The short story “Shatranj ke Khiladi”, or “The Chess Players”, by the renowned Hindu writer Premchand, published in 1924, is set in the times of Wajid Ali Shah when Lucknow was plunged deep in luxurious living. Premchand portrays a purportedly feudal mentality of a whole culture through the two main protagonists, Mir and Mirza, who are immersed in chess to the point of being oblivious to everything else. Premchand's narrative of the two noblemen of Lucknow absorbed in their own game of chess is set forth against the larger chess game— the annexation of Awadh by the British in 1856. Interestingly, the conquest was peaceful, without bloodshed, and not surprising considering Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's reputation. His devotion to art, artists, and courtesans, and his imperviousness to matters of the state reflect the pervasiveness of luxury Premchand discusses as well as condemns in his narrative. Against this specific cultural and historical context of Lucknow, the characters of Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Raushan Ali do not appear peculiar. Through their characters, Premchand portrays a society that has decayed from within. Premchand shows us only a pervasive sense of weariness and inertia throughout most of the story. When Mirza’s house is the centre of their duels, his wife detests the chessboard since it deprives her of her husband's company. When the scene of chess combats shifts to Mir Roshan Ali’s house, the servants in his house are exasperated since they are suddenly burdened with work. Mir's wife is also unhappy about it since it halts her affair with her lover. This lover soon poses as a messenger from the king’s court and announces that Wajid Ali Shah has ordered Roshan Ali to appear in the court so as to enlist his services in the military. Alarmed at the possibility of such a scenario, the two friends quickly shift the venue of play again to the ruins of a mosque, which they select due to the privacy it offers them to continue with their game without any interruption. A basic atmosphere of hollowness and dissatisfaction continues to prevail when the Nawab departs as a prisoner and Lucknow remains drunk in the sleep of sensual pleasure. Ironically, the story only reaches its climax when the two friends are slain by the edge of each other’s swords. They were not bothered when their king was captured, but they fought to protect the pawns of their artificial battlefield and the honour which they associated with it. Premchand was indeed remarkable in portraying the last extreme of political decay so subtly. The British do not so much conquer it as simply take it over. As the old regime departs un lamented, the new regime arrives unwelcomed.
Note: Below is the critical appreciation of the story, *The Chess Players*, and the film by Satyajit Ray. Read the **BOLD** portion which is relevant to understand the story. Students may ignore the portion which discuss about the film. The link of the article has been shared.

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/published/txt_chess_players.html

"THE CHESS PLAYERS": FROM PREMCHAND TO SATYAJIT RAY

by Frances W. Pritchett

Near the end of his life, Premchand was asked to explain how he wrote his stories. He replied with a short essay in which he maintained that every story needed to develop toward a climax of some kind: 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 be-ginning to the end in my mind. 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....

The point about the climax was an important one, and he elaborated it. He denied that a story could be created "merely by using beautiful and smart words, and a brilliant style." Rather, a story must have "a climax, and that also a psychological one." And the whole story must "move in such an order that the climax should keep on drawing nearer."/1/

Any reader of Premchand's stories knows that his practice follows his theory. Characters are developed "in accordance with the story," the action moves steadily toward a climax, and the climax itself is not only "psychological" but also designed to "depict some philosophical and emotional truth." Such climaxes occur at the end of virtually all Premchand's stories. In some the climax is apparent to the characters; it is a turning point in their lives; it causes marked changes in their attitudes or behavior. "Bare bhai sahab" (My Older Brother), "Mukti-marg" (The Path to Salvation), and "Puski rat" (A January Night) are stories of this kind. In other stories, however, the characters do not change, but merely carry their typical behavior further and further until it reaches some final extreme. This extreme is so striking, so egregious, that its impact on the reader forms a real "psychological climax" to the story. Some of Premchand's most successful pieces are of this latter kind--stories like "Kafan" (The Shroud) and "Dudh ka dam" (The Price of Milk).

Another work which belongs in this latter group is the Hindi story "Shatranj ke khilari" (The Chess Players), first published in 1924. This work offers, as we will see, a particularly clear example of Premchand's commitment to his theory of narrative structure. And the story is noteworthy for another reason as well: in 1977 Satyajit Ray made it into a Hindi (or rather, Urdu) film. This film, also called Shatranj ke khilari, was Ray's first big-budget Hindi film and has received a great deal of critical attention. Out of Premchand's 288 or so stories, Ray chose this one to film. Those familiar with Ray's
great gifts as a filmmaker may well wish to look at the original story, and especially at
the ways in which Ray has transformed it.

Premchand's story takes place in the colorful, cultivated Lucknow of Nawab Vajid
Ali Shah's day; the climax of the story coincides with the British annexation of the
nawab's whole kingdom of Avadh in 1856. Here is how Premchand begins his
story: It was the time of Vajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was absorbed in vilasita
[enjoyment, pleasure, luxuriousness, sensuality]. Great and small, rich and poor, all were
absorbed in vilasita. If one person arranged music and dance performances, then the next
took pleasure only in the intoxication of opium. In every department of life, enjoyment
and merry-making prevailed. In government, in literature, in social conditions, in arts
and crafts, in industry, in cuisine, everywhere vilasita was becoming pervasive. Government
servants were absorbed in sensual indulgence, poets in the description of
love and lovers' separation, craftsmen in making gold and silver thread work and delicate
embroidery, artisans in earning a livelihood from eye shadow, perfume, missi [a powder
used to color the teeth], and oils. Everyone's eyes were overspread with the intoxication
of vilasita. No one knew what was happening in the world. Quail are fighting. Bets are
being made on prtridge fights. Here the chausar board [a pachisi-like game] is spread,
shouts of "I've thrown a six!" are heard. There the terrible combat of chess has begun.
From king to pauper, all were drunk with this same mood. So much so that when
mendicants were given coins, they did not buy bread but ate opium or smoked madak [an
opium-based preparation]. This brief inventory of luxurious pursuits--music, dance,
opium-smoking, poetry, clothes, cosmetics, cuisine, quail fights, games--is given in a
casual and perfunctory way. All this local color, so evocative and fascinating to others,
all these Lucknowi tastes about which whole books have been written--all these are merely
elements being mentioned to prove a point. Far from being described or differentiated,
they are lumped together as various aspects of Lucknow's total, universal vilasita
(enjoyment, pleasure, luxuriousness, sensuality). Music, dance, poetry, embroidery,
opium, and chess are all equally facets of vilasita, and it is this vilasita itself, as an abstract
moral concept, with which Premchand is primarily concerned. Once he has, by a kind of
inductive generalization, made us familiar with the idea of vilasita, he has no further
interest in Lucknowi local color. The activities mentioned so summarily in these two
opening paragraphs are not (except for chess) mentioned again in the whole course of the
story.

Premchand thus begins his story by speaking to us authoritatively, telling us
general truths, judging a whole culture in a way that seeks to compel our consent. He
then introduces the two Lucknowi aristocrats, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Raushan Ali,
who have inherited such wealth and social position that they are free to indulge their
passion for what he calls with seeming sarcasm the "terrible combat" (ghor sangram) of
chess. He tells us also how those around the two players react to this passion. The two
stage their daily "battle" (lara'i) at Mirza's house, and Mirza's neighbors and servants
make malicious remarks about their obsession. Mirza's wife seeks to scold her husband,
but he starts playing so early and continues till so late that she hardly gets a chance.
Finally, she claims to have a headache, demands his attention, creates a scene, upsets the
chessboard, and flings the pieces away. The game is then moved to Mir's house. There
too the servants, resenting the extra work, pretend moral disapproval; the neighbours
mutter; Mir's faithless wife is disgusted at having less freedom to meet her lover. [67] At this point Premchand once again interrupts his immediate story to make sweeping judgments about the state of the whole society. This time the urgency is greater: vilasita is a chronic condition, but its consequences are reaching a critical stage:

[passage 2:] Lamentation was raised in the realm. Day by day the people were being looted. No one listened to their complaints. All the wealth of the countryside was being drawn into Lucknow and squandered on prostitutes, jesters, and other kinds of vilasita. Day by day the debt to the English Company kept growing. Day by day the blanket grew wetter and felt heavier. Because there was no proper administration in the country, even the annual revenue was not received. The [British] resident repeatedly gave warnings, but people here were besotted with the drunkenness of vilasita; no one had the least idea what was happening. (274)

In this time of growing national peril, Mir and Mirza too undergo hardship. The tension of their daily chess battles frays their nerves, and they are sometimes on the verge of quarreling. But even if they go so far as to break up the game in a fit of pique, they are reconciled and ready to play again by the next morning. The outside world, however, subjects them to hardship as well. Mir's wife's lover poses as a messenger from the nawab and demands Mir's services for the army. This scheme to drive Mir from the house is successful. Hurriedly Mir and Mirza move their chessboard to a desolate place near a ruined mosque on the riverbank. They play there daily, with only a brief break for lunch at some roadside shop. So absorbed in the chess 'battlefield' (sangram-kshetra) do they become that they sometimes forget to eat.

As they play one day, Mir and Mirza see British troops march into Lucknow. Only Mir, who is losing, expresses perfunctory regret at this sight; Mirza, who is winning, rightly suspects an attempt to distract his mind from the game. The two know that Lucknow will remain quiet: "Nothing will be happening in the city. People will have eaten their meals and will be sleeping peacefully. His Highness the nawab too will be in the pleasure house," they cynically conclude. They then continue their game. Here Premchand breaks into the story once again to articulate his bitterest and most passionate words:

[passage 3:] Never before could the king of an independent country have been defeated so peacefully, without bloodshed, like this. This was not the ahimsa [nonviolence] with which the gods are pleased. This was the kind of cowardice at which even the biggest cowards shed tears. The nawab of the spacious land of Avadh was departing as a prisoner, and Lucknow was drunk in the sleep of sensual pleasure. This was the last extreme of political decay. (277)

As the British bear off Vajid Ali Shah into captivity, the chess players are still absorbed in their game. This time Mirza is losing, and it is he who notices and laments the disaster, while Mir firmly recalls his mind to matters of greater urgency:

[passage 4:] Mirza said: "The brutes have taken his highness the nawab prisoner." [68]

Mir: "All right, so they have. I'm putting you in check."

Mirza: "Sir, just wait a bit, please. My heart isn't in it right now. The poor nawab must be weeping tears of blood now."

Mir: "Well, so he should. This luxury will never fall to his lot there! There, check!"
Mirza: "No one's fortune continues the same all his life. What a pitiful situation it is."

Mir: "Yes, of course it is--take that, check again! And this time it's checkmate; you can't escape."

Mirza: "By God, you're really heartless. Even seeing such a major calamity doesn't make you sad. Alas, poor Vajid Ali Shah!"

Mir: "Please save your own king first and mourn for the nawab later. There, check, and there, mate! Come on, concede!" (277)

This seizure of their country and king by the British, an event which ought to have been deeply feared and energetically resisted, remains a kind of non-event, a climax manqué. Premchand denounced all Lucknow for cowardice and political decadence, in language as forcefully contemptuous as possible. And in the wonderfully funny and ironic dialogues between Mir and Mirza as they sit over their perpetual chess game, Premchand shows us how fully they share their city's attitude.

But after the climax manqué of British conquest, Premchand is finally ready to end his story--with the real climax to which it has been building all along. Mir and Mirza, who have been undergoing progressively more severe hardships for the sake of their chess game, are to have their moment of heroism after all. Mirza has lost three games in a row and finds himself losing the fourth as well; suffering from "the wound of defeat," he picks a quarrel over a point of chess etiquette. Feelings run so high that the two begin to cast aspersions on each other's nobility of descent. Finally, they draw their swords and prepare for a fight to the death: [passage 5:]

Both were vilasi [pleasure-lovers] but they were not cowards. Political feelings had decayed in them--for the king, for the kingdom, why should they die? But there was no lack of personal courage. Both assumed their positions, the swords gleamed and clashed. Both were wounded and fell, and both, writhing in pain, died. Those from whose eyes not one tear fell for their king, those same two living beings gave their lives protecting their chess queens.

Darkness had come. The game board was spread. Both kings, seated on their royal thrones, seemed to be mourning for the death of the two heroes.

Silence had spread all around. The broken arches of the ruin, the fallen walls, and the dusty minarets saw these corpses and grieved. (280)

[69] Here, with this most striking "psychological climax," the story ends. The "terrible combat of chess"--a description that seemed sarcastic at the beginning of the story--has claimed its victims after all.

Since attention is focused on the steady development of the story toward this climax, it is not surprising that Premchand chooses to omit most details of Lucknowi culture and atmosphere. He wants to direct the reader's attention to the moral and political drama at the center of the stage. This drama is one of obsession: Mir and Mirza live entirely in their own chess world. Within it they are energetic, purposeful, devoted. While they are not really admirable, certainly the other characters in the story appear even less admirable. The lazy, hypocritical servants, Mirza's self-centered wife, Mir's adulterous.
wife with her deceitful lover—all seem better examples of the decadent and indolent side of vilasita than do the chess players themselves, whose devotion to chess is at least active and sincere. Although Premchand condemns the chess players and deplores their political indifference, he insists on their personal courage. They ignore events in the real world which should have been the climax of their lives, but which instead barely attract their attention. But what they will not do for their "real" king (who is himself hopelessly sunk in vilasita) they unhesitatingly do for the kings of their chess world. They die—and the ruins among which they die grieve for them. They are heroes (vir) who waste their heroism (virta) in a tiny artificial world; but Premchand surrounds their death with an odd kind of dignity, and ends the story on what can only be called an elegiac note.

Throughout the story Premchand is much more interested in condemning Lucknowi culture than in portraying it. His use of language contributes to this effect of distance and hostility. Rather than drawing us into the Lucknowi atmosphere, his language removes us from it. In narrating the story, Premchand conspicuously rejects most of the Perso-Arabic words actually used in Vajid Ali Shah's Lucknow in favor of pointedly Sanskritic ones. Premchand, familiar with Urdu from boyhood, often used Perso-Arabic words in his Hindi stories where they seemed appropriate. In this story particularly, the only one of his stories to center wholly on Lucknow and Lucknowi culture, his narrator's insistence on a heavily Sanskritic vocabulary makes a strong political point. For in fact the narrator carries his aversion to Perso-Arabic words very far. Itemizing the different forms of vilasita, he finds Lucknowi poets absorbed in the "description of love and lovers' separation": "Kavigan prem aur virah ke varnan men...lipt the" (269). Any Hindi speaker concerned to evoke classical Lucknowi poetry even accurately, much less vividly, could easily write something like "sha'ir 'ishq aur firaq ke bayan men...masruf the." Similarly, later in the story the hookah which the chess players smoke burns "like the heart of some lover"—not "kisi 'ashiq ke dil ki tarah," but "kisi premi ke hriday ki bhanti" (273). Even today colloquial Hindi retains words like sha'ir, 'ishq, 'ashiq, and dil in exactly such Urdu-influenced romantic contexts, and lipt and bhanti are surely less common than masruf and tarah. Most prominent of all is the ubiquitous Sanskritic abstract noun vilasita, which is used to sum up and condemn Lucknowi culture. Only rarely does Premchand use such Sanskritic vocabulary to sharpen rather than blunt an image: the chess players are so absorbed that "ko'i yogi bhi samadhi men itna ekagra na hota hoga"—"probably no yogi in deep meditation had ever been so intent" (276).

The characters themselves do, of course, use Perso-Arabic words rather than the sanskritized language which Premchand as narrator insists upon. They occasionally use exclamations that show their identity as Muslims (vallah, Hazrat Husain ki qasam), and Mirza's wife uses a few characteristically feminine expressions (nigori, nauj, nikhattu); but generally they speak simple standard Urdu, devoid of special flourishes. Conversations in the story are informal, involving only Mir and Mirza (who are social equals and old friends), their [70] wives, and various servants; there is thus no occasion for the famous Lucknowi formality, courtesy, and elegance in conversation. When the chess players are together, they speak laconically by choice: "Except for a few words like 'check' and 'checkmate,' no other sentences left their lips" (276). In language as in other dimensions of the story, local color is the last thing Premchand wants to offer us.
The Hindi story, "Shatranj ke khilari," on which this discussion is based, was published in the journal Madhuri (Sweetness; Lucknow) in 1924. Sometime in the next few years, but before 1928, Premchand published an Urdu version of the same story called "Shatranj ki bazi" (The Chess Game) in a volume of stories entitled Khvab o khiyal (Dreams and Visions). Many of Premchand's stories were published in this fashion, in separate Hindi and Urdu versions. Unfortunately, it is often impossible to determine which version of a given story Premchand first wrote. The version first published may reflect merely chance or convenience rather than prior composition. Usually the Hindi and Urdu versions of a story differ somewhat from each other. In the case of this story, they differ in ways which perhaps illumine some of the points made above about Premchand's use of language.

In the Urdu story "Shatranj ki bazi," Premchand's narrator is deprived of the kind of distancing effect which could be achieved through the use of a Sanskritic vocabulary in the Hindi story. The narrator is obliged to use Urdu terms for all the characteristic Lucknowi habits, customs, and attitudes. Some of these terms ('aish o 'ishrat, nashah, saghar o jam, nishat ki mahfilen, etc.) have distinctly positive, romantic connotations as well as pejorative ones. In Urdu Premchand cannot condemn by keeping his distance; perhaps in reaction he becomes a bit more scathing and specific in his indictment. He elaborates; he adds a few details; he makes every point a bit more vehemently. Compare the beginnings of the two stories:

**Urdu Version**
1. It was the time of Nawab Vajid Ali Shah. 1. It was the time of Vajid Ali Shah.
2. Lucknow was absorbed in a lifestyle of pleasure and enjoyment. 2. Lucknow was absorbed in vilasita.
3. Great and small, rich and poor--all were engaged in indulging themselves. 3. Great and small, rich and poor were all absorbed in vilasita.
4. If somewhere joyous gatherings were arranged, then someone else took pleasure in the intoxication of opium. 4. If one person arranged music and dance performances, then the next took pleasure only in drinking opium.
5. In every department of life, drunkenness and licentiousness prevailed. 5. In every department of life, enjoyment and merry-making prevailed.
6. In government, literature and poetry, social behavior, arts and crafts, in industry and commerce--everywhere was the craze for sensuality. 6. In government, literature, social conditions, arts and crafts, industry, cuisine--everywhere vilasita was becoming pervasive.
7. Nobles of the realm were becoming slaves to wine drinking, [71] poets were intoxicated with kisses and embraces, craftsmen with making gold and silver thread-work and delicate embroidery, soldiers with partridge fighting; artisans were devoted to buying and selling perfume and oil, eye shadow and missi. 7. Government servants were absorbed in sensual indulgence, poets in description of love and lovers' separation, craftsmen in making gold and
silver thread-work and delicate embroidery, artisans in earning a livelihood from eye shadow, perfume, missi, and oils.

8. In short, the whole country was held fast in the shackles of sensuality. 8. --

9. Everyone's eyes were overspread with the intoxication of wine flask and goblet. Everyone's eyes were overspread with the intoxication of vilasita.

10. No one knew what was happening in the world, with what scientific inventions it was absorbed, how the western nations kept conquering land and sea. 10. No one knew what was happening in the world.

11. Quail are fighting. 11. Quail are fighting.

12. Bets are being made on partridge fights. 12. Bets are being made on partridge fights.

13. Here chausar is going on; shouts of "I've thrown six!" are heard. Here the chausar board is spread; shouts of "I've thrown a six!" are heard.

14. There the battles of chess have begun. 14. There the terrible combat of chess has begun.

15. Armies are being annihilated. 15. --

16. The nawab's condition was even worse than this. 16. From king to pauper, all were drunk with this same mood.

17. Here melodies and rhythms were invented. 17. --

18. New tricks, new prescriptions for sensual pleasure kept being devised. 18. --

19. So much so that when mendicants were given coins, instead of buying bread they took pleasure in madak and chandu [an opium-based smoking preparation]. 19. So much so that when mendicants were given coins, they didn't buy bread but ate opium or smoked madak.

Many discrepancies between the versions can be seen, and they generally contribute to greater length and more comprehensive detail in the Urdu version. Most conspicuously, sentences 8, 15, 17, 18, and most of sentence 10 appear only in the Urdu version.

[72] This pattern is, moreover, continued throughout the story. Whole sentences appear in the Urdu version which do not appear at all in the Hindi. This is particularly the case in narrative rather than dialogue passages, and above all, in passages which express Premchand's moral disapproval of Lucknowi culture most strongly. Passage 2 from the Hindi story (translated above), for example, includes in its Urdu version more details about the ways rich young Lucknowis spent their money on "jesters, mimes, dancers, and courtesans. Gold pieces rained down on the shops for hookah-smoking. Rich young men threw away a gold piece with every puff" (68). And in the Urdu version, just before passage 4 we find the following bitterly effective simile: "The nawab departed from his house the way a bride, weeping and beating her breast, goes to her in-laws' house. The begams wept. The nawab wept. The maidservants wept. The ladies-in-waiting wept. And that was that; the kingdom came to an end" (73).
Such greater detail is not, however, always such a gain to the story as in this passage. The ending of the story suffers badly in the Urdu version. While in the Hindi story the ruins of the mosque "saw these corpses, and grieved" (passage 5), in the Urdu story they "saw these corpses. And they lamented the transience of human life, which was not even as enduring as stone and brick" (77). The explicit moralizing of the latter passage is much less effective than the simplicity and suggestiveness of the former.

Such instances, large and small, of increased detail at crucial points in the Urdu story are typical. By contrast, passages present only in the Hindi story are few and tend to be matter-of-fact rather than emotionally charged. It is not my purpose to contrast the two versions in detail, but only to point out one conspicuous and relatively consistent way in which they differ. It seems to me that this difference reflects Premchand's use of the linguistic resources available to him. In Hindi, he judges Lucknowi culture more abstractly, from a distance, in a language quite alienated from that of the culture itself. In Urdu, he judges Lucknowi culture more specifically and in more detail, with all the force he can command. He must exert himself to overcome the increased intimacy and evocative, romantic power of the Urdu vocabulary he cannot help but use.

It is true that any close analysis of Premchand's language must be done with a certain amount of caution, for Premchand was notoriously careless about what were to him small matters of word choice. He was often pressed for time and produced slapdash Hindi versions of stories originally written in Urdu and vice versa. In the later part of his career he sometimes hired others to do this work of transliteration and vocabulary modification for him and did not always supervise their work carefully. Since it is difficult in most cases to know whether the Hindi or the Urdu version is the original, there remains a residue of uncertainty about the literary significance of details and word choices in his stories. Whether or not Premchand's conscious artistic intentions in his choice of language can be demonstrated, it seems to me that the language does have the effects that I describe, and that Premchand may well have found himself working, consciously or unconsciously, along something like the lines I suggest. Comparisons between the Hindi and Urdu versions of others of his stories might shed some light on such problems of style. "Shatranj ke khilari" and "Shatranj ki bazi" might, for example, be contrasted with the Hindi and Urdu versions of "Idgah"/"Idgah" (Id-festival Grounds) first published in Urdu in 1933, which offers one of Premchand's very few highly sympathetic, even admiring, portrayals of Muslim culture. But all such close analysis of style can claim only a tentative kind of validity.

Fundamental textual uncertainties remain in the case of all too many stories, and we have no means of dispelling them. If in this paper I generally confine myself to the Hindi story "Shatranj ke khilari," the first version to be published, it is mostly for the sake of [73] simplicity. Premchand himself would certainly have felt that the discrepancies in the two versions were much less important than their similarities, for in both versions the plot is the same. And for Premchand, of course, the interest of the story centers on this plot--which steadily progresses towards a "psychological climax." Premchand as narrator
breaks into the action at critical points to introduce each phase of the plot in turn. First, he sets the stage by describing chronic vilasita as the crucial defining feature of Lucknowi life; second, he warns that vilasita is leading Avadh rapidly toward ruin; third, he describes the ruin and denounces all Lucknow for allowing its king to be so bloodlessly captured; fourth, he describes the fatal battle bravely fought by Mir and Mirza in defense of their chess kings. The progression is from normalcy of a kind, through danger, through disaster (the climax manqué), to death (the real climax). Premchand's narrative organization is thus made very explicit within the story itself. The story is, like most of Premchand's other works, ultimately a moral tale.

Of course, the way Premchand intended the story to be read is not necessarily the way we enjoy reading it today. We may read Premchand for his knowledge of village life, his feeling for colloquial conversation, his wide sympathies, etc., etc., rather than for the well-constructed plots over which he took such pains. In this story we may enjoy the lively temper of Mirza's wife, the pious innuendos of the servants, and above all, the totally absurd yet completely serious conversations of the two chess players on the riverbank as their country is invaded and their king led away captive. We may feel Premchand's heavy-handed, insistent moralizing and his didactic, all-too-well-explicated plot weigh down the lighter and better-written dialogue passages like bars of lead. But we must recognize that Premchand installed that lead deliberately. We may disregard the author's intentions when we read the story--but we owe it to him to recognize that we have done so.

If we read the story as a series of vignettes rather than a plot with a climax, we are moving to a lower level of generality than the one Premchand wished to emphasize. But it is equally interesting to consider the story at a higher level of generality, for its central idea--the juxtaposition of Lucknow's political life with a chess game--is a provocative one. As for the two chess players themselves, the extreme point has been reached in their lives: they identify themselves primarily as subjects of their chess kings. "Please save your own king first and mourn for the nawab later" says Mir to Mirza. Yet Vajid Ali Shah is not so different from a chess king after all, not so much more "real." He is passive, sunk in vilasita, unable to act or even to understand what occurs. The chess kings are as powerful as Vajid Ali Shah--more powerful, in fact, since each has one retainer loyal to the death, while Vajid Ali Shah has none.

Moreover, the chess world itself is not so different from the world in which, according to Premchand, most Lucknowis live. The people of Lucknow devote their lives to pastimes fully as specialized as chess (poetry, cuisine, fashion, etc.) or exist in the dreamworld of opium. The inhabitants of these small, brittle, self-contained universes can no more defend themselves against incursions from the real world than can chess pieces defend themselves against the upsetting of the chessboard. In addition, they rely on the outside world for constant transfusions of money, which must be extorted from the peasants or borrowed from the British. Lucknow's fragile game world is doomed, and we feel the inevitability of its passing.
But just as Premchand is not writing a series of humorous vignettes, he is not writing a meditation on cultural decay. He is writing a cautionary moral tale about the corrupting effects of vilasita. Mir and Mirza are admirable only for their personal courage: they are vilasi, Premchand tells us, but not cowards; they have no lack of personal courage. Their fight to the death, [74] however arbitrary and unmotivated it may seem to the modern reader, establishes their courage (as well as their inability to use it properly) beyond a doubt. Why should Premchand grant this mitigating grace, courage, to representative members of the culture he so thoroughly condemns? Perhaps because he was a romantic in a very literal sense: a reader of romances. As a child and young man, he grew up on the classic Urdu dastan literature, especially Tilism-e-hoshruba (Sense-Stealing Enchantment, 7 vols., 1881-1892) and on the melodramatic novels of G. W. M. Reynolds (1814-1873) in Urdu translation. Fights to the death in hand-to-hand combat over issues of personal honor were everyday occurrences in those worlds, and did not need much explanation. Similarly in Lucknow, Premchand tells us, gentlemen were always armed and prepared for instant combat: "It was the time of the nawabs; everyone wore sword, dagger, poignard, etc." (279-80).

But, of course, the revelation of the chess players' courage also serves to intensify the sense of loss at the end of the story: we regret the death of a culture that had such a redeeming feature. Mockery is replaced by elegy, and Premchand accords the two Lucknowis in death a dignity which he never accorded them in life. Whence the feeling of "psychological climax" the reader is meant to experience. Premchand's judgment is severe and absolutely serious: Lucknow's political decay is not, finally, farcical or absurd, but tragic. Indians must learn from it so that it will never be repeated.

When Satyajit Ray and his team turned "Shatranj ke khilari" into a film, they made a number of additions to the plot. The British Resident, General Outram, and Nawab Vajid Ali Shah himself become major characters. A host of minor characters associated with them also appear: the nawab's minister, his mother, his courtiers; the resident's translator, his friends, his aides. As for the chess players themselves, their domestic life is more elaborately described. Mirza's quarrel with his sulky wife is expanded into a Hindi-film-style seduction scene, while Mir is given a kind of bedroom-farce scene with his faithless wife and her lover. Mir and Mirza are also given a few social contacts. At one point they go to call on an acquaintance, hoping to borrow his chess pieces. At another point, an old Hindu friend comes to call (interrupting their game) and teaches them the British style of chess—which they later adopt. The universe of the film is a much larger and more well-rounded vision of Lucknow than that of the story.

This greater attention to the full scope of Lucknowi life is also evident in the film's language. All the characters (including the unseen narrator who introduces the film) speak the formal, sumptuous, highly persianized Urdu associated with the Lucknowi elite of this period--except the servants, who speak a musical kind of Avadhi, the local dialect. And the narrator's tone when he speaks of Lucknow and its decline is regretful, fatalistic, romantically melancholy--in contrast to Premchand's harsh criticisms. Even a single word of Sanskritic Hindi would be a jarring intrusion into this elegant, classically Lucknowi atmosphere. (The introductory cartoons that simplistically "explain" British imperialism are, to my mind, an irritating intrusion; fortunately they are fairly brief). Vilasita is not, as in the story, abstractly described and then
vigorously condemned; rather, Lucknowi tastes, pleasures, and luxuries are shown, with a minimum of direct comment. Settings, scenery, dress, music and dance, poetry—everything is presented in careful, colorful detail. "In the Kathak scene," Ray writes, "both the details and the colour scheme conform to engravings of that period. The scene is a very close replica of the miniatures of that period. Even the cat comes from a drawing by an artist of Wajid's court."/7/ In marked contrast to the story, the film is closely attentive to Lucknowi culture and presents its refinements very attractively.

A detailed study of the film is forthcoming and will be welcome./8/ For our present purposes, however, none of the above changes is as significant as [75] the change in the character of the chess players themselves. Ray's chess players are buffoons, comic figures from start to finish. In front of a visitor Mirza even boasts of his courage, flourishing an ancestral sword and vowing to annihilate all enemies. Like Premchand's chess players, the two end up playing chess on the riverbank as the British are about to invade. And like Premchand's chess players, they quarrel over a point of chess etiquette. Their quarrel deepens into mortal offense—not because they insult each other's nobility of descent, as in the story, but because Mirza ridicules Mir as a cuckold. Mir pulls out a pistol. Mirza is abjectly terrified. Mir's hands too are unsteady and he fires by accident. Both are momentarily paralyzed, but fortunately Mir has missed. Chastened, the two return to their game-playing in the British style. Finally, the British pass by on their way into Lucknow, and the film ends.

One reviewer said of the film that Ray had carried his comedy "to the verge of slapstick" and had made the chess players into a kind of "Laurel and Hardy."/9/ Gone is the unhesitating personal courage, the strong, if misguided, sense of honor which led the original Mir and Mirza (who never boasted of their heroism) to die in a hand-to-hand sword battle. In the film, the two have one gun between them; its accidental firing totally unnerves them, and they are quite incapable of any fighting at all. Ray omits their fight to the death for exactly the reason Premchand included it: because it formed a kind of climax to the narrative. "The idea of the two friends killing each other was abandoned because I felt it might be taken to symbolise the end of decadence," as Ray has explained./10/ With the chess players turned into "Laurel and Hardy" figures, the real dramatic center of the film becomes the struggle between Outram and Vajid Ali Shah. Outram feels doubt and guilt, but he grudgingly acts—in a manner which he knows to be unjust. VajidAli Shah, a dreamy, self-absorbed, poetic dilettante, feels all kinds of conflicting emotions—and does not act at all.

The film thus shares with the story a basic atmosphere of hollowness and dissatisfaction, a dearth of admirable or even likable characters. Both Premchand and Ray portray a society that has decayed from within. The British do not so much conquer it as simply take it over. Ray adds to the general sense of futility by making it clear that the incoming British themselves are exploitative, self-interested, unable to offer any hope of moral regeneration. The old regime departs unlamented (except by a handful of aristocrats); the new regime arrives unwelcomed (except by a peasant boy, excited at seeing the soldiers pass). Ray shows us little hope or sincerity anywhere—only a pervasive sense of weariness, inertia, anticlimax.
If the spectacle of Lucknow's decline and fall is such a bleak one, why should Ray build a mass-market film around it? Out of all Premchand's stories, why should it be this one that Ray chose to film? Perhaps Ray, like Premchand, found that the fall of Lucknow was a part of Indian history with which he had to come to terms. Ray himself has described the painstaking historical research he did, both on the period in general and the character of Vajid Ali Shah in particular, before making the film. When criticized, he cared enough to defend the film's historical accuracy at some length in The Illustrated Weekly of India. Knowing the truth about Lucknow and the reasons for its fall is important to many Indians. For Lucknow, as it was under the nawabs, remains alive in the Indian imagination. It is evoked with disdain and condemnation at times, with nostalgia and a sort of pride at others.

Lucknow, as people imagine it to have been, was a society that carried things to extremes. If in social terms this meant extremes of wealth and poverty, privilege and oppression, in cultural terms it meant the pursuit of certain kinds of perfection. Lucknowi culture is seen as a cultivation of expertise and connoisseurship, an insistence on pushing even minor arts to their furthest limits, a rejection of moderation, balance, common sense, in favour of elegance and extravagance. If opium-smoking and sensuality were carried to their limits, so also were many kinds of refinement. Lucknowi taste in fashion, in cuisine, in the decoration of homes and the design of gardens, was greatly admired and imitated, as was also the famous Lucknowi courtesy, with its whole range of verbal conventions designed gracefully to convey the humility of the speaker and the loftiness of the person addressed. The arts too were intensively cultivated. Lucknow was famous for its singers, dancers, musicians, painters, calligraphers, and poets.

Specialized, artificially narrowed worlds can be peculiarly attractive to the imagination. The artists, athletes, etc. who devote their lives to such worlds are admired for their dedication. If Mir and Mirza were international grand masters of chess, the world would reward them well for their devotion to the game. Their vīlasita lies in the fact that they are not chess players but jagirdars (holders of feudal estates from the nawab) and thus, in theory at least, soldiers obliged to furnish and command troops for the nawab. Ray creates in the nawab himself a similar divergence between private and public identities. Vajid Ali Shah is in his own eyes first of all a poet, then a prince of royal blood, and only afterwards the ruling monarch of a kingdom. When a poem comes into his head, it displaces all other business—whether he is judging a difficult case or facing the loss of his throne. The camera lingers on the throne itself, and above all on the nawab's face, during his frequent soliloquies. We see him dilating upon his plight, exploring and heightening his own sensations. What a splendid and romantic victim he makes of himself, what a source of poetic inspiration! In the film (though not the story) his nobles are prepared for armed resistance; he need only rally them and give them the word. He toys with the idea, then petulantly rejects it and denounces his nobles instead. The vision of himself as a tragic figure takes command of his imagination; he insists on theatrically handing over his crown to the uncomfortable Outram. And perhaps in the back of his mind lies the temptation of a luxurious exile, free of all duties and responsibilities, during which he will celebrate his sufferings in immortal poetry.
Mir and Mirza insist on being chess players rather than soldiers; Vajid Ali Shah insists on being a tragic poet rather than a responsible king. The narrowness of their specialized interests makes them hopelessly vulnerable, and the British lose no time in seizing the advantage. The very refinement and cultivation which are part of Lucknow's enduring appeal--a king who would rather be a poet, nobles who live an ascetic life dedicated only to the intricacies of chess--bring about its downfall. Lucknow, as it is imagined, represents a vision that cannot be sustained; along with its vices and vilasita, its beauty and creativity are also doomed to destruction. This vision of Lucknow may, of course, be far removed from historical truth. It undoubtedly exaggerates both virtues and vices, and oversimplifies complex realities. Still, this is the vision which lingers in the Indian imagination--and it is one with which both Premchand and Satyajit Ray are seeking to come to terms.

By comparison to Ray's film, however, Premchand's story is finally almost invigorating. Premchand removes himself so far from Lucknowi culture, and judges it so harshly and insistently, that the reader never really enters imaginatively into its death throes. Lucknow is falling apart, and the British pick up the pieces; there is no hint in the Hindi story that the British have acted in a particularly shabby or unexpected way. (Here again, the Urdu story is more detailed and accuses the British of premeditated treachery./12/) Premchand has a firm grip on moral truth. Lucknow has succumbed to vilasita, it is dying, it is dead--and serves it right, too. The best use we can make of Lucknow is to learn from its fate, and never be guilty of the same shameful political apathy ourselves. Yet after all this has been said, it is Premchand, rather than Ray, who is ready to offer a sort of epitaph for Lucknow: his chess players "were vilasi, but they were not cowards." There was something there after all to admire. Premchand judges, he condemns, but he can also praise. Ray does neither. Premchand takes great pains to prepare us a "psychological climax," while Ray takes equal pains to deny us one. Climax gives way to anticlimax, with fifty years of the twentieth century in between.