

**A Study of the Cinematic Adaptation of Premchand's  
*Shatranj ke Khiladi***

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Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shatranj\\_Ke\\_Khilari](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shatranj_Ke_Khilari)

**Abstract**

The paper aims to do a comparative study of Premchand's *Shtaranj Ke Khiladi* and its cinematic adaptation by Satyajit Ray. It also exposes the dynamic relationship between literature and cinema, demonstrating that the two art expressions have convergences and divergences. The present story is also translated into several languages and adapted into different cultures with a little modification according to the demand/popularity and understanding of the directors and the audiences. There is always a remarkable creative touch-up given by the translator or the director to the original story in order to make it appear more rooted into the culture of the readership or viewers. Most of the times the settings, times, costumes, dialogues, etc. are completely reframed holding only a little resemblance to the original text and thus appear like faded traces of the original text. The paper is an attempt to trace the differences in story writing and script writing, plotting and acting, characters and actors, settings and locations, characterization and acting etc through Satyajit Ray's adaptation of *Satranj ke Khiladi*.

**Keywords:** Premchand, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, Adaptation, Cinema, Modification, Translation, Transliteration, Cinematic Devices.

Before comparing adapted movies with the original story it is important to understand the basics of adaptation and the standard of judgment. The major difference between films and books is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words do this indirectly, for example, reading the word 'chair' requires a kind of mental "translation" that viewing a picture of a chair does not. Thus, film is a more direct sensory experience than reading, there is also colour, movement, and sound. The creation of cinema has brought new considerations as well as new techniques and approaches of the literary text and it is greatly influenced by literature. Adaptations of classics confirm the fact that novels have widely inspired film-makers. Classics provide cinema with ready-made, pre-tested material for its success both artistically and commercially. Cinema is considered to be a visual and aural narrative and thus, adapting a novel is like translating words into a succession of moving pictures through which a story is told. One pertinent question about adaptation is not the degree to which a film is faithful to its literary reference, but the possibilities offered by cinema to treat a literary work. Both cinema and novels have the narrative in common, even if stories may be told differently. Similarly, films have had a great influence on modern writers of every era. Several novelists adopted cinema aesthetic and techniques in their narrative. Now a day the linearity of text and film is no longer essential. Time progression is not the same, flashbacks are integrated, the space is fractionated, the pace is rapid and even the language used has changed. Film makers are inspired by literature and tend to translate books, especially classics or best-sellers into screen. The present paper is thus on one of the best stories of Premchand directed by Satyajit Ray.

The opening scene of the film has a close-up camera on the chess board with hands moving, changing the position of the chessmen. The camera then zooms out capturing the stern expression of the two chess players and the rich Nawabs of Lucknow, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali. The story opens with the description of the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, the then emperor of Lucknow where every rich and poor is pre-occupied with different shades of pleasure. Premchand before introducing the major characters to the readers provides with a background of the history of the city and then places characters in it. However, in the movie this is done with the help of Amitabh Bacchan's voice first introducing the characters then the history and finally moving on to the description of the pleasure-seeking people of Lakhnow. Later in the middle of the film whenever something is to be apprehended is done with the same technique. The director also made use of animation to provide the audiences with a caricatured history of British rule and policies in India which is an additional treat to the sense. There are excellent linguistic expressions in the movie which could be seen in the scene where a British official is singing and translating an Urdu Ghazal for British governor general. Thus the movie successfully justifies its adaptation by making use of various cinematic, linguistic and technical expressions.

The film is set in 1856 when British are about to annex the Indian status of Awadh. There are two parallel plots of the film, one projects the historical drama of the Indian Kingdom Awadh and its Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and two noblemen obsessed with Shatranj. These Nawabs on one hand projected to be extremely extravagant, but sympathetic figures. The nobleman on the other hand are humorous, rich, disoriented, neglecting his wife and fail to act against the real life seizure of their kingdom by the East India Company, they have been shown as neglecting their family responsibilities fleeing at different places to play chess. Ray's basic message in the film is that the sense of detachment of India's ruling classes supported British officials and soldiers to take over Awadh. Amjad Khan, who till then played the role of villain was Raj's first choice for the role of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah because he himself was a Muslim and if one looks at the portrait of Wajid Ali Shah there is an uncanny resemblance between the two. Thus, Ray has his reservation about Amjad being able to rid himself of his typecasting as a Villain. For the costumes referred to in these letters the attire of the period was

thoroughly researched by Satyajit Ray and then the younger brother of John Mollo was hired to draw the sketches for the costumes. He was two times Oscar winner for costume design in Star wars and Gandhi. Ray made low budget art films and prepares his actors to do very few takes with almost no rehearsal, so that the spontaneity would lend more realism. Ray had written to each actor ahead of time explaining the role and how he envisioned it. They play chess as per the ancient rules of the games, ignorant of a different kind of chess playing by the British both literally and metaphorically.

Mirza's wife Khursid begum felt neglected as Mirza no longer responds to her feminine charms due to his obsession with the game. On the other hand, Mir's wife Nafeesa too faces a similar fate but finds solace in a love affair with a young man. Even after discovering this affairs Mir opts to ignore it rather than confronting the situation and disturb his routine of chess playing. Chess playing is metaphorically presented in the story where the British are playing a bigger game of chess. General Outram was sent to take over Awadh by Lord Dalhousie on the pretext of Nawab's misrule, giving a checkmate to Wajid Ali shah. Shah has only two options either he fights with the British or gives up the throne without fighting. Wajid Ali Shah did not have a well- equipped army and thus fearing blood shed in hopelessly unequal battle he opts to give up his kingdom and sings a thumri to himself,

*“ jab chod chale lakhnow nagri  
Kaho haal aadam par kya guzari”*

(As we leave our beloved city of Awadh, we could sense the pain of Adam while leaving heaven.)

As compared to the earlier films of Ray it reported to have cost two million rupees. This however was still a shoestring budget of the contemporary Hindi films of Bombay ranging from 4 to 10 million rupees. It is also one of the two non-Bengali films other being *Sadgati* (Deliverance) also based on Premchand's short story. Being an adaptation of Premchand's story there would be definitely some similarity made by the director's creativity and imagination like Premchand's Story focusses primarily on two chess players and the result of their obsession whereas Ray has expanded the story by providing more space to the characters of Wajid Ali Shah, General Outram and some more creative characters are being added. The remarkable thing about the film that there is no hero or villains, he sympathizes with better attributes of both the British and the king. General Outram is shown troubled with the illegal means he is bound to follow to take over Awash for his loyalty to British Empire. The king on the other hand is shown as an accomplished poet, musician, artist and art seeker with no interest in political matters. Unfortunately like many of other Indian kings he relied on the treaty of friendship with the British to pursue the art instead of maintaining an army.

A scene that takes place between General Outram and Captain Western prompted V.s Naipaul to comment “It is like a Shakespeare scene. Only three hundred words are spoken but goodness! Terrific thing happens. This is an excellent story about obsession and of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear of leading a blinkered existence of refusing to even acknowledge that an unpleasant truth lurks somewhere beyond. Mirza and Mir set up in the form of their daily games of chess an illusory world where they fight heated battles strategizing and thinking and warning to the exclusion of all else. Premchand writes,

*“ apne baadshah ke liye unki aankhon se ek Boond aansu na nikla,  
Unhone satranj ke vajir ki raksha mein pran de diye”*

*Shatranj ke khiladi* stands in singular isolation as the only full-length feature film in Hindustani by Satyajit Ray. His most recent biographer Andrew Robinson has flourished in considerable detail the circumstance under which Ray made the film. Ray's films usually entailed a inconsiderable amount

of historical and sociological research; his meticulous attention to detail is indubitably one of the most characteristic trade marks of his films. The films enlarge the metaphors of the game to include the larger historical game played by the east India company within the province of Avadh. In the film the game of chess is associated with the elite class whereas there are some other cheap games projected in the movie enjoyed by commoners like pigeon flying, kite flying, cock fighting. Critics do believe that Premchand's story is overtly critical of the game of chess, equating it with Ganjifa and Gambling. The narrators voice the background is reflective of Premchand's ironic commentary on the Nawabs and their obsession. When in the story Premchand presents the characters of the king as an art lover. So it becomes the responsibility of the director to add music, paintings, architecture, and dance in order to do justice to the fictional characters. Ray's basic message in the film is that the sense of detachment of India's ruling classes supported British officials and soldiers to take over Awadh.

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Being an adaptation of Premchand's story there would be definitely some creative modifications made by the director using his imagination targeting the interest and culture of the audiences. Premchand's story primarily focuses on the two chess players, their obsession and the consequences whereas Ray expanded the story by providing more space to the character of Wajid Ali Shah, General Outram and other characters almost missing from the original story. The most remarkable thing about the film is that there is no hero or villain, he sympathizes with better attributes of both the British and the king. General Outram is shown troubled with the illegal means he is bound to follow to take over Avadh for his loyalty to British Empire. The king on the other hand is shown as an accomplished poet, musician, artist and art seeker with no interest in political endeavors. Unfortunately like many of other Indian kings he relied on the treaty of friendship with the British to pursue the art instead of maintaining an army. A scene that takes place between General Outram and Captain Weston prompted V.S. Naipaul to comment,

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## Conclusion

Cinema no more plays a second fiddle to literature. It is a different genre with its own standards of judgements. Cinematic adaptation is an art which can't be mastered by everybody but only by those who understand the technicalities of acting and directing. Satyajit Ray's movies are best examples of an entertaining and informative films, even when it comes to adaptation they lack nothing instead add more seriousness and humour to the subject. The cinematic adaptation of the present novel by Premchand is among one of the best movies by Ray. The film has the flavour of 19<sup>th</sup> century Lakhnow which is captured in acting, directing, dialogues, costumes etc. The film is adds to the quality of adaptation in India where the words of the story by Premchand are given life by the actors and the director.

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