

**Short Fiction in Indian Literature**  
**Prof. Divya A**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology – Madras**

**Lecture – 06A**  
**Short Story Genre and Premchand's The Chess Players**

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Premchand's The Chess Players. This lecture is a continuation of the previous session where I discussed the short story genre and Premchand's emphasis on a psychological climax which emphasizes the theme or a profound idea or a philosophical perspective over an incident okay.

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Now if you recall there is great problem in Mirza's home in terms of their chess playing. This game is loathed in Mirza's house and his wife is terribly displeased and the Begum puts an end to the playing of this particular game and now the game is shifted to Mir's home and the problem is not that the Begum hates the game.

It is the obsession which disrupts the domesticity in Mirza's home which pushes the Begum to react in an almost hysterical manner in which she throws the chessboard, flings the pieces away and shuts the door almost against his friend Mir who kind of slinks away like a thief.

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## Chess at Mir's home

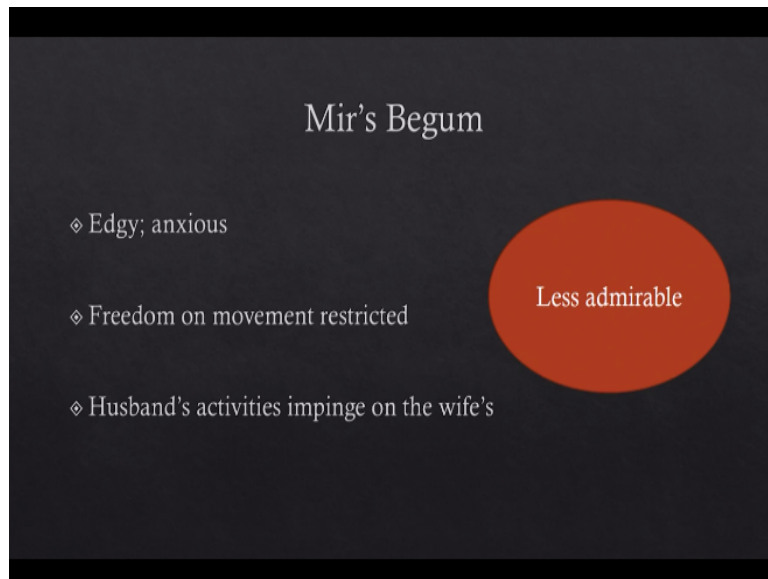
- ◇ Mir's Begum is unhappy.
- ◇ "when the chessboard was spread in the devankhana and Mir Sahib stopped going out, the begum became edgy. Her freedom was curtailed. She hardly had any chance to have a glimpse of the outside.

So when the game is moved to Mir's home, Mir Roshan Ali's home, his wife his Begum is also unhappy. So she is also equally displeased and that is for another specific reason, will come to the reason in a short while. So this was the state of affairs when they spread the chessboard in the guesthouse of Mir's home. Let me read the extract. When the chessboard was spread in the dewankhana and Mir Sahib stopped going out, the begum became edgy.

Her freedom was curtailed. She hardly had any chance to have a glimpse of the outside. So the word edgy is particularly interesting in the context of the Begum and the narrator says that how freedom was stopped, curtailed, put an end to and because of the continuous presence of her husband in the house, she could not even managed to get a glimpse of the outside world.

So the chess playing at Mir's home causes some obvious troubles for his wife and there is a deeper subversive subtext to this game of chess which is played at Mir's house because the wife wants the husband away for other reasons too. We will come to that in a minute.

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So as I said the word edgy is very interesting because the Begum becomes anxious. If you remember the wife of Mirza, she becomes anxious for another reason. She is anxious and edgy because the husband is never around in the house and on the contrary Mir's Begum becomes anxious when he is within the house. So we have two opposites, two polar extremes here depicted or orchestrated in this particular story.

So we have two domesticities and there is one domesticity in Mirza's home where the wife wants the husband at home with her while there is another where the wife wants the husband away from the home. So as I said the freedom of Mir's Begum is restricted and the husband's activities impinge impact negatively on the wife's mobility as well and there is as I said a less admirable side to Mir's wife which is revealed gradually in the story. There is almost a small mystery that has been kind of weaved or woven into this narrative.

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## Mir's home

◇ Less admirable Servants

◇ "Up till now they had sat idle, warding off flies. They were never bothered by guests. But now they had to take orders the whole day. Now to fetch the paan, now sweets. And the hookah kept smouldering like a lover's heart."

Equally, we have less admirable servants in Mir's home as well. The wife is less admirable and so are the servants, so there seems to be a mirror image here playing out in this particular narrative. If you recall the two friends, they are also almost mirror images of one another and the servants seem to mirror the lackadaisical attitude of their masters too. So we have a really interesting extract which discusses that aspect of the servants in the story.

Up until now they sat idle, warding off flies. They were never bothered by guests but now they had to take orders the whole day, now to fetch the paan, now sweets and the hookah kept smoldering like a lover's heart. So this is the context of the servants in Mir's home where until now they had an empty home because they did not have the master at home so they did not have any business at home as well.

But now since the master is at home with his friend, they constantly have to run errands, they have to take orders the whole day, they have to bring the paan, they have to bring the sweets and the hookah has to be kept running as well and it is very interesting to see that simile there where the hookah is described as a smoldering like a lover's heart constantly throbbing without any rest.

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So what is clear in this particular extract is a sheer dislike of work. In other words, it is a shirking off of responsibility, it is a rejection of responsibility almost and over shirking of responsibility and certain idea is beautifully put in an rhetorical way in that particular extract by the narrator. So if you look closely at the lines, there is a neat parallelism there. Now to fetch the paan, now sweets as the two ideas are broke one after the other in a corresponding manner.

And as I said there is a rejection of responsibility and that too done in a direct manner. The job of the servants in that particular period was just to meet the demands of the masters and that was their responsibility but they reject that kind of job that they had to do then. So it is very interesting that they can do that in an overt manner. So this is the picture that the narrative paints for us.

And what is very significant about this rejection of responsibility is the fact that it indicates at a large scale corruption, a large scale disorder in society. So the servants become symbolic of the kind of corruption which is at play in the city of Lucknow in the 19th century. So every subject in that hierarchy in that social order seems to be implicated in the moral and social disorder chaos that is kind of playing out in 19th century Lucknow and I want also to pick up on the image of a business house especially a sweet shop.

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If there are no customers in a sweet shop, the assistants in the shop would just be sweeping away or taking a swipe at or warding off flies and that metaphor seems to be employed in the context of Mir's home when in the absence of Mir the servants at home seem to be doing the exact same thing which shop assistants in a sweet shop would do when there are no customers.

So there is no business at home when there is no master at home that parallel seems to be drawn there and again the simile that I mentioned in passing the hookah smoldering like a lover's heart, it is an interesting parallel there between hookah and the heart of a lover and in this particular story, there are hardly any romantic plots or happy domesticity plot in the story because as I said both the wives of the two central characters are disgruntled with their husbands in some respect or the other.

And there is a clear disruption of domesticity in both the homes in both Mirza's home and in Mir's home and they are kind of orchestrated in different manner. In the case of Mirza, the wife longs for the husband's attention and in the case of Mir's home there is another rival for the husband who is always away from the home. So the comparison of a hookah to a lover's heart in relation to Mir and Mirza is a little bit ironical because none of them are akin to a lover in their relationship with their wives.

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## Mir's home

◇ But this game is evil. The person playing it never prospers. A misfortune is bound to fall upon such a house. So much so that we have seen whole neighbourhoods being ruined one after the other. Everyone in the neighbourhood is talking about it. We're his faithful servants and don't like to hear him maligned.'

So this is how the game of chess is perceived in the society of Lucknow. This game is evil that is what the servants at Mir's home say to the Begum but this game is evil the person playing it never prospers. There is a nice consonance here p and p. The person playing it again playing it never prospers. A misfortune is bound to fall upon such a house. So much so that we have seen whole neighborhoods being ruined one after the other.

Everyone in the neighborhood is talking about it. We are his faithful servants and do not like to hear him maligned. Malignated is criticized severely maliciously, so this is the rhetoric of the servants at Mir's home. So they made this complaint to his wife. Mir's wife the Begum and they say that everybody in the neighborhood is talking and complaining about it and the game is an evil game and whoever plays this game of chess will never prosper in fact they will have a severe fall in fortune.

And in fact the people who play this in hoods of people who play this will always meet with a bad end.

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Now there is a lot of foreboding in the words of the servants uttered to the lady of the house. There are threats of the downfall of the home of Mir in that set of ideas that the servants communicate to the mistress of the home. That is very clear especially the choice of words evil and the idea of never prospering, people will never prosper, will never get wealthier, the word misfortune bad fortune or bad luck.

And it is going to fall upon such a house and the word ruined whole neighborhoods I mean people in those neighborhoods who play this game obsessively will be ruined one after the other. The idea of entire society kind of crumbling or getting destroyed and this choice of words, this diction creates a certain mood of foreboding and warning and prophesying. It is almost a foreshadowing of the fall of Mir and with Mir his friend as well as the entire society including the Nawab's fall.

So everything is implicated in that sense of foreboding that the servants communicate to the lady of the house and it is such a significant set of ideas and the servants say we are his faithful servants and do not like to hear him maligned. This is pretty ironical, his faithful servants because it is ironical as we saw in the previous slide that they reject the responsibility that is endured on them as servants.

And the servants are supposed to fetch and carry and meet all the demands of the masters at least in the context of the 19th century when the servants are almost like slaves of the masters. So they are not faithful servants in that context and so there is an element of hypocrisy in their words as well especially the last statement. They say that we do not like to



hear him maligned which is why we have come to you to get your help in sorting out this problem.

We are saving our master from such you know criticism such negative talk. So there is foreboding, there are threats about the fall of the house and there is hypocrisy on the part of the servants who behave in a morally righteous manner when they do not seem to have that opinion out of genuine regard for the master and they do have that kind of attitude because they want to get away from their responsibilities.

They want to shirk work and do something else, so the other social realistic part that we derive from this extract is the idea that the entire neighborhood is getting ruined by this pleasure that they derive from the game of the chess. The chess is the one pleasure that afflicts the home of Mir and Mirza whereas other kinds of pleasures are corrupting the homes of other people in the society of Lucknow.

It could be writing poetry, it could be listening to music, it could be you know enjoyment of cuisine or the prostitutes a whole range of pleasure sources are at the hands of the people of Lucknow and entire homes and the neighborhoods are involved in this pleasure pursuit and that is made clear in that extract too.

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The Servants and

- ◊ False sincerity; irony
- ◊ Chorus-like role
- ◊ Society's attitude towards chess playing

Game of chess becomes a symbol of evil; ruin

As if it is a kind of an epidemic, pleasure has become an epidemic that is sucking out the life spirit of the entire society and the servants chorus-like they are like a chorus in Greek plays where they communicate the state of affairs of the society to the audience. So the play that

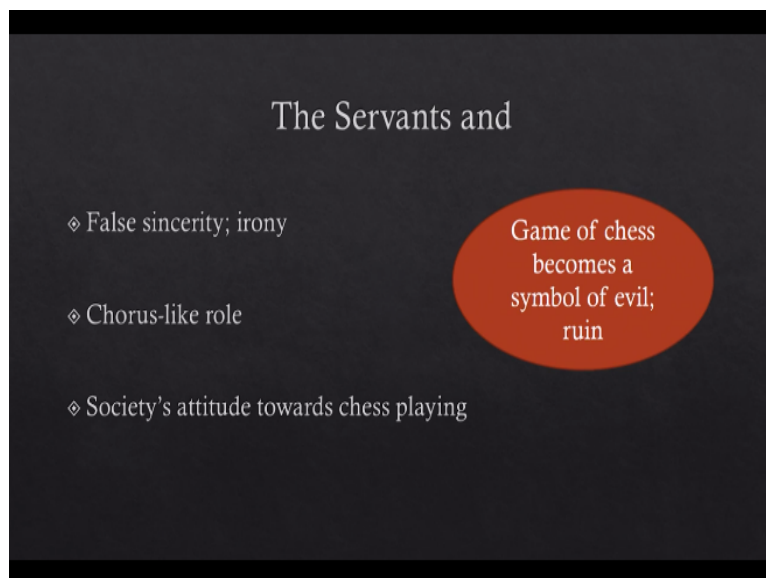
chorus-like role while having a kind of an individualistic identity as well endured on them in terms of their attitude towards work.

So they play the role of the chorus as well as have certain individualistic meaning bestowed on them by the narrator and as I said there is false sincerity in their words especially in the closing statements that they make to the Begum where they say that they make this plea to her because they are worried about their reputation of their master and not because of any other consideration.

So there is also irony in their terms especially in how they kind of present their perspective to the mistress of the house and other major role that extract plays is offer societies attitude towards chess playing in which the game becomes the symbol of evil as well as the symbol of ruin, ruin of entire families and some other critics also suggest that the chess also becomes a symbol of luxury.

It becomes a symbol of wealth and privilege where you know only the people who are rich and privilege enough can you know enjoy the privilege of playing this particular game. So this game of chess is multi-dimensional in its symbolic value that it has for the society at large okay.

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So we have seen the perspective of Mir's wife and the suffering that she undergoes when Mir's stays at home. For her on a surface level, she cannot get out of the house because the husband is at home that is her one of her troubles. If you look at the servant's predicament,

they have to run errands the entire day, they have to fetch in, they have to serve, they have to look after the masters who enjoy the game of chess continuously all day long so that is their predicament.

And when they make their complaint they say that you know we are kind of giving you the opinion of the others in society as well. Now the narrator then offers the perspective of the neighborhood that would be the last perspective that we have in relation to the game of chess which is played at Mir's home.

So we have the wives, we have the servants and we have servants you know indirect representation of the neighborhoods ideas and then we have the neighborhoods ideas as well for our information. So this is what the society of the neighborhood has to say about the game of chess, nothing good will come of it. When our aristocracy is behaving in this manner, God alone can save the country.

This kingdom will be ruined because of this game. It is an evil sign. So this is what the neighborhood thinks. The neighborhood thinks that the aristocracy is to be blamed because they are supposed to be the custodians of the kingdom. They are the officers of the state and if they do not behave in a responsible manner then nobody else but God can save the country and the game of chess is a sign of evil.

So again the idea of evil being embedded in this game of chess is highlighted, brought to the surface again and again and the aristocracy is especially marked out for receiving the blame because they are at the highest levels of society and they are seen as models for the people to kind of form their behaviour and lead their life. So if the aristocracy is corrupt, then accordingly the people below them would also follow their example.

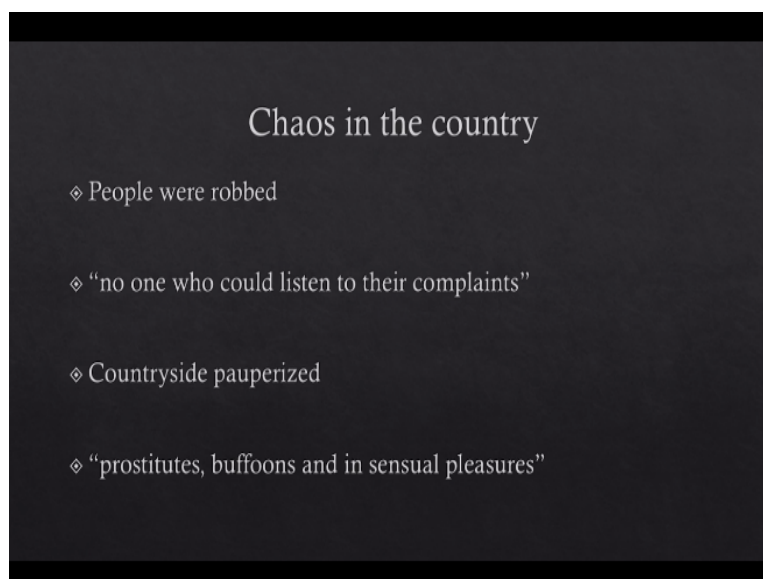
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So as I said the servants and the people of old school both choose this particular game of chess as the common enemy of the public and this evil that is associated with the game is once again reinforced by the opinions of the neighborhood as well and because it is a very simplistic and reductive formula but because of the game of chess because of this addiction to the game of chess because chess itself becomes a massive symbol, the country is threaten.

So we have a very exaggerated as well as a very simplistic formula which accrues a lot of symbolic value to this particular chess game and this chess game is sort of pointed out as the common enemy of the public good and as a result of this common enemy the country is brought to a ruin. So Premchand kind of sketches exaggerated but a neat model where it is easy to point the finger of blame at a few people or a few characters in this particular narrator.

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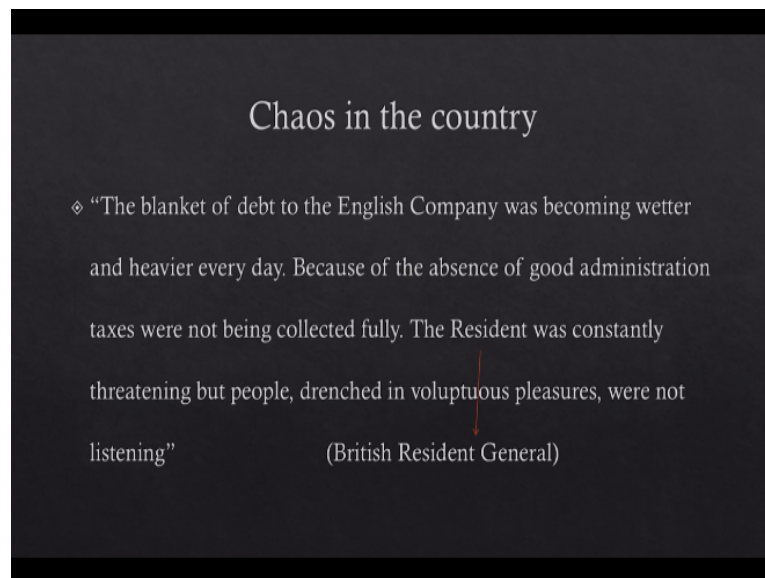


So what is the consequence of the pleasure that is drenching the surface of the country, drenching the society, drenching the people in Lucknow? So even when people are being robbed in the country side outside of Lucknow, there is nobody who could listen to their complaints and get redressal for their problems. So there is hardly any administration, there are hardly any guardians who could save the people.

So the country side is also pauperized, the country side is becoming poorer and poorer and that is probably because wealth is kind of taken out from the country side and injected into the city and the city is enjoying the luxuries that it is deriving from elsewhere and the entire society of Lucknow is drowned in sensual pleasures you know pleasures that involve prostitutes, buffoons, music, writing poetry and the game of chess.

So we have chaos in the country and the people who are supposed to be the guardians, who are supposed to be the upholders of the rule of law are away from their offices or away from their positions of power and they are involved in other pursuits of pleasure.

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So this is the extract that neatly shows the impact of the pleasure pursuits of the officers of the state and its hints at the ruin that is going to arrive at the doorstep of Lucknow. The blanket of debt to the English Company was becoming wetter and heavier every day because of the absence of good administration, taxes were not being collected fully. The resident was constantly threatening but people drenched in voluptuous pleasures, were not listening.

So the immediate problem is hinted at there, immediate problem is the English East India Company that is getting tired of not receiving the taxes from the people and the city of Lucknow is getting indebted to this company and that issue of debt is going to bring some kind of massive trouble for the people of the country. So there is a lot of interesting metaphors that has been employed in this particular extract.

Let us look at the first one, the blanket of debt, debt itself is like a blanket that is thrown over the people and it is kind of suffocating. So the blanket of debt to the English Company was becoming wetter and it is not just a blanket which is suffocating which is covering the entire populous of Lucknow and Avadh, it is also becoming wetter, becomes terribly uncomfortable, so it was becoming wetter and heavier ever.

It is suffocating metaphor that has been used there and the country of Lucknow was being threatened by the resident. The resident being the British Resident General who wants his taxes from Lucknow but that is not getting to his treasure chest probably because the officers of the state, the aristocrats are not doing their job of collecting the taxes instead what they are doing is they are drenched in voluptuous pleasures.

So I am reminded of the servants who do not want the masters at home because they do not want to do any work for the masters. So we can draw a parallel between the servants within the home of an aristocrat and the aristocrats within the country who are answerable to the British Resident General. So we can see some parallels, the interesting symbolic parallels that are drawn in this particular narrative.

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Chaos in the country

- ◆ Country becoming indebted to the Company
- ◆ Pleasures are the source of corruption
- ◆ Ability to function is erased

Image of a heavy and wet blanket suffocating the sleepers

So the country was becoming massively indebted to the company. So we know what happens when the country becomes indebted because we have seen in history that the company can take over the rule of law, take over the administration from the local rulers and there is a clear indication that the pleasures are the source of corruption in society. So there is a deep moral corruption in the society and that is the source of the problem in Avadh or in the region or Avadh and that is why it eventually is annexed by the English East India Company.

So it is also important to note that the impact of the pleasure, the immediate impact of pleasure pursuits is the inability to function, all ability to function is erased and that is evident in this particular extract where the narrator says that the people were not listening, it is as if their ears have stopped listening as if their bodily firm, as if they have stopped functioning as human beings because they have become immobile, they have become addicted to some other pursuits.

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So let us be clear about the state of the people in the country of Avadh. We have the country people on the one side and we have the city folk, the city folk of Lucknow and we have the aristocrats who are the cream of the society and above the aristocrat we have the Nawab who is ruling the country. So the country people are helpless because we can see that the country has become pauperized.

Wealth has been sucked out of the country and the country people are getting robbed by criminals and nobody is helping them. So they are in a helpless, vulnerable state. They are in a helpless situation. How about the city folk, the city folk in Lucknow? The city folk are very comfortable, they are sedate, they are enjoying the joys of life as I said they are writing poetry to the extreme without taking care of any of the productive aspects of life.

So the people of Lucknow be the rich or be the poor, they all involved in activities which is not directly helpful for the running of the society and the aristocrats who are represented by Mir and Mirza in this particular story seem to represent the entire section of this particular strata of society and the aristocrats obviously are not very responsible officers of the state, they are engaged in all sorts of pleasures and chess represents one of them.

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## Categories

Country people are helpless

City folk are decadent

Aristocrats are passive; hedonistic

So the city folk as I said are decadent, hedonistic and the aristocrats are passive. They are not active at all. They are passive in relation to the responsibilities that have been endured on them by the ruler of this particular country and they are hedonistic. They are completely slaves to the pleasures that they can derive from the material aspect of society and the country people in relation to these 2 sections are completely helpless.

So this is the state of affairs of the people in the country in the region of Avadh in 1856. Thank you for listening. I will catch up with you in the next session.