

**Twentieth-Century Fiction**  
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**Lecture – 59**  
**The Chess Players – Part 4**

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From the next day both the friends would leave their homes before dawn. With a small mat under their arms, holding a box-full of paans the two friends would make their way across the river Gomti to an old deserted mosque that had been built perhaps by Asaf-ud-Daula. On their way they would buy tobacco, a chillum and wine; and they would enter the mosque, spread their mats, light their hookah and start playing. Then they would forget the world. No other words except 'check' and 'mate' would come out of their mouths. No yogi would be so focused in his meditations as these two. When in the afternoon they felt hungry they would go to an eatery and eat something; smoke their hookah for a while and then restart their play. Sometimes they would forget even to eat.

On the other side, the political situation in the kingdom was deteriorating every day. The Company's forces were advancing upon Lucknow. The city was in a great turmoil. People were fleeing to the villages with their families. But our two players were unconcerned. They came out of their houses and sneaked through narrow lanes, hiding themselves from the eyes of the king's men. They wanted to enjoy the benefits from their Jagirs yielding thousands of rupees annually by doing nothing in return.

One day both the friends were playing chess sitting in the decrepit mosque. Mirza's position was somewhat weak. Mir sahib was threatening him with 'check' after 'check'. In the meantime they saw the soldiers of the Company passing by. It was the *gora* army moving towards Lucknow to capture the city.

Mir sahib said, 'The English army is advancing. God be kind.'

Mirza said, 'Let it come. Check. Save your king.'

'Let's watch. Let's stand in a corner.'

'Do that later. What's the hurry? Check.'

'They have the artillery too. There must be some five thousand men. Their faces red like monkeys! One is afraid to look at them.'

'Jannah, don't make excuses. Don't use these ruses. Check.'



So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We were looking at Munshi Premchand's short story, The Chess Players. So, we will conclude this story with this particular session. We just come to the end of the story and just take it off from where we left last time which is where the two men, Mirza and Mir are playing chess outside the kingdom. So, they are on the fringes of the kingdom, they have found decrepit you know an abandoned mosque where they find some you know safety and some security and privacy to play the game of chess.

And, obviously, the game of chess is a distraction deviation from any normal duties that they are supposed to be carried out as Jagirdars as landlords. And, the bigger political backdrop is also interesting because this is the point where the army, the East Indian Company army is marching in - they are about to take over the kingdom and yet the two men are completely oblivious to the fact that the kingdom is about to get lost that there would be a paradigm shift, a power takeover and they are still absorbed in this game of

chess. So, that is the point where we left last time. Let's just go back to this and we will finish the story in this lecture.

So, this should be on your screen – One day both the friends were playing chess sitting in the decrepit mosque. Mirza's position was somewhat weak. Mir sahib was threatening him with check after check. In the meantime, they saw the soldiers of the Company passing by. It was the gora army; the gora army is a White army, the White man's army moving towards Lucknow to capture the city. Mir sahib said The English army is advancing. God be kind. Mirza said, Let it come. Check. Save your king. Let's watch. Let's stand in a corner. Do that later. What's the hurry? Check.

So, again I mean look at the complete lack of interest these people have generally. The army is coming to take over, there will be, they will lose everything; their households, their income, their wealth, their property everything is going to go to the army and yet they cannot be bothered to leave the game of chess and at least watch what is about to happen let alone retaliate or resist.

They have the artillery too. There must be some 5000 men. Their faces red like monkeys! One is afraid to look at them. So, again the otherness of the army is indicated by the allusion to monkeys and red as monkeys. So, there the red army come in, they look like monkeys, they are not like human beings. So, it is obviously, a racialized metaphor, but interestingly it is reverse racism in some sense over here, it is a non-white person looking at the white person calling him a monkey. And, that becomes obviously, a pointer to otherness you know cultural otherness, political otherness, dermatological otherness.

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On the other side, the political situation in the kingdom was deteriorating every day. The Company's forces were advancing upon Lucknow. The city was in a great turmoil. People were fleeing to the villages with their families. But our two players were unconcerned. They came out of their houses and sneaked through narrow lanes, hiding themselves from the eyes of the king's men. They wanted to enjoy the benefits from their Jagirs yielding thousands of rupees annually by doing nothing in return.

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'They have the artillery too. There must be some five thousand men. Their faces red like monkeys! One is afraid to look at them.'

'Janaab, don't make excuses. Don't use these ruses. Check.'

'You're a strange man. Here the city is in danger, and you're only thinking of "check and mate". Have you thought how we shall go home if the city is besieged?'



One is afraid to look at them. So, the sense of fear that is created that has been created that has been generated by the arrival of the army becomes important here. Janaab, don't make excuses. Don't use these ruses. Check. So, they are having this, they are beginning to fall out now because one of them is saying you know Mirza is saying that you know we should play this game of chess and what Mir is saying is look at the king, let us look at the army coming in, they are about to take the king away and they began to fall out on this particular topic.

You're a strange man. Here is the city is, here is the city is in danger, and you're only thinking of check and mate. Have you thought how we shall go home if the city is besieged? So, this is the most rational question, this is the most rational response that one might have at this point of time, but obviously, it is too late in the day to think about rational retaliation. So, one of them is actually asking that do you actually know that what is going to happen the city is besieged can we actually go back home if the army takes over the red army takes over the entire city.

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'We shall see when it is time to go. Here is check. And mate.'

The army marched away. It was ten o'clock. A new game was set up.

Mirza said, 'Where shall we eat?'

'It's a *roza* day today. Are you feeling very hungry?'

'Oh, no. God knows what's going on in the city!'

'Everything must be as usual. People must have eaten and would be sleeping peacefully. Nawab sahib must be having fun in his harem.'

Both of them set up another game. It was three in the afternoon. This time Mirza's position was shaky. The four o'clock bell was ringing as they heard the sound of the army's return. Nawab Wajid Ali had been captured and the army was escorting him to an unknown destination. There was no commotion in the city, and no fighting. No bloodshed. Nowhere the king of a free country would have been vanquished so quietly, without any bloodshed. It wasn't the kind of non-violence that would please the gods. It was a form of cowardice on which even great cowards would have shed tears. The king of a vast country like Awadh was being driven away as a prisoner, and the city of Lucknow was sleeping peacefully. This was the nether of political downfall.

Mirza said, 'The tyrants have captured Nawab sahib.'

'Never mind. Save your king.'

'Wait a minute, *janaab*. I can't concentrate at the moment. Poor Nawab sahib must be



We shall see when it is time to go. Here it is. A check. And mate. So, again the whole idea is to go back to the game and not look out what is in terms of what is happening in the political climate. The army marched away. It was 10 o'clock. A new game was set up. So, they also and they actually finish the earlier game and set a new game after having seen the army come in. So, this obviously, is an indication of the complete callousness that they are exhibiting as political subjects.

Mirza said, Where shall we eat? It's a roza day today. Are you feeling very hungry? It is a fasting day. Oh, no. God knows what's going on in the city! Everything must be as usual. People must have eaten and would be sleeping peacefully. Nawab sahib must be having fun in his harem. So, this is a general picture of Lucknow, everyone's eating and sleeping peacefully, the Nawab is having fun in his harem all again point us to very hedonistic lifestyles.

Both of them set up another game. It was three in the afternoon. This time Mirza's position was shaky. The four o'clock bell was ringing as they heard the sound of the army's return. Nawab Wajid Ali shah had been captured and the army was escorting him to the unknown destination. I mean he will eventually be sent to Calcutta and that is where he will be deported, but this is a time when he is taken out of Lucknow and these three men are just watching the army come back with the Nawab.

So, historically there was no retaliation whatsoever even if you take a look at the film by Satyajit Ray, we find it even there, there is zero resistance offered by the army of the Nawab. So, the Britishers come in and take him away without any bloodshed.

There was no commotion in the city, and no fighting. No bloodshed. Nowhere the king of a free country would have been vanquished so quietly, you know without any bloodshed. It wasn't the kind of non-violence that would please the gods. It was a form of cowardice that which on which even great cowards would have shed tears. So, this is an act of cowardice. It was not like a deep philosophical non-violence, the Gandhian non-violence which would please the gods or some metaphysical attribute of restraint, it was not that. It was purely an act of cowardice complete lack of resistance, a complete lack of spine and that is basically cowering down against this mighty army of the British.

The king of a vast country like Awadh was being driven away as a prisoner, and the city of Lucknow was sleeping peacefully. This was neither this was the nether of political downfall. The bottom the most bottom position of the political downfall, the nadir of political downfalls. Everything just plummeted down to the lowest point conceivable in terms of political prestige, in terms of political authority, everything comes to an end it was end of an era.

And, the narrator obviously, tells us very clearly that this was an act of cowardice nowhere in history of a free country was the king taken away so peacefully without any resistance whatsoever right. So, this is an act of cowardice and the city of Lucknow was sleeping peacefully. No one was even bothered in terms of checking on what is happening politically so, the British are going to take over the company rule is about to take place in Lucknow without anyone resisting it.

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Mirza said, 'The tyrants have captured Nawab sahib.'

'Never mind. Save your king.'

'Wait a minute, janaab. I can't concentrate at the moment. Poor Nawab sahib must be shedding tears of blood.'

'He should. He won't enjoy these luxuries there. Check.'

'All days are not the same. What a painful situation!'

'That's true. Here, check again. Now it's mate. There's no escape for you.'



'By God, you're so cruel. You are unmoved even after such a great calamity. Oh, poor Wajid Ali Shah!'

'First you save your own king. Mourn for Wajid Ali Shah later. Here's check and mate. Give me your hand.'

The army marched away with the king as their prisoner. Mirza laid another game as soon as they were gone. Defeat is always painful. Mir said, 'Come on, let us sing an elegy to mourn Nawab sahib's fall.' But Mirza's loyalty to the king had disappeared with his defeat. He was bent upon taking revenge.

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It was evening. In the ruins the bats had begun to flutter and scream. The swallows had returned to their nests. But the two players were still playing, as if two bloodthirsty



Mirza said, The typhoons, the tyrants have captured the Nawab sahib. Never mind. Save your king and this becomes a very ironical statement because your king over here refers to obviously, the chess piece of the king on board. And, that is become that is a central problem in this particular story that there is no attention given to the real king outside and the entire attention is on a proxy king, the chessboard king, the game king right.

So, there is obviously, is a very sad reflection of the priority of these people. So, they, their priority is entirely focused on saving the chess pieces and saving the ludic landscape rather than the real political landscape. So, the real political landscape gets less important than a ludic landscape. The ludic landscape, the playful landscape of procrastination, absorption, narcissism, indulgence. So, that becomes more important that becomes more worthy of protection rather than the real political landscape which is you know obviously, constituted by real things, that is economy, political subjectivity etcetera ok.

Save your king. Wait a minute, janaab. I can't concentrate at the moment. Poor Nawab sahib must be shedding tears of blood. He should. He won't enjoy the company he enjoys these luxuries there. Check. All days are not the same. What a painful situation. That's true. Here, check again. Now, it's mate. And there is no escape for you.

So, I mean look at the way in which there are parallels that can be drawn between the game of chess happening and the political downfall at the same time. So, one king is

about to be captured in the chess board, in the chess landscape, the other king is, has been captured already. So, the two kings parallel each other in terms of political predicament and the predicament obviously, becomes political as well as sort of psychological over here.

By God, you are so cruel. You are unmoved even after such a great calamity. Oh, poor Wajid Ali Shah! First you save your own king. Mourn for Wajid Ali Shah later. Here's check and mate. Give me your hand. Right. So, again the priority is established quite clearly over here. So, first you should mourn the death of your chess king rather than bothering about the bigger king in a political climate, Wajid Ali Shah and that is something that you know he can think about later. Again, the same politics of procrastination is at play over here.

The army marched away with the king as their prisoner. Mirza laid another game as soon as they were gone. Defeat is always painful. Mir said, Come on, let us sing an elegy to mourn Nawab sahib's fall. But Mirza's loyalty to the king had disappeared with his defeat. He was bent upon taking revenge right.

So, again the sense of revenge, a sense of vendetta comes up over here only because the chess king has been vanquished not because real king has been captured right. So, one of them the winner of the chess game, he chooses to sing a song a mourning song, elegy for the real king whereas, the person who has been defeated he is thinking of a way to avenge himself in the chess board. So, the entire erotic economy, the entire libidinal economy, the entire masculinist economy is directed towards a chess board over here rather than the real political regime outside and that is that is the crux of the story in some sense.

It was evening. In the ruins the bats had begun to flutter and scream. The swallows had returned to their nests, but the two players were still playing, as if two bloodthirsty warriors were engaged in a mortal combat.

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warriors were engaged in a mortal combat. Mirza had lost three successive games and the fourth one too didn't seem to be going his way. He was playing with the determination and caution, but each time some move somehow went wrong and weakened his position. His desire for revenge was sharpened with each defeat. On the other hand, Mir sahib was bursting into ghazals, and teasing Mirza sahib, as if he had unearthed a secret treasure. Mirza sahib was irritated but he would utter words of praise for Mir sahib to overcome his embarrassment. But as his position progressively weakened he was losing his patience, so much so that he was losing control over himself. 'Now don't change your move again and again. What's this? You make a move and then change it. Make your move only once. Don't touch a piece unless you are moving it. You're taking too much time. This is against the rules. If someone takes more than five minutes to make a move he should be treated as the loser. Now you changed your move again. Please put the piece back.'

Mir sahib's vazir was about to be taken. He said, 'I haven't moved yet.'

'You've made your move. Please put the piece back where it was.'

'Why should I put it back? I had never let it go from my hand.'

'If you don't let go your piece till eternity, does it mean you haven't moved it? Now when your vazir is being taken you have started cheating.'

'It is you who is cheating. Winning or losing is by luck. No one wins by cheating.'

'Then, you have been checkmated in this game.'



Mirza had lost 3 successive games and the fourth one too didn't seem to be going his way. He was playing with the determination and caution, but each time each time some move somehow went wrong and weakened his position. His desire to revenge for revenge was sharpened with each defeat. On the other hand, Mir sahib was bursting into ghazals, and teasing Mirza sahib, as if he had unearthed a secret treasure. Mirza sahib was irritated but he would utter words of praise for Mir sahib to overcome his embarrassment.

But as his position progressively weakened he was losing his patience, so much so he began to start losing control over himself. Now don't change your move again and again. What's this? You don't you make a don't make a move and then change it. Make your move only once. Don't touch a piece unless you are moving it. You are taking too much time. This is against the rules. If someone makes takes more time more than 5 minutes to make a move he should be treated as the loser. Now you changed your move again. Please put the piece back.

So, the irritation is very apparent. Mirza is getting more and more irritated because he is losing at a stretch he is in a role of losing and now he takes it out in some other forms of irritation. So, he is talking about the rules of the game, he is talking about Mir taking up too much time, he is talking about how things should be changed, he is talking about how once you touch a piece you cannot move it again. So, his frustration is coming out



and again look at the way in which the entire frustration and the entire agony, the entire sense of winning and losing is all enclosed and bounded inside this chessboard thing, but nothing outside the chessboard is bothering them at all.

Mir sahib's vazir was about to be taken. He said, I haven't moved yet. You have made your move. Please put the piece back where it was. Why should I put it back? I had never let it go from my hand. This is the point where it begins to get agitated in the story. If you don't let it go your piece till eternity, does it mean you haven't moved it? Now when your vazir is being taken, you have started cheating. It is you who is cheating. Winning or losing is by luck. No one wins by cheating. Then, you have been checkmated in this game.

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'You've made your move. Please put the piece back where it was.'

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'If you don't let go your piece till eternity, does it mean you haven't moved it? Now when your vazir is being taken you have started cheating.'

'It is you who is cheating. Winning or losing is by luck. No one wins by cheating.'

'Then, you have been checkmated in this game.'

'Why have I been checkmated?'

'Ok, then replace the piece in the same square.'

'Why? I won't do it.'

'Why not? You'll have to.'

Tempers were rising. Both were unwilling to yield. Then the argument took a different turn. Mirza said, 'You would have known the rules if someone had played chess in your family. Your ancestors were grass-cutters. How could you learn to play chess? Nobility is something different. One does not become a nobleman just by receiving a jagir.'

'What? It is your father who must have been a grass-cutter. In our family we have been playing chess for generations.'

'Oh leave it. You have spent your life working as a cook at Gazi-ud-din's. To become a nobleman is no joke.'

'Why are you blackening the faces of your ancestors? They must have been cooks. Our family has always dined with kings.'

'You grass-cutter, don't make tall claims.'

'Hold your tongue. I'm not used to listening to this kind of language. If someone stares at me I pluck out his eyes. I dare you.'



Why have I been checkmated? Ok, then replace the place in the same piece in the same square. So, this is getting more and more angry, this exchange is getting angry and more and more curt.

Why? I won't do it. Why not? You will have to. Tempers were rising. Both were unwilling to yield. Then the argument took a different turn. Mirza said, you would have known the rules if someone had played chess in your family. Your ancestors were grass-cutters. How could you learn to play chess? Nobility is something different. One does not become a nobleman just by receiving a jagir.

Now, the attacks become personal. So, Mirza told Mir that you know how would you know a game of chess because you know your ancestry had nothing to with nobility, you just became an upstart jagirdar you just got some land and that is how your claim to fame and fortune is. No one in ancestry had any sense of nobility at all. So, I belong to a higher class. So, I know a game of chess because it is run it runs in my veins, but no one has ever played chess in your family before.

So, you can see how the game of chess here suddenly becomes the prestige marker. It becomes a marker of class, a marker of aristocracy, a marker of you know some degree of indulgence which is only available for the aristocracy. So, anyone who does not have the indulgence means that is cut off from that access to aristocracy the access to agency.

What? It is your family who must have been a grass-cutter. In our family we have been playing chess for generations. Oh leave it. You have spent your life working as a cook at Gazi-ud-din. To become a nobleman is no joke right. So, again now the secrets are out, they are attacking each other in personal fronts, and attacking each other at you know in terms of the ancestry and it just gets ugly and uglier.

Why are you blackening the faces of your ancestors? They must have been cooks. Our family has always dined with kings. You grass-cutter, don't make tall claims. Hold your tongue. I am not even used to listening to such this kind of language. If someone stares at me I pluck out his eyes. I dare you.

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'You want to test my courage? All right, let us test each other's to the end.'

'I'm not afraid of you.'

Both the friends drew their swords from their hips. It was the age of chivalry. Everyone was equipped with a sword or a dagger. Both friends were pleasure-loving but no cowards. They had become devoid of political will. Why should they die for kings or kingdoms? But they were not deficient in personal courage. The fight began. There was thrusting and parrying; the swords flashed and clashed. And both, fatally wounded, fell down and died writhing in pain. They who could not spare a single drop of tear for their king died defending their vazirs on the chessboard.

It was getting dark. The pieces still lay on the chessboard. It was as if both the kings sitting on their thrones were shedding tears at the death of these warriors.

Silence reigned all around. The broken arches, the ruined walls and dust-laden pillars of the mosque were watching these corpses and cursing their fate.



You want to test my courage? All right, let us test each other's to the end. I am not afraid of you. Now, this becomes very violent and you know, the vendetta comes out very clearly.

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So, this is how the story ends and we find that these two men suddenly become very valiant, suddenly become very gallant and gallantry returns makes a very dramatic comeback. And, we str also told that this is a time where everyone had swords on them all the time because that was a marker of aristocracy, it was a marker of chivalry, although that was not really used at all for any political purpose.

So, again we come back to the same point that everything has been used for hedonistic purposes, for noble purposes not utilitarian purposes. So, these swords can be used could have been used to offer some military resistance to the army coming in, but that was not used in that sense, then it was used to kill each other, to protect each other's chivalry or sense of nobility. So, the whole idea of chivalry or nobility become very superfluous categories over here and yet they are willing to die, they are willing to give their lives up because of a superfluity and that becomes more important for them than defending the political kingdom, the political the real political space right.

Now, the final ironic scene is important over here because the kings on a chessboard they seem to be mourning the death of the subjects are the same subjects that could not be bothered to defend their real king, to resist the take over the kingdoms and just give their

own lives and slay each other to defend the kings on the chessboard, and that becomes the irony the final ironic moment in this particular story.

Now, if you contrast this ending with the ending of the film where it is a different kind of ending because they have a shot at each other in pistols, they carry little pistols and they have a shot at each other and both of them miss, right. And then they go back to playing a game of chess. So, no one really dies in the film, but that is actually more inglorious kind of an ending because over here at least they picked up the sword and they had some sense of agency some something to defend some family honor. However, dubious that may be. But, at least they you know they engage in activity because of that particular cause and in the process they killed each other very stupidly.

However, in that film they couldn't even be bothered to you know shoot each other and the even they miss each other's shooting and then they forgive each other and start playing a game of chess. So, they are doomed there. So, in a way it is a symbolic death in the film. It is more of a death in the film than in this particular story because in the film they do not really die at a physical level, but morally die completely. They die at a level of morality, they die at the level of you know agency, everything just goes away from them entirely whereas, in the film this particular story they have a biological death which in a way if not redeeming them at least gives them some sense of action at the end in a way that defend each other's family values and family glory and family narrative and in the process get killed.

So, that being the story and the end. So, we find this is a story about feudalism this is story about feudal honor, feudal monarchy and the entire thing is about how this particular culture is coming to an end and now there is a new kind of culture coming in which is going to take over the feudal the you know the kingdom the feudal culture and the new culture is obviously, capitalist culture. It is an economic change, it is the ruling change, it is an administrative change and obviously, it is a military change. It is a change of governance.

And, that gives a very interesting picture, a very authentic picture of how the British manoeuvred their ways financially, by taking over different kinds of kingdoms before they became the overlord of the entire country. And, obviously, this is before the sepoy rebellion and after rebellion happened the company went away and the company rule

came to an end and the queen took over, the sovereign took over at that point of time. But, at the moment in this particular story it is the company which is taking control over the dynasty, the company taking control over the kingdom and that becomes a very important political statement as well.

So, with this we come to the end of the Chess Players and we finish all the texts in this particular point. I hope you enjoyed listening to all the texts when discussed and hope you took something out of it. We have a concluding session at the end we will wrap up everything and discuss everything in terms of a summary of all the texts.

Thank you for your attention.