



Premchand's The Chess Players: A Comparative Analysis of YouTube and MOOC Platforms

Rahul Jain

Abstract

YouTube videos are being increasingly viewed as alternate educational resources by a large number of learners. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) also include video lectures from scholars of high-profile universities. This paper aims to give an insight into the question of whether just consuming videos on YouTube is enough to ensure proper learning or hour-long MOOC lectures are necessary to comprehend the nuanced and layered writings of great writers like Mushi Premchand. It presents a comparative analysis of a few video lectures of three Swayam MOOC courses on Premchand's short story, *The Chess Players*, along with its various mass-market multimedia renderings on YouTube. While such popular renditions ensure a wide currency for the story, the academic discourse has critically analysed the story in terms of its narrative structure and its gendered power structure. This paper explores whether such analyses are inherently closer to the underlying message of the story. It also examines whether the YouTube videos can make up for a close reading of the text itself. It concludes that Premchand may best be understood in the original Hindi text, then consumed critically through MOOCs, and only much later, should he be watched on YouTube, if necessary.

Keywords: YouTube, MOOC, Pedagogy, Video Lecture, New Media Studies, Munshi Premchand.

1. Introduction

One of the foremost aims of education is the development of a critical outlook. Being critical implies a progressive worldview with an active desire to reduce domination and exploitation in society. Reading Munshi Premchand's fiction can arguably be called educational in itself because of its deep social concerns for the downtrodden and marginalised. While disapproving of the feudal classes of his times, he steers clear of creating stock characters or clichéd dialogue, like in the chosen text for this paper, *The Chess Players*. This is the mark of a great writer. The protagonists, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, represent the nadir of the pre-colonial Awadh society. Mirza and Mir are *jaghirdars* who kill each other over a game of chess while their king Wajid Ali Shah, whose protection is their solemn duty, is being unceremoniously dethroned by the British Army. This paper examines whether Premchand's message can be critically recreated in its screen adaptations. These multimedia translations or adaptations are available in the form of video lectures, audio readings, textual translations, theatrical recordings and feature films.

2. Critical Summary of *The Chess Players*

It was in the times of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was drowned in sensuality. The big

and small, the rich and the poor – all were sunk in it. Some were engrossed in dance and music; some just revelled in the drowsiness induced by opium. Love of pleasure dominated every aspect of life. In administration, in literature, in social life, in arts and crafts, in business and industry, in cuisine and custom – sensuality ruled everywhere. (Premchand 2013)

Thus begins the story of Premchand's *The Chess Players*. It was “the best of times” (Premchand 2013) for all the citizens of Lucknow. The story is an example of historical fiction as it is set in 1856, at the time when Wajid Ali Shah ruled Awadh. It starts with an account of the decadence of the citizens of Lucknow who are steeped in sensuous pleasures of all kinds, from opium-eating to cock-fights to card-playing to narcissistic consumption to an excess.

The exploitative *jagirdari* system has been depicted through the protagonists, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, who are the beneficiaries of hereditary jagirs gifted by the king, whom they have a sworn duty to protect in return. Even as the word spreads that the East India Company is eager to annex Awadh, these two *jaghirdars* use every trick to evade conscription even while shamelessly enjoying the revenues collected through their jagirs. Eventually, they hide in a derelict mosque outside of town to fulfil their obsession with fighting each other on the virtual battlefield of chess.

Their misplaced chivalry is aroused when their Nawabi lineage is questioned, even though they scarcely care about the future preservation of the same lineage. Even when they see their capital being surrounded by the Company army or their king Wajid Ali Shah being taken away in chains, their patriotism is not aroused. The immediate concern of checkmating and winning the game of chess is paramount. Premchand has even graded their concentration as better than the Himalayan yogis. Even the thought of the loss of their jagirs does not enter their mind. The final lines describe the atmosphere thus:

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 the dust-laden pillars of the mosque were watching these corpses and cursing their fate. (Premchand 2013)

These lines point towards their alienation from *deen-duniya* which roughly translates to “matters of spirit and world” (Premchand 2013) as the dilapidated mosque pillars and the chessboard kings mourn the loss of capable but depoliticised brave men.

2.1. The Metaphor of Chess

The story indicates the loss of political consciousness in Awadh which had become a kind of cultural wasteland sans social cohesion or economic prudence. The metaphor of the game of chess can be suitably applied to the kingdom of Awadh as a whole. The chess pieces have no agency of their own to move forward or backwards. They are moved by an external force. Likewise, the opium-fuelled lifestyle of the Awadh citizenry had lulled them into a puerile and sterile lethargy much like a wooden chess piece. The external force of the East India Company merely took over the reins of power rather than having to conquer an active army. King Wajid Ali Shah abdicated the throne to be moved out of the kingdom by the Company Army.

Society was deeply divided based on region, class and gender. Those at the bottom of the pyramid, like rural farmers, are just cannon fodder much like the pawns on the chessboard. An urban begum may have a higher status but no social agency. They are mere pawns of patriarchy. The *jaghirdars* and the king's ministers held the highest status in the society, forming the backbone of the king's defensive line. The ultimate authority was wielded by the Mughal king. Much like the game of chess wherein the death of a king implies defeat even if all the other chess pieces are intact, the easy submission of the poetic king Wajid Ali Shah meant that Awadh's army surrendered without a single bullet being fired. Premchand has described the king's capture thus:

Nawab Wajid Ali had been captured and the (Company) 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. (Premchand 2013)

3. Language and Translatability

Translation is a political act. Premchand was a freedom fighter and he left his job at Gandhi's call for Non-Cooperation against the British. He calls the English language a disease in one of his essays and believes that the development of the Indian mind can only take place in its native tongue. He calls the native obsession with English speech artificial and hollow (Premchand 2022, p. 56). To translate Premchand's Hindi short fiction into the language of the coloniser is hence a tremendously political act. To quote Premchand in full is especially useful in this context:

We have already drawn the attention of readers of Hans (Premchand's magazine) to this issue. It pains me to write that even our national workers are as much a victim of this disease (of the English language) as government servants, lawyers, and college teachers. There is no doubt that they have started wearing khaddar, but there is not even an iota of culture and tradition to be found in their mentality. Go to any committee meeting, and you will find the khaddar-clad gentlemen conversing in fluent English. The words and sentences, which they have read in papers or English dailies, which are eager to flaunt do appear the moment they get the opportunity. It is hilarious when this gentleman shows his elegance of speech in English in the presence of women who do not even know English. How long will this spell of English last and linger over our heads? How long will we remain a slave to this language? It only proves that our nationalism has not reached the depth of our hearts. We do not see any leader except Mahatma Gandhi propagating the Hindi language. It should be clear that as long as our national language is not nurtured, the development of our nation will remain an idea and a dream. A Japanese expresses himself in Japanese, a Chinese in Chinese. An Iranian in Persian but an educated Indian takes pride in studying and speaking English. Many gentlemen do not hesitate to say that they find writing and speaking in Hindi difficult. This is a simple slave mentality. Even the most distinguished Indian speaks in English when he talks to a White man. Not once does he think about why an Englishman cannot speak Hindi? Well, talking in English with the English can still be condoned, but there is no justification for conversing in English amongst ourselves. (Premchand 2022, pp. 46-47)

Though it must be said that the very subject of postcolonial studies is the articulation of the colony against the empire, of the subaltern against the hegemonic. In other words, the Empire writes back, in the Empire's own words (Ashcroft et.al. 2002). It is a pity that Premchand's stories are not being taught in the Hindi language in any of the Swayam MOOC courses. All three MOOCs that teach *The Chess Players* are in English. Two courses are taught by Avishek Parui as part of the *Gender and Literature* MOOC (Parui 2022a) and the *Twentieth Century Fiction* MOOC (Parui 2022b). Divya teaches this same story along with *The Shroud* in the *Short Fiction in Indian Literature* MOOC (A 2020).

On the other hand, YouTube archives many video clips in Hindi. The major facet of Premchand's writing is its use of Hindustani or Urdu words which enrich his writing and contribute to its lyricality. Such a lyricality is lost in the English readings of the text, and so is the sharp wit and the cultural milieu. To watch a video recording of a play on the story is immensely rewarding as there is plenty of theatrical dialogue that moves the narrative forward and contributes to its enduring appeal to generations of readers (Gupta 2019).

YouTube also hosts a major feature film in Hindi directed by Satyajit Ray based on this story (Shemaroo 2015). It stars Sanjeev Kapoor and Saeed Jaffrey as the main protagonists. It is narrated by Amitabh Bachchan and has a stellar supporting cast of Shabana Azmi, Farooq

Shaikh, Tom Alter, Richard Attenborough, and Amjad Khan who plays Wajid Ali Shah. It must be said about the film that it contorts the central message of the story from that of being the delinquency of the ruling pre-colonial elite to that of the childish obsession of the male protagonists with chess and their tomfoolery. Therefore, it is better to see this movie as a transcreation or transgression of the original story. To instantiate, Ray has given a meatier role to Wajid Ali Shah and the Begums while also completely altering the ending of the story. In the original, Mirza and Mir kill each other on a minor trifle over a game of chess while in the screen adaptation, Ray has them placate each other and continue playing chess while the end credits roll on. In this way, it mirrors the beginning credits wherein the frame is closed in on the chessboard and the audience sees a couple of hands moving the pieces forward (Shemaroo 2015). This film is one of the lesser-known works of Ray, who is more at home in the representation of the Bengali language and culture.

On YouTube, there are also several individual readings in Hindi of the text by many speakers while many have attempted a straightforward story-based analysis of the text. These analyses are in Hindi, but cannot be called academic as they do not display sufficient scholarship, critical acumen or a politically-committed reading. Therefore, while YouTube renditions of *The Chess Players* can be said to be grounded in Premchand's linguistic milieu, they cannot be called progressive. The academic readings available through Swayam MOOCs contribute to the growing critical dialogue on Premchand who is fallible and complicit with the reigning hegemonies of the day. For example, in *The Shroud*, he shows the Dalit daily-wagers as heartless parasites while in *The Chess Players* the responsible citizenry of India has been depicted as a hedonic lumpen proletariat while the British efficiency has been illustrated in glowing terms.

4. A Plethora of Choices

It has been amply shown that different learners learn differently. Therefore, it is always a good idea to create as many learning opportunities as possible. On YouTube, the same text has been interpreted through audio, screen and stage. Also, for different levels of learners, this same text has been analysed for school-going children and university scholars. It creates a wide variety of watching experiences whereby the viewer can choose the speaker or scholar from which he can learn best.

The academic discourse is monolingual and restricted to two teachers only. It does not have the freshness of outlook that an amateur viewer can connect with immediately. Also, their lectures are too long, accented and repetitive to hold the attention of the online learner. Each of the three MOOCs teaches *The Chess Players* differently. One of Parui's MOOCs, *Gender and Literature*, focuses on exposing the differences between the pleasure-loving, solipsistic masculinity of the Awadh gentry and the ruthless, expansionist masculinity of the Company army. It conducts an intertextual reading as it uses frames from Ray's film to contrast the jewellery-laden robes of Wajid Ali Shah with the army fatigues of the British general. The representation of women in the text has been talked about later (Parui 2022a). Most pertinent for the online audience, it uses an open-source translation of the text freely available on a blog, the link of which is shared on the course website. The other one of Parui's MOOCs, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, does a close reading of the English translation. It shows Parui alongside a screencast of his laptop wherein the viewer reads the text as it is scrolled down by Parui on his laptop (Parui 2022b). It helps to gain a textual understanding and attention to detail but the length of the lecture remains an inhibiting factor for most of the online audience. The seminal article in the field of video lecture engagement by Philip Guo and others (2014) recommends breaking long videos into chunks of 6 minutes or less which requires pre-production planning like scripting. In *Short Fiction in Indian Literature*, Divya A. shows the two kinds of narratives that Premchand deploys (A 2020). In the first kind, the characters go through a change of heart and the conflict is resolved by compromise. While in the second kind, the characters' flaws are intensified by the end, thus giving the effect of a culture shock. *The Chess Players* and *The Shroud* belong to the second kind as the male protagonists persist in their follies and never

become wise as a result. She analyses the various narrative tools and devices that Premchand uses to enrich his art. In the final lecture of the MOOC, she is seen discussing the story with two of her students in her office (A 2020). Such a freewheeling discussion is unfit for a display to the online audience as the contours of such a discussion are never shared with the audience. The discussion is not thrown open to the online audience.

5. Gendered Readings

The gendered reading of Premchand's stories is a shot in the arm for Indian feminism as it exposes the deep-rooted gender stereotypes that colour the Indian imagination. Such discourses are rare in the popular scenario as it is the academia which has the access, space and resources to bring to the fore such counter-cultural ideas. There has been a plethora of research papers that have been published dealing with issues of femininity and masculinity in the story. For instance, the effeminate character of king Wajid Ali Shah was criticized by Ray's contemporaries but defended by Ray himself based on historical sources.

5.1. Domestication of Women

Avishek Parui has criticised the symbolic non-presence of women in *The Chess Players*, who despite being capable are incapacitated by the rigid patriarchal structures of 19th-century Awadh. They have been portrayed as nothing but nagging unfulfilled wives whose very personhood is subsumed by the generic term for wives i.e. Begum. Their social existence is restricted to the Andar mahal. They lack political, economic and cultural agency since the jagirs are inherited in a patrilineal way. The men of the Awadh kingdom have been infantilised by self-centred hedonism while the women have been socially invisibilized and politically disenfranchised (Parui 2022a). The men are even biologically unproductive i.e., they have no children. In such a scenario, the men have been at least given the choice of self-destruction while even that has been taken from the women of Awadh. The only choice available to them was to become a Begum or a courtesan.

Even in Premchand's oft-anthologised *The Shroud*, we have an all-male protagonist couple, Ghisu and Madhav, who scarcely care about the predicament of the ailing pregnant daughter-in-law/wife who speaks only through her wailing and crying in the story. It shows that while being a Dalit is to be a suppressed being, being a Dalit woman entails a double dehumanisation, an intersection of social and filial oppression.

In Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, the women hardly make an appearance except as the Begum, a courtesan, a servant, the king's concubine or the king's ineffectual mother. When it is hinted at the movie's end that the Queen (i.e. Queen Victoria) had become more powerful than the King (i.e. King Wajid Ali Shah), it is only a symbolic victory for women as all the weight of upper-class or royal honour turns into an iron maiden of domestic slavery. Typecast into the singular roles of chaste wives and brave mothers, they become convenient pawns of patriarchy. Since the private domestic sphere is not considered to have larger political ramifications, they become paternalistically subordinated to men as a fraternity (Bouwer 2010, p. 9).

They have scarcely any say in what happens to the kingdom or how the colonial or national discourse is played out while the nation itself is feminised as a mother which is supposed to be protected by hypermasculine soldiers. National liberation is nothing more than "a transaction between men over the honour of a woman-mother whose ownership passes through paternity" (Banerjee 2005, p. 9).

5.2. Women's Everyday Forms of Resistance

Mirza's Begum, fed up as she is with the constant chess-playing, calls for Mirza to attend to her headache. Mirza, as usual planning his next moves on the chessboard, angrily questions whether she is taking her last breath. In a typical misogynist tone, Mir insists that Mirza visit her wife as "women are delicate things" (Premchand 2013). When the Mirza relents, we see the pent-up frustration of the Begum being articulated thus:

You love this wretched game so much that you don't care even if I am dying. What kind of a man are you?' ... 'If Mir sahib comes here, I shall drive him away from the

doorsteps. Had he devoted himself to God like this he would have become a saint. You keep playing chess and I remain enslaved to the domestic chores. Are you going to the hakim, or are you still unwilling? (Premchand 2013)

It is only when the Begum threatens to visit the Hakim by herself that Mirza's sense of honour arises. Such a threat of the Begum forms an everyday act of resistance. She even dares to enter the exclusive male space of the home's *divankhana* to upset the game. This is the only outlet for her deep sense of grievance. James Scott defines everyday forms of resistance as "such resistance (which) is virtually always a stratagem deployed by a weaker party in thwarting the claims of an institutional or class opponent who dominates the public exercise of power" (Scott 2008, p. 52). He further adds that if "the same results may be achieved by everyday resistance, albeit more slowly, at a vastly reduced risk, then it is surely the more rational course" (Scott 2008, p. 35)

6. Possibilities of Criticism

Wole Soyinka has said that freedom dies in the absence of criticism (Adibe 2020). It is the solemn duty of the academic as a public intellectual and as the representative of the unspoken majority to keep the authors and authorities humble, thereby making the lives of the marginalised more liveable. On YouTube, one finds that the inherent biases in *The Chess Players* have been further trivialised to the point of banal entertainment. The revolutionary zeal with which Premchand writes as a political being, a Third-World humanist, and a colonised native is completely lost in the screen adaptations of the story. It becomes a mere spectacle, a virtual performance that must be consumed for its own sake, foreclosing the potential for real-world action. The insight which is gained by reading Premchand is completely lost in the visual glamour of its film adaptation or its stage rendition. The focus is on the entertainment or humour quotient of the story while the sarcastic undercurrent that sustains the narrative is lost. Learning from McLuhan (1994), one can say that the message of Premchand somehow gets lost in the medium. In his famous presidential speech titled "The Aim of Literature" (*Sahitya Ka Udeshya*), given at the first session of the Progressive Writer's Association, Premchand points to the socialist character of all great literature (Premchand 2004, appendix). He finds the name of the association unsuitable as a writer is naturally progressive. The literature of the generation before him was written in the service of the elite and ruling classes because it was patronised by them. In effect, their pen was a slave to the capital. Premchand initiated a progressive ethic in writing by freeing himself of the need for elite patronage. He even started a printing press and two magazines for this purpose (Premchand 2004). The conclusion of his stirring speech is worth quoting in full here:

We, literary people, lack the strength of action. This is a bitter truth, but we cannot shut our eyes in front of it. So far, the aim we had set for literature did not require any action. The absence of action was a good thing because often action brings along partisanship and narrowness. If a religious person becomes proud of his or her piety, it would be better if they believed in 'eat drink and be merry'. Such bohemians can be the rightful recipients of God's mercy, while someone who takes pride in his or her piety cannot.

In any case, as long as the aim of literature was only to provide entertainment, to put us to sleep by singing lullabies and make us shed a few tears to lighten our hearts, it did not need action. It was like a mad lover whose sorrow was felt by others, but in our mind, literature is not only a plaything for entertainment and sensual enjoyment. The only literature that will pass our test is that which contains high thinking, a sense of freedom, the essence of beauty, the soul of creativity and the light that emanates from the truths of life, literature which instils in us dynamism and restlessness, not sleep; because to go on sleeping now would be a sign of death." (Premchand 2004, appendix)

The action that Premchand talks about can be understood in terms of the patriotic projects that Premchand concerned himself with. He had even left his job as a Munshi to dedicate himself fully to the nationalist cause.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, YouTube's inherent strength is its wide variety of video clips that are uploaded by general users and media companies. For example, Shemaroo has uploaded the *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* for free viewing while the drama repertory DramaTech has uploaded its stage rendition of the story on YouTube. These resources in turn help the academics as free references for their lectures in MOOCs. The immanent critique of YouTube as pedagogy is its lack of order, coherence, depth or forced attention which makes it perfect for entertainment but unfit for education (Juhasz 2008). On the other hand, the MOOCs which were analysed here do not pay heed to the demands of the online audience and do not tweak the basic pattern of the hour-long classroom lecture. As a final suggestion, Premchand may best be consumed in the original Hindi text, then consumed critically through MOOCs, and only much later, should he be watched online, if necessary.

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Bio-note

Rahul Jain is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has previously worked at the Hindustan Times as a desk-editor. His PhD topic deals with the question of whether literature can be meaningfully and effectively taught online through massive open online courses, popularly referred to by their acronym MOOCs.

My ORCID ID is 0000-0001-8817-3253.

E-mail ID: rahuljain3228@gmail.com