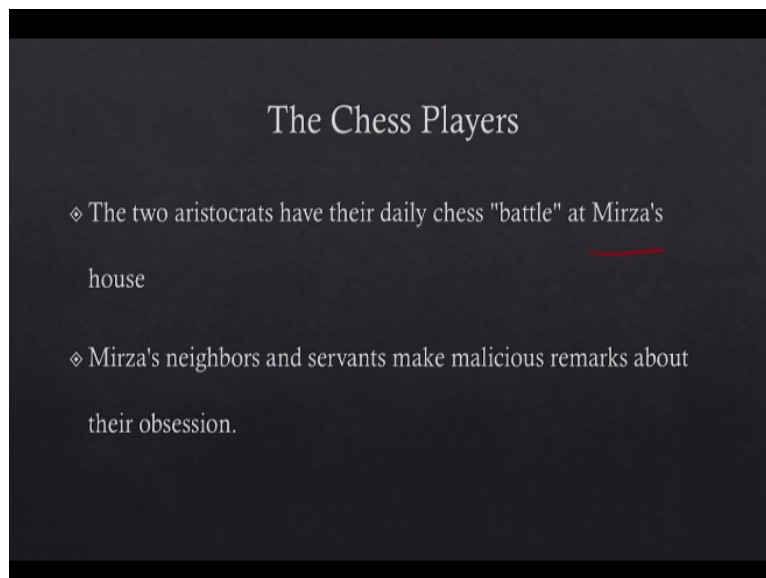
The Chess Players

- ◆ two Lucknowi aristocrats, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali
- ◆ Inherited wealth and social position
- ◆ Free to fight the combat of chess

Now once we get this visitor of pleasure, once we get this broad canvas of pleasure painted by the author about Lucknow and its glorious, celebratory, hedonistic lifestyle, we come to meet two Lucknowi aristocrats, they are Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali. So we are introduced to two higher ranking men in society who had inherited wealth and social position in society.

So these are the two noble men or the aristocrats and these aristocrats since they have inherited wealth and a lot of luxurious, they are free to enjoy their own personal pleasures and how do they do it, they do it through this game of chess. So they are free to fight between themselves over the chessboard and they do it all day long every day.

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So the two aristocrats have their daily chess battle as I said at Mirza's house, one of the aristocrat's house that is how the story begins and everybody is critical of their playing of this game be at their neighbors and servants and be it Mirza's own wife, the Begum. So everybody makes negative and malicious remarks about this game of chess and their obsession but these two hardly bat an eyelid at such a criticism.

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Now one person is specifically displeased by the behaviour of these two men and that is Mirza's wife, the Begum. She is terribly hurt by his prolonged play of this particular game and she hardly even gets a chance to fight with him or scold him because he begins the game very early on at the guest house and then he ends the game very late when she has gone to bed. So she does not get the chance to even meet him to talk about her obsession with this game of chess.

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The Chess Players

◇ However, she would expend her ire upon the servants. 'Are *they* asking for paan? Tell *them* to come and take it *themselves*. Have *they* no time for food? Go and throw it to *them*. Let *them* eat or cast it to the dogs.'

But face to face she was helpless. She wasn't resentful against her husband so much as against his friend, Mir sahib. She had named him Mir, the *spoilsport*.

Now how does she expend her ire, how does she take out her anger about her husband's addiction to the game of chess? She does it through her irritation with her band of servants. So this is the extract which tells us how she does it. Let me read the extract for you, however she would expend her ire, ire is anger upon the servants. Are they asking for paan? Meaning her husband and his friend tell them to come and take it themselves.

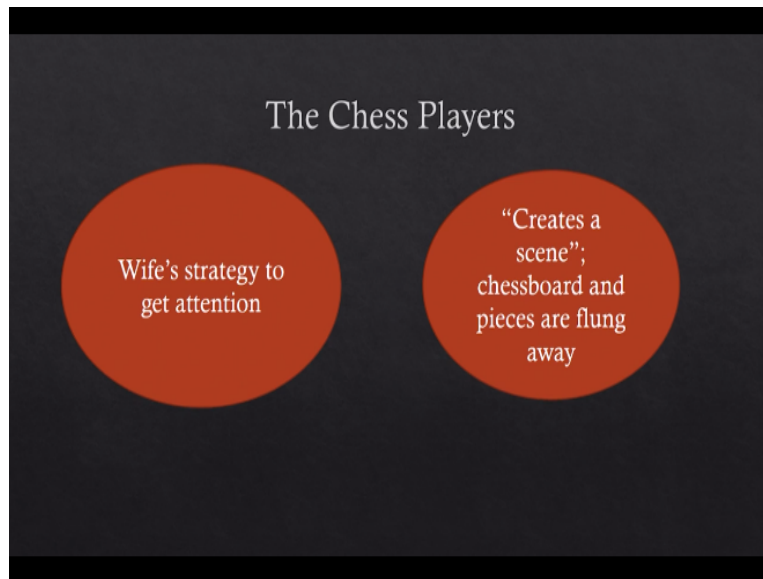
Have they no time for food, go and throw it at them, let them eat or cast it to the dogs but face to face she was helpless. She was not resentful against her husband so much as against his friend Mir Sahib. She had named him Mir, the spoilsport. So you can see that she takes out her anxiety and her hurt and her anger and her turmoil at this addiction of her husband's or to her servants.

So she says you know throw everything at them you know do not give them the respect that is due to them, just throw the food at them, they can either eat it or throw it back at the dogs. So the disrespect that she cannot personally show to her husband, she shows it to her servants and kind of provokes them to do the same to the men folk who are engaged in this game of chess and it is very interesting to see that she was not very angry so much with her own husband as with his friend and that is a very human attribute.

You cannot be really angry with your loved one, you probably want to find fault with those who are around them and that is a very interesting human feeling that Premchand makes it clear to us at this particular extract in the story and he also points out that she is quite helpless in this set of events where she cannot even get the space to talk to her husband in order to sort it out.

Because he is completely shut off from this family because he has been taken over by this game of chess which has become the most dominant pursuit in his life and Mir, the friend is named as the spoilsport and it is a very interesting word because that sport that they engage in that the husband and the friend engage in kind of affects the domesticity of this family and there is a pun there on the word sport and there is also irony there in that particular term.

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So she devises a specific strategy to get the attention of the husband one day because she has taken so much insult and you know and she has come up with a particular strategy to get the attention of the husband. So what she does is she claims that she is unwell and eventually that claim leads to her creating a scene which ends in the game of chess being disrupted between the two friends and eventually the chessboard is thrown away and the pieces are flung out.

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The Chess Players

- ◊ Mir sahib interjected, 'Why don't you go? Women are delicate things.'
- Mirza retorted, 'Oh yes, you want me to go because you're facing defeat in the next two moves.'
- ◊ Mir said, 'My dear, don't be under any illusion. I have thought of a counter move that'll turn the tables on you. Go and attend to her. Why are you hurting her?'

So let us see how this plays out, so the wife says that she is very sick that she has a terrible headache and she wants her husband to go to the hakim or the medicine man and the maid is sent out to give this information to the two men who are playing in the guesthouse. So Mir sahib interjected so he says to his friend why do not you go? Women are delicate things. Mirza retorted oh yes, you want me to go because you are facing defeat in the next two moves.

Mir said, my dear, do not be under any illusion. I have thought of a counter move that will turn the tables on you. Go and attend to her. Why are you hurting her? It is a very interesting conversation and you can clearly see that they are not worried so much as the women who is ill but they are clearly very worried about the game of chess which one of them is winning and the other is in a losing position.

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So the addiction is clearly stated out as a subtext to that scene and Mir Sahib's concern why do not you go, women are delicate things is a very ironical there. This concern is suspect and there is irony as well in Mir Sahib's concerns and we can see why he wants Mirza to leave the room because he is in the losing position and he does not want the game to carry on and Mirza obviously does not care about his wife either and he wants to checkmate his friend and finish with the game and win it.

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The Chess Players

- ◊ 'I won't go until I have checkmated you.'
- ◊ 'I won't make any moves. Go and attend to her.'

'My dear, I'll have to go to a hakim. There's no headache. This is just a sham to harass me.'

Clearly knows the motivations of his wife

So he says that I would not go until I have checkmated you and Mir Sahib promises I would not make any moves go and attend to her. My dear, I will have to go to a hakim. There is no headache. This is a just a sham to harass me. So Mirza is quite clear that the wife is not ill but this is just an excuse that she has made up to bring him back to her. So he knows the motivations of his wife and therefore he wants to carry on with the game of chess.

So he does not understand that she is trying to get the attention of him which is why she even has come up with this excuse that kind of emotional exploration is completely absent in his psyche.

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The Chess Players

- ◊ Mirza points the finger of blame at Mir Sahib
- ◊ Refuses to send him away
- ◊ Begum goes herself to *dewankhana*

Cannot be trusted to speak the truth

Mirza's pleadings are in vain

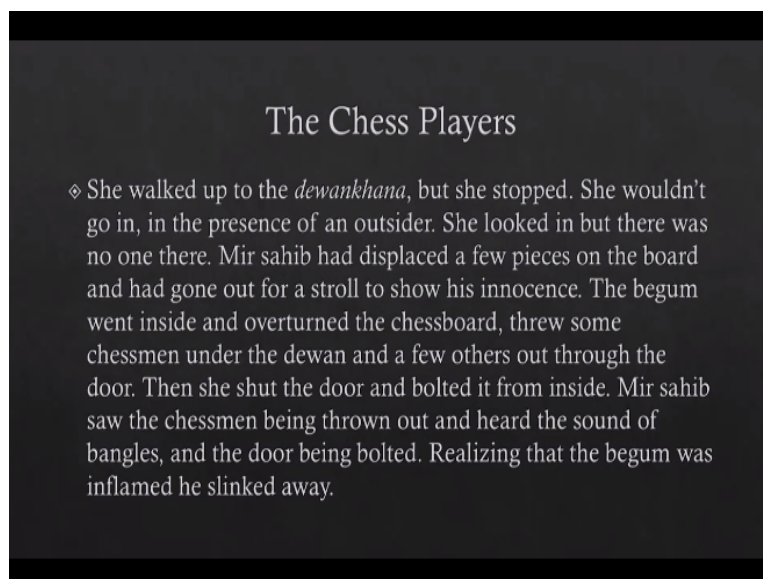
And again it is very significant to notice that when he meets the wife, he points the finger of blame at Mir Sahib. He says that he is you know two ranks higher than me therefore I cannot

refuse him if he wants me to play a game of chess. He does not want to admit or accept his addiction to his wife probably because he is frightened of her attitude and behaviour and he is not willing however to send him away even though he can see that his wife is displeased.

So two things are very clear here, one is that he is not willing to give up the game of chess at any point for anybody. So that is one thing, the other thing is that he cannot be trusted to speak the truth because he is lying to his wife that it was Mir Sahib who insist on playing the game of chess while it is quite clear that both of them are involved in this addiction. So the Begum has no choice but to take things into her own hands.

And she moves towards the guesthouse to chase away Mir Sahib and Mirza begs with her, pleads with her not to bring shame to him and not to do such a disrespectful thing.

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But however his pleadings are in vain. So what she does is she walked up to the dewankhana, but she stopped. She would not go in, in the presence of an outsider. She looked in but there no one there. Mir Sahib had displaced a few pieces on the board and had gone out for a stroll to show his innocence. The Begum went inside and overturned the chessboard, threw some chessmen under the dewan and few others out through the door.

Then she shut the door and bolted it from inside. Mir Sahib saw the chessmen being thrown out and heard the sound of bangles and the door being bolted realizing that the Begum was inflamed he slinked away. So this is what happens and this is the first big action that happens

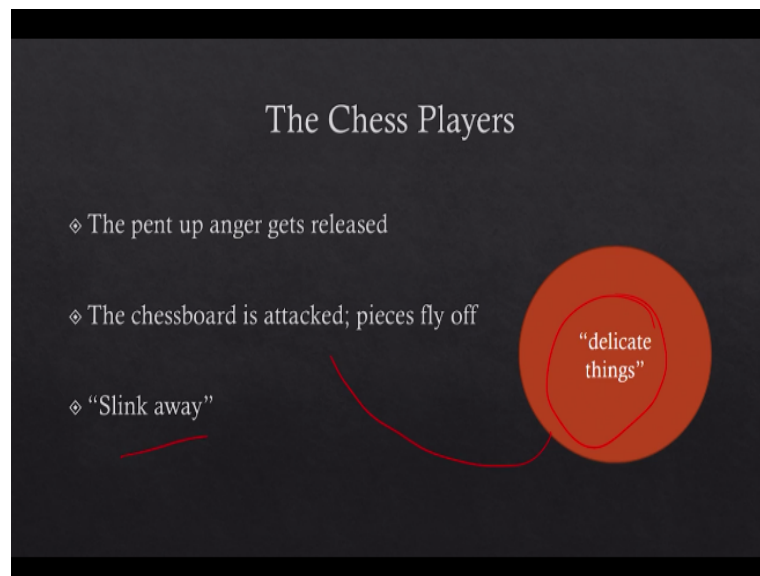
in the story so far unable to bear the state of affairs at home when the husband just playing chess all day long and every day the Begum is forced to confront his friend Mir Sahib.

And in those days' women are not allowed to meet strange men in their home and despite that regulation and rule she walks up to this dewankhana, the guesthouse but then at the last minute she stops because there is that cultural barrier which prevents her from meeting a stranger in the house and what she does is she takes a peep and she realizes that the room is empty.

So Mir Sahib has left the guesthouse, so she angrily walks in and then overturns the chessboard, throws the coin, some of the under the sofa and then she throws some of them out of the door and she bolts it from the inside and Mir Sahib who hears the sound that is coming from inside the guesthouse, he can hear the sound of the bangles and he becomes scared and he slinks away.

So this is this interesting incident that happens in the first third of the story and the first third ends with this big action, this action of this Begum who does whatever is within her means to stop the game and send the other person who is involved in this sport away.

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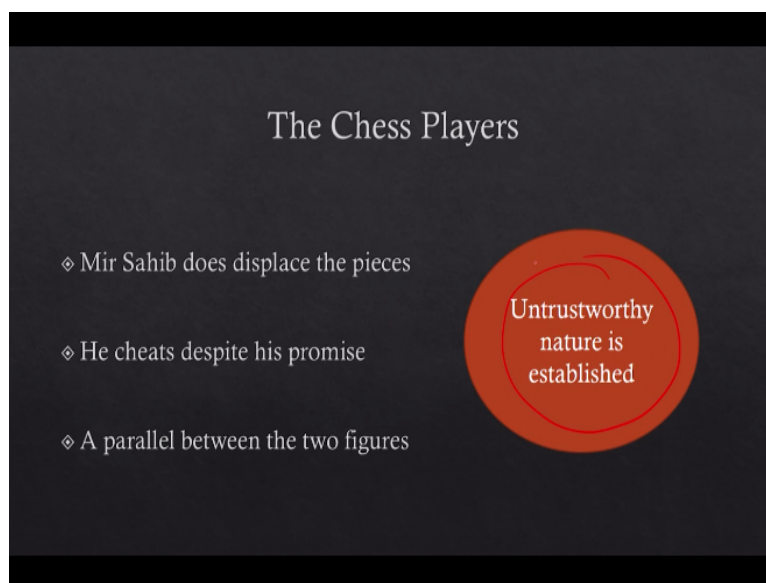


So this action also gives her the chance to you know release the pent up anger that has been building inside her for a very longtime and she attacks the chessboard and that is very symbolic. That attack on the chessboard is an attack on these two men who are engaged in

this worthless pursuit of the game of chess and this attack on the pieces seems to be an attack on all the similar activities that are going elsewhere outside of this home and household.

And the victory at this moment is with the women folk with the Begum and the friend of Mirza, Mir Sahib slinks away like a thief. He walks away furtively you know deceitfully, discrete fully. So there is a lot of irony as I said in that particular phrase delicate things, women are not delicate things as we can see through this attack, this physical attack which is a symbolic attack in some other sense too about an attack that questions the authority of the men when they are engaged in useless pursuits.

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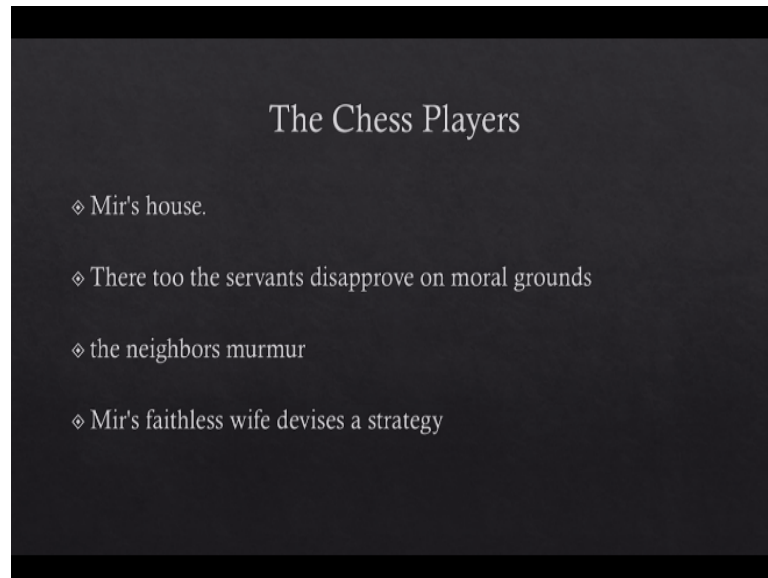


So the other important thing that we need to notice in that particular scene is that Mir Sahib had displaced a few pieces on the board. So if we recall the conversation between Mir Sahib and Mirza, he assures Mirza that he will not touch any of the pieces so he can safely go out and look after his wife and see to her demands but instead of sticking to his promise, he does displace the pieces in order to save himself from that checkmate that was about to happen.

So again the untrustworthy nature of Mir Sahib is also laid bare to the readers. So both the men, Mirza is untrustworthy because he lies to his wife Begum that you know it was Mir Sahib who is engaging him in this game of chess and Mir Sahib now tells us or shows us that he cannot be trusted as well because the game of chess is supreme, no other issue or no other moral responsibility or moral question can come anyway near the obsession for this game.

So he cheats on this game despite his promise and this cheating helps us to draw a parallel between these two men who are utterly disrespectful and who utterly disregard the ethical side of life, the moral responsibilities that they have towards their women folk and towards their society.

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Now so what is the result of this particular big battle that happens, a battle which has symbolic overtones and what is the effect of this battle, the effect of this battle is that the game of chess is moved from Mirza's house to Mir Sahib's house. So they have to vacate the house and go and find another place where they can play this game of chess.

And even in that particular house, the servants disapprove on moral grounds, the neighbors have something to say about this and not very positive things and Mir's faithless wife is also eager to find a strategy which will get rid of her husband and his friend from within the confines of the house. So we will continue with the second battle or the second strategy that the Begum of Mir comes up with in the next session. Thank you for watching. I will catch up with you in the following lectures.