

Liminality and Gender: A Study on Munshi Premchand's *The Chess Players*

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Abstract: Munshi Premchand's *The Chess Players* or *Shatranj Ke Killadi* is representative of the age-old treatment of women in Indian society. Nevertheless, he portrays the women as powerful figures whose organic embodiment is stronger than that of men's. The colonial influence on the Indian masculinity is clearly evident in the short story. The paper titled "Liminality and Gender: A Study on Munshi Premchand's *The Chess Players*" is a study on the movement of male and female across the liminal space. One's location is crucial in recognizing his or her gender identity, performativity, agency, etc. The study also focuses on the instability of the concepts such as masculinity and femininity.

Keywords: Liminality, Space, Masculinity, Femininity, Emasculation.

INTRODUCTION

"Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179). Gender is a construction as it is often influenced by the prevailing culture and its beliefs. Gender norms vary across geographical, cultural, and political borders. Masculinity and Femininity are both considered to be dichotomous. However, there is no absolute masculinity or absolute femininity as its definitions change with changes in time and space. Moreover, there are more than 70 genders besides male and female. Gendered spaces are places where certain gender of people and certain forms of gender expressions are welcomed, while other forms are deemed

unwelcome or inappropriate. Social institutions sustain the structure of gender through the gendering of spaces, which is a key method. In the context of India, gendered spaces were available only for men and women. The rest of the genders were allocated with no space at all. For a long time, women were mostly confined within the four walls of the kitchen while men enjoyed the privileges that their gender bestowed upon them. In order to cater to the need of the hour, different genders started traveling toward the spaces that were considered unfit for them. Liminality is the idea of moving between spaces, zones, identities, and categories. The term is used to describe the psychological process of transitioning across boundaries and borders.

Masculinity and femininity are often described as something that should be performed by both men and women respectively. Nonetheless, no person can be completely masculine or feminine and the definition of both these terms can vary based on what place or the time he or she is in.

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, who is popularly known as Munshi Premchand (1880-1936), is one of the most well-known authors from the Indian subcontinent and is recognized as the greatest Hindi author of the first half of the twentieth century. More than a dozen novels, around 300 short stories, several articles, essays, letters, and Hindi translations of numerous foreign literary masterpieces are among his many creative outputs. After Premchand's demise, many of his works were

translated into English and Russian. *Godaan*, *Karmabhoomi*, *Gaban*, *Mansarovar*, and *Idgah* are some of his masterpieces. “We find exquisite portrayal of women who were exploited through the ages. Premchand tried to portray almost every aspect of women’s life” (Sharma). He portrayed the people, and the customs of his society as it is. He was a social critic and a realist. “Premchand has also produced various compositions on inter-caste marriage, polygamy, and various other aspects of marriage including dowry with a serious line of thought. He wanted the bride and the groom both get agreed before tying the knot of marriage” (Sharma).

The Chess Players or *Shatranj ke Khilari* by Munshi Premchand, published in 1924, is set during Wajid Ali Shah’s reign, a time when “love of pleasure dominated every aspect of life” (Madhuri) in Lucknow. The story revolves around Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, who spend most of their time playing chess. The diwankhana where they play chess is an interface between the private house and the public road where women are not allowed. The women of the house are confined within the four walls of the kitchen. Women in the short story have no name either. Being landlords, Mirza and Mir are supposed to serve the king during the time of unrest. However, they are at war with each other. They refrain from bothering about the matters of their house and the matters of the state. Even when the British army took away the king, they were defending their kings on the chessboard. They die fighting each other over the game and “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.” (Madhuri)

The paper titled “Liminality and Gender: A Study on Munshi Premchand’s *The Chess Players*” is a study on the movement of male and female characters between space, identity, etc. The space of women is inside the house, though the organic embodiment of the women is stronger than the organic embodiment of men. They are incapacitated and are even not allowed to enter the diwankhana, which acts as a boundary between the house and the public space. We see how they try to move towards the restricted domain though they were hesitant initially. It is one’s location in a certain space that determines your gender identity, performativity, agency, etc. The paper also looks at the reconfiguration of the concept of masculinity and femininity.

The short story was set immediately before the 1857 rebellion. “Premchand’s narrative of the two noblemen absorbed in their own game of chess is set forth against the larger chess game- the annexation of Awadh by the British in 1856” (Singh). It was the time when British company was getting more powerful. The story depicts masculinities in two ways- sartorial and embodied representations.

In particular, we posit that wearing clothes causes people to “embody” the clothing and its symbolic meaning. Consequently, when a piece of clothing is worn, it exerts an influence on the wearer’s psychological processes by activating associated abstract concepts through its symbolic meaning—similar to the way in which a physical experience, which is, by definition, already embodied, exerts its influence (Adam and Galinsky 2).

The leisurely and decorative culture of the people of Awad and the pragmatic, lean, and crisp style of the people of Britain reflects their lifestyles. Thus, British men are more productive compared to the men of Awad.

In 19th century India, women had no agency. They were the victims of patriarchal prejudices and practices.

The participation of women in the workforce has been found to be very low. The female members of society were subjected to unequal pay as compared

to their male counterparts. They were confined to the four walls of their houses and were not allowed to contribute to the country's GDP. (Major Issues and Debates Concerning Indian Women of the 19th Century)

The protagonists Mir and Mirza had agency. However, they seldom utilized it in a productive manner. They also robbed women of their freedom. Mir saw women as "delicate things" and

when the chessboard was spread in his diwankhana, his wife's "freedom was curtailed. She hardly had any chance to have a glimpse of the outside" (Madhuri).

In the story, we come across Mirza's wife, whose organic embodiment is stronger than that of her husbands'. She tries to procure the liminal space in her house. She enters the diwankhana, which is a prohibited space for her to be in, as a part of showing her resentment at being ignored by her lazy and callous husband. She was hesitant in the beginning- "She walked up to the dewan khana, but she stopped" (Madhuri). This clearly draws in front of us, the position of a 19th century Indian woman. However,

the begum went inside and overturned the chessboard, threw some chessmen under the dewan and a few others out through the door. Then she shut the door and bolted it from inside. Mir sahib saw the chessmen being thrown out and heard the sound of bangles, and the door being bolted. (Madhuri)

Here, the woman is clearly moving between feminine and masculine identities and spaces. She outweighs the men through her acts of subversion. For example, walking up, over turning the chessboard, throwing out the "chessmen" etc. The sound of her baangles is suggestive of her powerful presence. Homi K. Bhaba describes liminal in post-colonial literature as a potentially troublesome inbetweenness "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5).

Premchand portrays how the hegemonic masculinity of Awad gets marginalized by the British masculinity and also by the powerful presence of the women. "Realizing that the Begum was inflamed, he (Mir) slinks away" (Madhuri). In the short story, chess playing is a metaphor for non-productivity, indolence, and indulgence- "This is an inauspicious game and can ruin

families. God forbid that anyone should get addicted, for it makes a person unfit to do anything" (Madhuri). The act of playing chess and slinking away from the diwankana, which is indicative of a spineless movement points towards the emasculation of men. The English army moving towards Lucknow to capture the city indicates to the invasion of a new form of masculinity. The emasculation of Mir and Mirza is evident through their response: "the English army is advancing". "Let us stand in the corner" (Madhuri). The situation worsens when the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah gets captured. "It was a form of cowardice on which even great cowards would have shed tears". In the game of chess, Mirza's "position progressively weakened" and "he was losing control over himself". Mir and Mirza die fighting to defend their "Vazirs on the chessboard". Their death symbolizes the movement of the hegemonic masculinity of Awad from the centre to margins.

Premchand portrays women as more authoritative and bold though their privileges are limited due to the lack of agency. We see the movement of femininity across the borders. The diwankhana, or the threshold is the space of men.

They become trapped in this threshold as it widens and develops into an unhomely space of its own, from which they “slinks away”. “First, the threshold is characterized by a potential for disorder; second by asymmetry; third by instability” (Aguirre 31). The women occupies the liminal space or the threshold. As a result, the hegemonic masculinity gets sidelined. Moreover, the British army’s arrival and their newly established power over Awad resulted in the ultimate unmaning of the men. The space is remapped and the men are emasculated.

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