

# Masculinity and Femininity in *The Chess Players*<sup>1</sup>

## Sexual Moves, Colonial Manoeuvres, and an Indian Game

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

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

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

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

### The Game of Kings

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



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

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

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

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

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

### **Frolicking with Gopis**

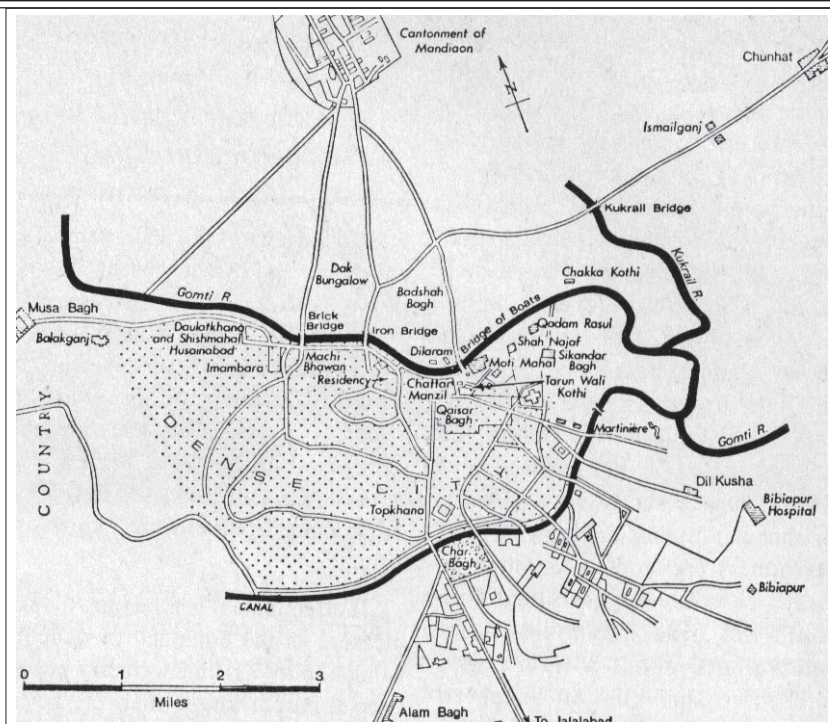
Let me begin, then, with a controversy that followed the public release of *Shatranj ke Khilari* in India. It drew a sharp rebuke from one Indian critic who found that Ray had, as he thought, accepted the British view of Wajid Ali Shah as a quintessential Oriental monarch, "effete and effeminate," an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

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

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

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

as politics, we should have to talk of 'effeminacy', it would do well to recall that the trope of effeminacy, the first element of an Orientalist grammar of India, had a particular place in colonial discourse. Relying upon the accumulated experience of several generations of European visitors to India and Asia, Robert Orme, historiographer to the East India Company, was to provide in 1782 the classic statement on, to appropriate the title of his essay, "The Effeminacy of the Inhabitants of Hindustan". I cannot here describe the complex of ideas, ranged around notions of climate, diet, and constitution,<sup>8</sup> that led Orme to the argument that "very few of the inhabitants" of India were "endowed with the nervous strength, or athletic size, of the robustest nations of Europe". As Orme put it in a famous passage, the European newly arrived in India had only to brandish "his stick in sport" to put "fifty Indians to flight in a moment". Thus confirmed in "his contempt of a pusillanimity and an incapacity of resistance", was the European to be chided if he could barely recall that "the poor Indian is still a man"?<sup>9</sup> That other fundamental element of the Orientalist grammar of India, Oriental Despotism, was already well in place;<sup>10</sup> and together they functioned to produce a picture of Indians as given to a life of sensuality, indolence, and mindless amusement. "The physical organisation of the Bengalee", as one English writer was to put it, "is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movement languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. . . . His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance . . ."<sup>11</sup>



**Lucknow and its environs at the time of the 1857 revolt**

These words, from Macaulay's characterisation of the Hindu Maharajah Nand Kumar in his essay on Warren Hastings, could just as well have been used to describe the monstrosity that the British had conjured up in the figure of Wajid Ali Shah. Thus, in one of the earliest images in Ray's film, the camera moves to a close-up of the throne — a throne barren of its occupant, who is in the next shot shown frolicking with the *gopis* (cowherdresses) in an enactment of the *rasa lila*, and subsequently partaking of the pleasures of his *zenana*, the sanctum sanctorum of the Oriental Despot. The *rasa lila*, the subject of innumerable works of literature, miniature paintings, classical dance, and songs, is the dance of heavenly enjoyment in which *gopis* savor the delights of Lord Krishna's presence in their midst. But the *rasa lila* and the associated representations of Krishna as butter thief, naughty child,

seducer of girls, and the consort of Radha — in short, a playful God — constitute one image of Krishna. The other tradition is of a stern Krishna, who in the *Bhagavad Gita* counsels Arjun to leave behind his inhibitions to kill and perform his duty as a warrior, and who in the Mahabharat shows himself as a master of *realpolitik*, an advocate of the view that morality must not be allowed to impede conduct in war and politics.<sup>12</sup> In the tradition of Krishna the lover-God, his androgyny is clearly hinted at, and it is Krishna's feminine attributes that make him attractive to women. In one tradition of Bhakti painting, Krishna appears in the guise of Radha, while the bashful Radha is shown as having donned the clothes of Krishna. It is this tolerance of femininity and androgyny that, as some Indian nationalists were to claim,<sup>13</sup> had made India incapable of defending herself. It put her perpetually at the mercy of more virile invaders; and only a resolute will to



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

In a similar vein is the discussion that takes place between General James Outram (the resident at Lucknow to whom had fallen the delicate task of inducing Wajid Ali Shah to consent to his own abdication) and his assistant, Captain Weston. Having been informed that Wajid Ali Shah consumed the better part of a certain day praying, presenting gifts to the keeper of the pigeon-house for producing a pigeon with one black and one white wing, listening to a new singer, flying kites from the palace roof, taking a few naps, and finally reciting a new poem on the loves of the *bulbul* (nightingale),<sup>16</sup> Outram is desirous to know what kind of king is this Wajid Ali Shah. And that is not all: as Weston apprises him, Wajid Ali is “fond of dancing” — “with bells on his feet, like nautch-girls”, as Outram adds that he even composes his own operas. What time he has to devote to his 400 concubines and 29 ‘*muta*’ wives (women taken in temporary marriage for enjoyment), not to

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mention affairs of the state, remained uncertain. And what kind of king do those “various accomplishments” make him? “Rather a special kind, sir, I should think,” says Weston, to which Outram replies sharply: “Special? I would’ve used a much stronger word than that, Weston. I’d have said a bad king. A frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king.”<sup>17</sup>

If effeminate it is for a king to take pleasure in the company of dancing women, play Krishna to merry *gopis*, keep a harem larger than the royal stables, and take solace from music, poetry, and other frivolous pursuits, then Ray’s Wajid Ali Shah is surely effeminate. The famous chronicler of Lucknow, Abdul Halim Sharar, whose work Ray was to draw upon to a very considerable degree, was certainly inclined to think of Wajid Ali Shah as a dissolute king, “naturally inclined .

... towards sensuality and the pursuit of pleasure and amusement”. Beautiful, fallen women, singers, and dancers, Sharar was to add ironically, were to become the pillars of the state, “favourites of the realm”. The king, on Sharar’s account, had a special talent for putting his talents to grotesque use, such as adopting the style of the *masnawi* and, in consequence, “versified his love-affairs and hundreds of the amorous escapades of his early youth. He made them public throughout the country and became to a conventional, moral world a self-confessed sinner.”<sup>18</sup> Ray himself was repulsed by Wajid Ali’s proclivity to openly give vent to his “sexual transgressions”, and when Ray’s collaborator Shama Zaidi wrote to him offering to translate a work by Wajid Ali in which the King had documented his sexual exploits from the age of eight, Ray replied, “Don’t tell me all this because then I’ll dislike him even more.”<sup>19</sup>

The matter of Wajid Ali Shah’s purported ‘effeminacy’ cannot, however, be allowed to rest here. The debate has undoubtedly been a rather peculiar, if not an unfortunate one, similar to the most astounding discussion between Amartya Sen and some others on whether Sir William Jones, the eighteenth-century Orientalist who brought the writings of the ancient Hindus to the attention of the Western world, was a “good man” or not.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, it has not been without use, as the debate provides a point of entry to the more delicate and complex question of whether Ray has rendered Indian culture itself as feminine. What potency can the charge of Wajid Ali’s ‘effeminacy’ have, after all, when all the Indian men in the film fail to acquit themselves in a ‘manly’ fashion? To place my query in the language of the Victorians: where, in



**Painting of Wajid Ali Shah in exile  
at Matiya Burj, Calcutta**

this film, is the honour of Indian men? *Shatranj ke Khilari* itself appears to reinforce this point towards the end, just as the British march to occupy Awadh, and when Mir Roshan Ali, having been brought to an awareness of the fact that his most loyal wife has been amusing herself with a younger man, declaims with some despondency: "If we can't cope with our wives, how can we cope with the British army?"

The masculinity of our two *jagirdars* (noblemen) undoubtedly appears to be in question. This first becomes transparent when Mirza and Mir, having finished their prayers, are about to sit down for a game of chess when they are interrupted by the affable Munshi Nandlal, a character not found in Premchand's story. Ray admitted to having created him in order to signify the friendly relations that existed between Hindus and Muslims in the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, who was quite at ease with Hinduism although he was a "devout Muslim" himself.<sup>21</sup> The Munshi serves as a foil for a number of other critical interventions by Ray. While the Munshi is desirous of speaking to Mir and Mirza about the rumours now afloat about the impending annexation of Oudh, he realises that their attention is riveted upon chess, and that he can only draw their attention to the manoeuvres being undertaken by the British by way of speaking about chess. Much to their astonishment, Mir and Mirza learn from the Munshi that the British do not play chess by Indian rules. When did a conqueror ever abide by the customs and laws of the people whom he has subjugated? Where the pawn in Indian chess moves one square, in the English form of the game it moves two squares. To the English, the minister of Indian chess is the queen, the consort of the king and mistress



Courtesy: National Museum

**Krishna playing flute for the Gopis**

of the board. What use would a culture of Oriental Despotism have, one might ask, for a queen? In the society of the West, however, the fortunes of a woman can change rapidly: one moment she is the tycoon's wife, at the next moment she is the flotsam and jetsam of man's lust for youthful beauty. Thus each pawn, upon reaching the other end of the board, can be exchanged for a queen. It is perhaps fitting that an indolent people, for whom time moves slowly, should not want to hasten their game. When, at last, the Munshi is able to bring the discussion around to the political situation in Awadh, and adverts to the possibility of a war, Mirza makes pretence of being a man of intrepid character, resolutely masculine. He asks Mir, who at first does not comply, to take down a large sword from a display on the wall. When Mir does finally fetch it and removes it from its scabbard, it is plainly evident that he has never handled a sword before. Whatever else Mirza and Mir may be, they are not warriors. Nonetheless, Mirza now tries to establish a representation of himself and Mir as the progeny of officers in the army of King Burhan-ul-Mulk, officers so "formidable they stuck terror into the

enemy", and whose blood now flows in their own veins. The affect is everything; and indeed the clumsy demonstration acquires a special poignancy, for the discourse is directed at a Brahmin, a member of a race of men to whom, in the colonial scheme of things, the ethos of the warrior would have been all but incomprehensible.

### **Chess Versus Sex**

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

headache. Certainly, from Mirza's standpoint, that is little reason to abandon the game. Khurshid's summons is all the more incomprehensible to him because, having chosen to play out his obsession in his own premises, Mirza has provided her with the assurance that he is not pursuing the pleasures of the flesh at the door of one of Lucknow's famous courtesans. As he puts it to Mir, "They don't say a word when you spend the night with a whore . . . but when you stay at home and play a clean game, they pester you". Upon entering the bedroom, Mirza finds that Khurshid has played a move on him. Just as he moves his pieces on the chessboard, aiming to find a position most favourable to victory, so Khurshid avails of all the moves in her repertoire to keep him from departing. In its own way, the game of chess is to continue. Feigning compassion, Mirza inquires about the well-being of his *begum*, his pedestalled wife. Khurshid, in turn, complains to him of his indifference to her: "Even if I were dying, you wouldn't give me a drop of water." This evokes, as it must, a protest from him, whereupon she moves to the next level of attack, putting into question the usefulness of a game to which there appears to be neither a beginning nor an end. But this is only a slightly masked assault upon Mirza's manhood. What is at stake is not merely his neglect of her, but the duties of a husband to a wife; and if it is chess that keeps him from performing those duties, then his pursuit of chess must be marked as decidedly unmanly.

As Mirza continues to remain unimpressed, Khurshid startles him with the suggestion that Mir, who is prone to think of his wife as exhibiting an extraordinary fidelity to him, would do well to acquaint himself with the game that "his wife is playing at

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home" behind his back. "Now don't gossip," he admonishes her, and proceeds to return to her complaint of a headache, the conversation having gone on long enough for him. It is at this point that Khurshid admits to having engaged in subterfuge; and when Mirza makes to go, she grabs hold of him, and after a short tussle, positions herself on him. The doors to the heaven of heterosexual love would now seem to be open, and the moment when Shiv and Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi are conjoined seems to be at hand. Not unexpectedly, despite Khurshid's feverish attempts to consummate with checkmate the game she has initiated, Mirza cannot be aroused. Mirza, to put it bluntly, can't get his member to work, and has consequently lost all entitlement of membership to the much vaunted club of manly gentlemen farmers. Perhaps, in having assumed the role customarily accorded to men, Khurshid has committed a transgression; or, perhaps, the poor effeminate Indian that Mirza is, the chill of the evening is more than his body can handle, and indeed Khurshid has to cover him with

a quilt. His failure to satisfy her leaves Mirza altogether unperturbed; he attributes his failure to his preoccupation with the unfinished game that he has left behind, and to his anxiety about the gross dereliction of manners entailed in leaving his guest unattended. He promises to prove himself on a future occasion, and acting with nonchalance as manly men must do, he leaves with a love song on his lips. Where, as I have said, there is no masculinity, the affect must be all the more pronounced. Ironically, the disarray of Mirza's clothes — a flap of his tunic has been left unbuttoned, and his hair ruffled — have the pronounced effect of conveying the impression to Mir that in the interlude, Mirza has engaged in a rapid, if brief, bout of avid sexual play. In that interregnum, Mir has not been idle: he has altered the position of a piece on the board, and is now positioned to give checkmate. Deceived by his wife, the cuckolded Mir can yet attain triumph by deception in this game. Sighing ostentatiously, he moves his piece and utters 'check', as if to say, "Well, you had your queen, but I'll have the other one." For the Indian male, there is only the constant deferral, and the mastery at dissimulation.

If Mirza's sexual prowess is in doubt, his companion Mir is hardly a more striking figure in this respect. As our two *jagirdars* move to Mir's house, to escape the wrath of Mirza's wife, Mir expostulates on the admirable qualities of his wife, the very personification, he imagines, of loyalty and womanly virtues. Thus, when Mirza says, "Wives are always a problem," Mir replies with utter ease: "Some wives are a problem. No problem here, though." Their arrival at Mir's house creates a consternation for Mir's wife, Nafeesa, for she has taken Mir's nephew, a young man by





the name of Aqil, as her lover. When Mir chances upon them in the bedroom they are able to extricate themselves from a most difficult situation with an explanation that to anyone else would have been utterly improbable. The sound of Mir's feet, as he is about to cross the threshold that would bring him into the realm of sexuality, sends Aqil unsuccessfully scampering for safety under the bed. Having

at last found his voice, Mir demands to know what is going on, and why his nephew is so precariously positioned under the bed. Mir is easily persuaded that his nephew is in hiding to avoid being inducted into the king's army, but is uncertain why Aqil had to hide under the bed, as he cannot be seen from the street. Then ensues this dialogue:

Nafeesa: "He lost his head. He's like a child."

Aqil: "I lost my head."

Nafeesa: "Feel how his heart is racing."

Nafeesa then grabs Mir's hand and places it on Aqil's chest. Mir shakes his head, and says to Nafeesa: "You'd better give him some hot milk." What is supremely ironic is that Nafeesa must appeal to the masculinity of her cuckolded husband: Aqil must be rendered into a child bewildered by fear, to whom Mir can play the male guardian, and this is reinforced by Mir's suggestion that Aqil be given a glass of hot milk. It is only towards the very end of the film, in a scene reminiscent of the one that took place in Mirza's *haveli*, where Mir was asked to take down a sword displayed on the wall, that the truth of his wife's infidelity is brought home to Mir. If the inept manner in which he was to handle the sword at that moment was to suggest that he was indubitably not derived from a background of martial



eminence, the clumsy and frightened manner in which he lets off a shot at Mirza from his revolver appears to give credence to Mirza's claim that Mir's ancestors were little better than servants who tended the kitchens of the royalty.

Thus far, as it would seem, I appear to be pushing for a much stronger version of the argument that Ray's Wajid Ali Shah is 'effeminate', for Ray appears to have construed all Indians as essentially feminine, and thereby rendered himself complicit with the colonial construction of Indian society. Mir and Mirza have no manly pursuits; they are unable to satisfy their wives, and indeed they appear to be wholly indifferent to the sexual life. While their king is being dethroned, and a quiet revolution is being effected in their very presence, they retreat to the safety of a secluded spot by the river Gomti. Even the sight of British troops cannot arouse them to a sense of their duties. *Paan* in their mouths and *hookahs* by their side, Mir Roshan Ali and Mirza Sajjad Ali are the very picture of languid, torpid, and sedentary Orientals found in European travelogues. The point need not be belaboured.

### Reading Between the Lines

Yet as I would argue, we must question, if not reject, the reading I have so far offered, and see whether

our interrogation cannot go any further. Had Ray wished to accept the colonial construction of Indian sexuality, he could have rendered Wajid Ali Shah, following Premchand, Sharar, and his other sources, into a more pathetic creature. Sharar, for instance, noted that when the final orders for the annexation of Awadh had been brought to Wajid Ali Shah's attention, "The King, weeping and wailing, made every effort

to exonerate himself."<sup>22</sup> Ray's Wajid Ali makes, by way of contrast, a dignified departure. Nor, as the film itself suggests, did Ray endorse Premchand's condemnation of Wajid Ali as a pusillanimous coward merely because he surrendered his kingdom without so much as firing a single shot. Wajid Ali may well have surmised that he could not hope to defeat the British in battle, but on the other hand, by laying down his arms he may have successfully contrived to enhance the impression of British cruelty and arbitrariness. As students of Indian history know only too well, the annexation of Awadh was followed by the rebellion of 1857-58 which shook British rule in India to its very foundations. This interpretation, in any case, is not pursued by Ray.

It is to the figures of Weston and Outram that we must again turn in order to see whether Ray might not be putting into question the colonial construction of Indian sexuality that he appears to be endorsing. If the wives of Mir and Mirza unambiguously suggest the realm of femininity, one would expect European men to embody a firm masculinity. That, however, is not the case with Weston, who serves as an aide to Outram. Just as Wajid Ali Shah moves between the worlds of femininity and masculinity, and suggests the possibilities of androgyny

without quite evoking the Indian tradition of *ardhnarishwar*,<sup>23</sup> so Weston mediates between the Court of the Oriental monarch and the Residency of the European despot. Not insignificantly, he serves as the official translator, but his real endeavor consists in effecting a certain kind of cultural translation. Wajid Ali Shah must be rendered more hospitable to the ethos of the soldier. To Outram's astonishment, if not annoyance, Weston finds the king to be a rather accomplished poet; and when Outram demurs, Weston comes to the defence of the king with the comment that his poems don't translate well. The suggestion here is undoubtedly that the idea of androgyny cannot with ease be rendered transparent to a culture, such as that of nineteenth-century England, where masculinity and femininity occupied clearly demarcated spheres. Nor is Weston very critical of the king's conduct or his other pursuits: his suggestion that Wajid Ali might be looked upon as an eccentric king must not be taken lightly, for here is a reminder that colonialism acquires the force that it does precisely because of its homogenising tendencies, and its inability to accommodate pluralistic and diverse forms of living. Certainly, Wajid Ali's propensity towards feminine conduct is an eccentricity, particularly in a world where the spheres of masculine and feminine activity are sharply defined.

Unlike Weston, Outram appears to be uncompromisingly hostile to Wajid Ali and altogether indifferent to Indian culture, though he is mindful of the fact that a grave injustice is being committed against Wajid Ali. "We've put up with this nonsense long enough," he tells Weston. "Eunuchs, fiddlers, nautch-girls and 'muta' wives and God knows what else." Outram finds Wajid Ali's figure repulsive, his

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tastes abominable: Outram's coat, three months after his last meeting with Wajid Ali, still reeks of the perfume used by the king, and the prospect of another interview with him is wholly unappealing. "It would be a damned sight more convenient," says Outram, "if he were in *pardah* too, like his womenfolk. At least one would be spared the extreme proximity." Yet, though Wajid Ali cuts a poor figure with Outram, the king was unmistakably the "biggest bundle of contradictions" Outram had ever come across, and quite unlike other Oriental monarchs he had known. What kind of monarch is this who, on the one hand, prays five times a day and never drinks, and on the other hand keeps "a harem the size of a regiment", a king "who sings, dances, versifies, plays the tom-tom, flies kites from the palace roof and struts around the stage surrounded by frolicking nautch-girls?"

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annexation that leaves Outram with a nagging doubt about the morality of the course of action he must pursue. His moral confusion stems from two grounds. First, Wajid Ali's modes of communication and dissent are rather novel, which is visibly clear in the last meeting between them, when Wajid Ali, walking over to Outram, hands him his crown while refusing to sign the treaty which would have stripped him of his crown. Outram is stunned, and says curtly that he has no use for the crown; the head of this wretch, as Dalhousie was to put it unabashedly, would have been better. The coloniser asks of the colonised that if he is to dissent, he must do so in the prescribed manner, in accordance with codes of rationality to which adult men give their adherence.<sup>24</sup> Wajid Ali behaves as might a woman, with a degree of supposed unpredictability, and with a gesture that betokens moral disapprobation of a man in a position of strength who knows no charity. Secondly, as Ashis Nandy has suggested, Outram's discomfort with Wajid Ali arises from the fact that Wajid Ali speaks to a side of Outram that the general has repressed. If Outram is troubled by the *realpolitik* to which he must subscribe as the agent of the British empire, he can make "peace with his conscience" by reminding himself that such a king, decadent and unmanly, ought never to have been on the throne in the first place.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, on the other hand, it is precisely the presence of certain unpredictable qualities that mark Wajid Ali Shah as a king not only entitled to rule, but as one uniquely deserving to fill that role. This point is pressed home by Wajid Ali himself, who displays a supreme confidence in his own way of life, even while he is torn by uncertainty about the propriety of his conduct. In a long monologue addressed to his ministers, Wajid Ali



turns to the Prime Minister, and pointing to the love that his subjects have for him, and the popularity of his songs, he says: "Go and ask the Resident Sahib: how many kings of England have written songs? Ask if Queen Victoria has composed songs which her people sing?" The force of his rebuke, I must stress, is not merely rhetorical. It is rather the case that Wajid Ali has, in Nandy's words, "a deeper and more wholesome concept of governance"; more pointedly, he does not subscribe to the split between masculinity and femininity, responsibility and playfulness, work and leisure, the political and the cultural, the realm of politics and the realm of poetry, which very much forms part of the ethos of the coloniser.<sup>26</sup> It is to this cleavage that Wajid Ali is adverting, and it is to the other side — the repressed, feminine side — of this split in Outram that he can hope to make some appeal. The cool, steadfast logic of the coloniser is not available to Wajid Ali; nor does he have the skills of the negotiator who drives a hard bargain. Wajid Ali will hand over his crown, but not sign the new treaty; and so he shows again the maddening ambivalence with which he can live, incomprehensible to the bewildered Outram. Wajid Ali lives not between the male and the female, but in the interstices between the neither-female and the neither-male.

Ray himself has said that he was "portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides. You have to read this film between the lines."<sup>27</sup> One would like



to think that even colonialism was not so totalising as to preclude the possibility of cultural mediation, and although it is even possible to maintain that by a strange twist of history, victory is always more calamitous for the victor than it is for the vanquished, the conclusion to Ray's film would belie that reading. The shot that should have been fired by Mir Ali at the British is fired at Mirza Ali, and the displacement that colonialism seeks, as a way of entrenching itself into the fabric of the culture of the colonised, has taken place. But worse is to come, for after their altercation, Mir and Mirza sit down to resume their great passion. Now the game will be played in the Western style: the pawn will move two squares in its initial move, and the queen will take the place of the minister. That coupling, of the king and his consort, of husband and wife, which could not be effected throughout the film, now becomes real.

***...in what constitutes one of colonialism's most lasting triumphs, the heterosexual couple may well entrench itself as the principal nexus of human relationships in India.***

Henceforth, in what constitutes one of colonialism's most lasting triumphs, the heterosexual couple may well entrench itself as the principal nexus of human relationships in India. Secondly, if one recalls Mir's despondent remark, "If we can't cope with our wives, how can we cope with the British army?", the other inference must perforce be that, henceforth, our two *jagirdars* will be better able to cope with their wives. The masculinity of the coloniser would appear to have triumphed, and the androgynous Krishna of the *rasa lila*, the Krishna whose role Wajid Ali is shown enacting in the prologue of the film, has yielded to the other Krishna of Indian traditions, the Krishna who admonishes Arjun to fight like a man. As *Shatranj ke Khilari* tantalisingly suggests, masculinity may well be born with modernity and the nation-state.

## Notes

1. This paper was prepared for the Conference on "Satyajit Ray: Women, Discourse, and Counter Discourse", University of California, Santa Cruz, 7-8 May 1994. I am grateful to my wife, Anju Relan, for her strenuous efforts in locating a video print of this film for me, and to my research assistant, Mark Mairot, for his timely help in obtaining some of the material used in this paper.
2. It is in *Ghaire Bhaire (The Home and the World)*, 1982), that Ray finally took on colonialism and nationalism. Ray is on record as having said that he had wanted to make this film for thirty years, but the singular fact remains that nowhere else did Ray show any engagement with the period of colonial rule in India. Nor do any of his voluminous writings, mainly short stories and science fiction, betray this alleged interest in the "Raj period".
3. Dalhousie's letters suggest that he was unreasonably keen on taking Awadh under his administration from the outset. Eight years before the annexation of Awadh, Dalhousie wrote to a friend that "I have got two other kingdoms on hand to dispose of —

Oude and Hyderabad. Both are on the highroad to be taken under our management — not into our possession; and before two years are over I have no doubt they will be managed by us.” See J. G. A. Baird, ed., *Private Letters of the Marquess of Dalhousie* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1911), p. 33. Henceforth, I shall be using the modern spelling, Awadh, instead of Oudh or Oude, except where the word is within quotations. Shortly after the rebellion of 1857-58, the British created the United Provinces, within which Awadh was incorporated; after the reorganisation of states in the post-independent period, Uttar Pradesh was brought into being. Awadh no longer exists, though people still speak of Awadhi culture and cuisine, and by this is meant the culture of the *nawabs* or rulers of Awadh, whose seat was Lucknow.

4. Sir Joseph Fayrer, *Recollections of My Life* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), p. 90. Fayrer was at that time surgeon and postmaster attached to the residency at Lucknow. It is far from settled that Wajid Ali was a ‘bad’ king, and even some British writers were disposed to admitting that Wajid Ali served his people well. He certainly appears to have been popular with his subjects, and Fayrer, while taking an exceedingly dim view of Wajid Ali, did not doubt that “with all the defects and shortcomings of the King’s Government, the people of Oudh would have preferred it to ours” (p. 95). There is no necessary contradiction here, for if India was an Oriental Despotism, as British writers were wont to insist, it stood to reason that a despotic king would be popular with a people themselves barren of the spirit of freedom. In despotic countries, to rehearse the cliché, people certainly get the government they deserve.
5. Rajbans Khanna, “Ray’s Wajid Ali Shah”, *Illustrated Weekly of India* (22 October 1978):49-53.
6. Satyajit Ray, “My Wajid Ali Is Not ‘Effete and Effeminate’”, *Illustrated Weekly of India* (31 December 1978):49-51.
7. Rajbans Khanna, “Ray Has Missed the Wood for the Trees”, *Illustrated Weekly of India* (31 December 1978), p. 53.
8. I might note here that Dalhousie ascribed Wajid Ali Shah’s refusal to sign the new treaty, by the terms of which the king was to abdicate in return for generous compensation, to indigestion. He was surprised at Wajid Ali’s recalcitrance until he “recollected that heroes have indigestions like other people; and I hope”, continued Dalhousie, “that when he comes out of the doctor’s hands, in which

he now is, he will take a more cheerful view of our prospects.” See Baird, ed., *Private Letters of the Marquess of Dalhousie*, p. 365. Though there is a clear argument to be made, for example, of the relationship between femininity and anorexia, the supposition that Wajid Ali Shah’s resistance to the treaty owed something to indigestion is nothing short of absurd. These inanities are often found in the private letters of European statesmen, and provide one indication of the instability of the rationality that is claimed to be the benchmark of Western civilization.

9. Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire, of the Morattoes, and of the English Concerns in Indostan from the Year MCDLIX* (London: W. Wingrave, 1785; reprint ed., New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1974), pp. 58-62.
10. The classic statement here is that of Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, 3 vols. (London: S. Beckert & P.A. de Hondt, 1770; reprint ed., Delhi: Today and Tomorrow’s Printers & Publishers, 1973). See, in particular, the Advertisement to Vol. 1, and the Dissertation concerning the Origin and Nature of Despotism, appended to Vol. 3.
11. Lord [Thomas Babington] Macaulay, *Warren Hastings* (reprint ed., London: Cassell & Company, 1885), p. 28.
12. I have discussed the two traditions of the Krishna story in *The Representations of Krishna in Indian Miniature Painting and Bhakti Literature*, unpublished paper, The University of Chicago, 1988.
13. For the classic, late-nineteenth century nationalist interpretation of Krishna, see Bankimchandra Chatterji, ‘Kṛṣṇacaritra’ [1886], in his *Racanaṇṇali* [Collected Works], ed. Jogesh Bagal (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1958), 2: 407-583. It is no accident that the *Bhagavad Gita*, which contains Krishna’s teachings and instructions to Arjun, became the gospel of nationalist Hinduism; certainly no major figure, with the exception of Rabindranath Tagore, neglected to write a commentary on this text, and the interpretations of Tilak, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Gandhi all point to the extraordinary manner in which the *Gita* was wedded to nationalism and became, in a country where no text has ever stood in a majestic singularity, the text of modern India. For one brief, though wholly inadequate, account of this transformation, see Dilip Bose, *Bhagavad-Gita and Our National Movement* (Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1981).
14. The hyper-masculinity of Indian nationalism, the figure of Gandhi excepted, is discussed

in Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

15. This is in contradistinction to such dance forms as BharatNatyam, where the performers are women (though the gurus or teachers might well be men), and Kathakali, the performance of which is restricted to men.
16. Ray drew upon Fayrer, *Recollections of My Life*, pp. 94-95, for this description of a day in the life of Wajid Ali Shah.
17. Satyajit Ray, *The Chess Players and Other Screenplays*, ed. Andrew Robinson (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 18-21.
18. Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. and ed. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976), pp. 62-63.
19. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), p. 242.
20. A. K. Sen, India and the West, Lionel Trilling Seminar, Columbia University, 1993, with responses by Akeel Bilgrami and Clifford Geertz.
21. See Ray, “My Wajid Ali Is Not Effete”, p. 51.
22. Sharar, Lucknow, p. 65.
23. Literally, ‘half female and half male’; one of the forms in which Shiv appears.
24. I have drawn upon the work of Ashis Nandy for this argument. See his *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), especially the essay ‘Evaluating Utopias’; see also Ashis Nandy, Dialogue and the Diaspora, conversation with Nikos Papastergiadis, Third Text, no. 11 (Summer 1990).
25. Ashis Nandy, ‘Beyond Oriental Despotism: Politics and Femininity in films of Satyajit Ray’, *Sunday* (1981), reprinted in Ashis Nandy, ‘An Intelligent Critic’s Guide to Indian Cinema, Part II’, *Deep Focus* 1, 2 (June 1988):53-60, at pp. 54-57.
26. Ibid., pp. 54-55.
27. Quoted by Andrew Robinson in his introduction to Ray, *The Chess Players*, p. 12. □

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