

A Critical Study of Literary Devices And Themes In Prem Chand's Short Fiction "The Chess Players"

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Abstract

Premchand is actually the pen name and a pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai Srivatsava. He was born in 1880 in Banaras and he died also in Banaras in 1936. He wrote a lot of novels and short stories in Hindi and Urdu and many of them were translated into the English language later on. His first novel 'Sevasadan' which was published in 1918 is known as the House of Service and it talks about the problems of prostitution and moral corruption among the Indian middle classes. Premchand is one of the realist Indian modern story writers in Hindi and Urdu. He created artistic literary works in form of short-stories, novels, and drama. This article analyses the narrative structure and use of literary devices in his famous short story "The Chess Players". Research methodology employed for this article is analytical descriptive approach to analyse Premchand's "The chess players". This story is fully developed from the beginning till the end and the idea of philosophical and emotional truth is important in the context of Premchand's understanding of short fiction. He gave a psychological climax which he successfully communicated to the general readers. He justified the psychological point at the end of the story. He did not use beautiful and smart words and a brilliant style as he gave less importance to the writing style and the choice of words but put more importance to the ideas or meanings that he communicated through the story to the society. He developed the characters according to the story. There is a natural progression towards the climax. "The Chess Players" revolves around one emotional or psychological or philosophical truth and the climax was a natural outcome of the theme that he wanted to explore in relation to various aspects of the story.

Keywords: psychological, climax, theme, philosophical, truth, emotional

INTRODUCTION

Satyajit Ray, a very famous Indian filmmaker turned this story "The Chess Players" into an audio-visual masterpiece. He adapted the story into a film which was released in 1977 and it was critically acclaimed. It was a big critical hit evident of the reasons why this great filmmaker chose this particular story 'The Chess Players' among the 288 odd short stories written by Premchand.

In *The Chess Players*, the protagonists, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, represent the corrupt officials and administrators who were engrossed in sensual pleasures. They were only obsessed with the game of chess and ignored their duty to protect the kingdom and were ready to kill each other for the game during pre-colonial era in Awadh, when the Nawab was dethroned by the British army. This paper examines whether Premchand's psychological or philosophical truth was successfully communicated to the readers through characters or not. Depicted in this work, this is an India which is under the control of the colonial empire. The geographical background or the region that is focused upon in this particular story, is the Lucknow of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's days. In the climax, Nawab Wajid Ali was defeated and his whole kingdom of Avadh in 1856 was annexed to the British. The climax discusses the historical struggles of the day and it captures the particular moment when Lucknow was seized by the British Empire in 1856.

ANALYSIS OF THE TWO MAIN CHARACTERS OF THE STORY

'The Chess Players' begins with a list or an inventory and the list was about the various pleasures that are carried out across Lucknow. These luxurious activities included music, dance, opium smoking, poetry reading, poetry writing, fashion and different kinds of cloth making, cosmetics, cuisine, quail fights, and such other games. There is an element of criticism used by the writer in the enjoyment of all these luxurious activities and the short story begins with the inventory or the list of such activities that were happening across Lucknow. This list is automatic because there is not a greater amount of narrative expended by the author to openly criticize people indulging themselves in all these pursuits. There is sarcasm but obvious criticism is not very clearly stated in the narrative, at the beginning of the story. There is almost a hedonistic atmosphere that is present in this city of Lucknow, which is sometimes called as the Paris of the East as well. These sensual pursuits give a very evocative atmosphere to this particular city and it also becomes very fascinating for the readers

to think about all these aspects of life in Lucknow.

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

All sensual pleasures are lumped together to show that these all are part of Lucknow's total universal idea of enjoyment or pleasure or luxuriousness or sensuality. The two Lucknowi aristocrats, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, were two higher ranking men in society and they had inherited wealth and social position in society.

Since they had inherited wealth and a lot of luxuries, they were free to enjoy their own personal pleasures and they did it through the game of chess. So they were free to fight between themselves over the chessboard and they did it all day long, every day.

The story starts from Mirza's house where these two, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, used to play chess all day. The two friends, fond of playing chess used to consummate their whole day in playing chess and everyone around them even their wives, servants and neighbours as well were critical to them for wasting their time in an unproductive activity. But these two closed their ears at such a criticism. Mirza's wife the Begum, was terribly unhappy due to obsession of Mirza with this game. She wanted to discuss or fight with him, but Mirza did not give her that chance even as he would not leave any time spare for his wife to have a discussion on any of their personal life and domestic issues. She was puffing up with anger and wanted to take out her anxiety and anger.

However, she would expend her ire upon the servants. "Are they asking for paan? "Tell them to come and take it themselves. Have they no time for food? Go and throw it to them. Let them eat or cast it to the dogs." But face to face she was helpless. She wasn't resentful against her husband so much as against his friend, Mir Sahib. She had named him Mir, the spoilsport.

She asked her servants in anger to throw food at them and give them this kind of treatment. She even names Mirza's friend "spoilsport" because she considered him responsible for spoiling her husband and spoiling the domesticity of her family life too.

One-day Mirza's wife acted that she is unwell, but Mirza did not listen to the problem of his wife because he wanted to checkmate his friend and win the game. Mir Sahib wanted him to leave because he was losing the game. Eventually Mirza's wife could not control his anger and threw the chess board pieces.

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

Mirza did not understand the psyche of his begum who was devising strategies to get his attention and wanted to stop this game. She wanted to send Mir Sahib away. Mir Sahib promised Mirza that he would not touch any of the pieces of chess and ask him to go with his delicate wife and attend her. Mirza did not go because he knew that in next two moves Mir Sahib was about to face the defeat. Mir Sahib broke his promise and moved few pieces to win and win the game which he was about to lose.

Both of them were untrustworthy as one of them broke his promise to win the game and cheated and kept aside all moral principles. The other one cheated his wife as he told her that it was Mir Sahib who was engaging him in the game.

Both of them were irresponsible, unethical and liar. They did not have any moral responsibility towards women as well as society.

Now the game shifted to Mir sahib's house but here also his wife started devising strategies to get rid of her husband. Servants also disapproved and disliked the presence of the master at home. She was displeased and became edgy when chessboard was spread in Deewankhana.

Now Mir sahib was at the house all the time to play the game of chess and it curtailed the freedom of his wife. Her happiness and freedom all have come to an end as she was not able to get personal space, peace and glimpse of outside world.

THE BRILLIANT USE OF METAPHOR IN THE PHRASE "SWEET SHOP" AND "HOOKAH KEPT SMOLDERING UP"

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

Now the master was at home and servants had to work. It was ironical that the servants who had developed that habit of not doing the work, had to work and kept running as well all the time to fetch sweets and hookah. The simile has been used in the lines as the hookah is described as smoldering like a lover's heart which is constantly throbbing. It is presented in a beautiful way and rhetorically. The Mir's house was a symbol of corruption because the master as well as the servants

disliked the work and duty. The master as king of the country of the house was engrossed in sensual pleasures and aimless pursuit. The servants of the house like the common man was rejecting responsibility. So this all was symbolic of the corruption that was widespread in the city of Lucknow in the 19th century. The involvement of Nawabs and kings in aimless and pleasurable activities and implication of public in moral and social disorders was responsible for the downfall of Lucknow.

The attack on the chessboard is a direct attack on all these similar activities which were prevalent during that period. Mir Zafar and Mir sahib sneaked away deceitfully. Mir Zafar mentioned that woman are delicate things but that was also an attack on male chauvinism. The attack of Mir Zafar's wife showed that women are more powerful than man in authority as she brought to an end to a worthless and evil activity at her home by showing her anger and tempest.

SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF MIR'S HOME

The house of Mir Sahib has been compared to sweet shop and this is an appropriate metaphor as it perfectly describes the situation where there are no customers in the sweet shop. The sweet shop without customers will have flies flying all around and servants will just be sweeping away those flies. In the absence of Mir Zafar at home, the servants seem to be doing the same thing which the shop assistants will be doing, if there are no customers.

DESCRIPTION OF WIFE'S AGONY BY DEPLOYING SIMILE

Hookah has also been compared and 'simile' a literary device was used in smoldering hookah. The wives of both the Nawabs were disgruntled with their husbands. They (wives) were smoldering as hookah because there was no romantic happy domestic life in the plot. The wives of both the persons were sad, full of anger and grief. They both were smoldering themselves slowly.

It was also ironical also as Mirza's wife wanted her husband to be at home and Mir's wife wanted her husband to be away from home. The lover's relationship here means Mir Zafar's and Mir's Sahib relationship with their wives is ironical also. The lovers were also referred here Mir Zafar's wife and her lover whose heart was smoldering like hookah as they were not able to meet each other now.

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF CHESS

The metaphor used for the game of chess is appropriate as it symbolized the death of king who did not oppose and without using a single bullet on East India Company surrendered before them. Wajid Ali Shah accepted his defeat, although all the chess pieces were intact means the warriors of the Awadh city were not called for to fight.

So, this is how the game of chess is perceived in the society of Lucknow. This game is evil, that is what the servants at Mir's home say to the Begum, "But this game is evil. The person playing it never prospers." There is a nice consonance here, p and p. The person playing it again playing it never prospers. "A misfortune is bound to fall upon such a house. The whole kingdom and here the neighbourhood is ruined due to this evil game. Everyone in the neighbourhood was talking that whoever plays this game of chess will never prosper in fact they will have a severe fall in fortune. So this game was the symbol of downfall of the person whoever plays this game.

We derive from this fiction, the idea that the entire neighbourhood is getting ruined by this pleasure (chess) that they derive from the game of the chess. The chess is the one pleasure that afflicts the home of Mir and Mirza whereas other kinds of pleasures are corrupting the homes of other people in the society of Lucknow.

Chess playing is the game which has the symbol of evil, as well as the symbol of ruin, ruin of entire families and some other critics also suggest that the chess also becomes a symbol of luxury. It has also become a symbol of wealth and privilege, because only the people who are rich and privileged enough can enjoy playing this particular game. So this game of chess is multi-dimensional in its symbolic value.

The people of Lucknow were drenched in this pleasure especially the administrators so when people were being robbed in the countryside, outside of Lucknow, there was nobody who could listen to their complaints and get redressed for their problems. There was no administration and guardians who could save the people. The country is getting poorer and that is probably because wealth is taken out from the country side and the entire society of Lucknow is drowned in sensual pleasures, pleasures like prostitutes, buffoons, music, writing poetry and the game of chess.

The guardians, who are supposed to be the upholders of the rule of law were away from their offices, or away from their positions of power, and they were involved in other pursuits of pleasure.

When everybody is indulged, the personal characteristics of the individuals in society cannot be identified because everybody is tarred by this brush of pleasure, of sensuality, of drowsiness.

So, 'From the king to the pauper - all were engrossed in these pleasures. "if beggars received money in alms, they preferred to spend it on opium or its extract rather than bread." This is the tragic downfall of Lucknow. The statement in the fiction that the poor people, if they got the money in alms, they would use it to get a sedative, stimulant rather than healthy food that would be nutritious for their system.

So everybody in this society, all ranks of people, all ranks in society have been corrupted, debased and they all became addicted. The Nawab is also indirectly indicated to be involved in the pursuits of pleasure. There is no specific large scale description of the Nawab indulging in the pursuits of pleasures.

There are references here and there which tells the readers that the Nawab is also enjoying the pleasures of female company and music and other pursuits.

The use of the phrase "The blanket of debt" in the fiction clearly shows the impact of the pleasure pursuits of the officers of the state and it hints at the ruin that is going to arrive at the doorstep of Lucknow. The Blanket was getting heavier and wetter every day as the tax was collected by the administrators. They were engrossed and soaked themselves in the sensuous pleasures in the form of poetry, music and females.

The problem was that the East India Company was not receiving the taxes from the people and the city of Lucknow was getting indebted to this company, and this debt became trouble final call of destruction for the city Lucknow.

The blanket of debt- debt itself is like a blanket that is thrown over the people and it is kind of suffocating. The blanket of debt taken from the East Indian Company was becoming wetter and it was not only suffocating, which is covering the entire populous of Lucknow and Awadh, but it was also becoming wetter, heavier and terribly uncomfortable.

CHOICE OF WORDS

The dominant characteristic in Lucknow society are described in these words, **drowned, sunk, drowsiness**. All these words suggest that people have been debased, have reference here that from the highest to the lowest person in society everybody is addicted, everybody is engrossed, caught up in this web of pleasure and sensuality.

The words which were used in the fiction was an apt choice of words to convey the connotative meaning of the "downfall" and symbolic meaning of the game chess like 'evil' and the idea of "never prospering" -people will never prosper, will never get wealthier; the word "misfortune", means here that it is going to fall upon such a house. And the word ruined mean that whole neighborhood, the whole kingdom got ruined. The entire society got destroyed, crumbled and ruined. This game is a symbol of the fall of Mir, and with Mir, his friend, as well as the entire society including the Nawab's fall.

The use of the word 'maligned' in the fiction is significant as the servants did not want to hear the word 'maligned' for them as they had the idea that they were faithful servants. This is pretty ironical, his faithful servants because it was ironical because they rejected the responsibility that is endowed on them as servants in the fiction.

POWERFUL MESSAGE THROUGH CLIMAX

Premchand's fiction is divided into two categories:

In the first category of climax, the characters know where are they heading. The climax brings changes in their behavior and attitudes and the climax brings a turning point in their lives. These turning points make some remarkable changes in their lives. 'My Older Brother', 'The Path to Salvation' and 'A January Night' are examples of the climax in these fictional stories.

In the second category of the climax, the examples are 'kafan' (The Shroud) and 'Dudh ka Dam' (The Price of Milk). The characters in these stories remained unaware of the happenings and what is imminent in their life. The characters do not bring any change in their lives or characters. It brings a tragic end to the story and puts psychological influence on the readers. So we can easily differentiate between the two climaxes. In one category, the climax brings marked changes in the behaviors and attitudes of the characters and in the second category of climax, the chain of events and interesting incidents bring the unaware characters towards tragic end and crises in their lives.

In the story, the two incidents led towards the climax of the story; the shifting from Mirza's home to Mir's home and eventually to the bank of the Gomati river. The eruption of anger of Mirza's wife shifted both of them to Mir's home. At Mir's home arrived a visitor, a messenger from the king conveyed to him that he has been summoned by the king to

provide some soldiers for the king's army. The messenger was abrupt and brusque in his message who reminded the aristocrats like Mir Zafar, their duty to be in the battle which is to be fought by the Nawab. Being Zamindar, it was their actual responsibility, real nature of jagirdari which shows arrogance in the tone of the messenger. But that refusal to fulfill their responsibility led to their tragic end and climax of the story.

CONCLUSION

There were two major responsibilities of the zamindar of the state. First to collect revenue for a particular region and in return for this benefit and favour, zamindars have to provide soldiers at the time of crises to the king. The zamindar has to maintain the troops and send them at time of emergency to the king. This was the contract between zaminadars and rulers of the state.

The two aristocrats Mirza Sahib and Mir Zafar evaded their responsibilities because they do not want to die in the battlefield. They ran towards the Gomati river to play their favourite game chess. They thought the bad luck had befallen on them so they reacted and decided to save themselves from the bad luck by escaping secretly to the Gomati river.

Lucknow was in abundance with irresponsible people. The country was enslaved to East India Company but there were no noise and struggle to fight for the country among the people. All were involved in bad activities and enslaved to those activities. The two aristocrats were enslaved to chess games, Mirza wife was frustrated due to inattention of her husband and Mir's wife was lost in another illicit relationship.

Mirza lost two games in chess which led to the climax. He was about to lose the next game too which made him sad and gloomy. Mirza had lost three games consecutively. Mirza got angry and reminded Mir towards chess etiquette. He asked Mir not to take too much time.

This led to a battle between Mirza and Mir. They started using offensive remarks for each other's' ancestors and elders of the family. They took out sword to protect the dignity of their lineage and fought and died to protect the dignity of their ancestors from each other's offensive remarks.

They both took out their swords and pointed at each other. They wanted to fight not to save or protect the country but to save their personal ego. They wanted to fight not to protect the honor of the king but to protect the honor of their ancestors from the offending remarks which they used for to demean each other. That was an ironical situation in the fiction in which the two were cowards but they showed their chivalry in the battlefield of the game of chess.

They did not have the courage to face the messenger of the king but they were brave enough to kill each other. The love for the game of chess was above the love for the country. Their life was limited to the game of chess board. The messenger had illegal affair with Mir's wife who conspired this plot to make them out of the house. Mir and Mirza believed it to the reality due to political circumstances at that time and tried to escape from the situation. So to avoid the summon of the king, they shifted to the Gomati riverside

The final setting was Gomti riverside where these two started blaming each other for not following rules of the game. The English company had looted Lucknow and left nothing for the people to survive. The people of the country were dying due to starvation and exploitation as the two aristocrats died due to their love for the game of the chess.

The Nawab was arrested and there was no commotion in the city. The fortune of the two aristocrats was a symbol of the fall down of the country. That was the future of Lucknow, the tragic end and a message. The misfortune that befell on the country was due to the negligence and indulgence of administrators in the sensual pleasures.

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