Like the Bengali landlord in *Jalsaghar*, Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, is an overinscribed figure in colonialist and nationalist historiography. He is the referent of all Lakhnavi tall tales. In mainstream postcolonial films, folk tales, and popular memory he is cited for the high achievement in Awadhi culture. At the same time the figure of Wajid Ali Shah appears in these cultural texts as a figure of contradiction, teetering between perfection and ludicrousness. He is acknowledged as the patron of indigenous arts and crafts, a ruler in whose reign these knowledges and innovations achieved unparalleled excellence. Simultaneously he is held responsible for causing the defeat of the Muslim dynastic nawabs of Awadh in his hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. Thus the Manichean perception of Wajid in the popular imagination contains elements of the colonialist as well as nationalist critique.

The insistence with which the Wajid figure reappears in the margins of mainstream cultural production suggests that in the popular imaginary he is more than, other than, the colonialist/nationalist formulations about him. In popular memory Wajid Ali Shah is a figure in excess. This excess is a consequence of Wajid’s status as an artist himself and the local legends in circulation concerning his artistic accomplishments, a fact that is completely glossed over by colonialist as well as nationalist accounts. It is when his artistic accomplishments are foregrounded that the ambivalent figure of Wajid exceeds the boundaries of ridiculousness as well as villainy. He becomes a tragic figure in whom postcolonial cultural producers recognize themselves with sneaking sympathy and identification. Thus Wajid, the figure of fun and calumny, becomes the artistic ancestor of cultural producers and artists.
When Ray was researching and writing his script for *The Chess Players* based on Premchand’s short story, he created the character of Wajid. The Wajid he constructed did not exist in Premchand’s story, there is only a passing reference to the King. Nor is Ray’s Wajid a faithful reconstruction of history. Historical documents about Wajid at best repeat the colonialist nationalist judgment about him. Ray’s Wajid is his own creation. The film *Shatranj ke Khilari* (1977) has been received and interpreted as a film about Wajid Ali Shah, but at the same time it has been condemned for its portrayal of the last Nawab of Awadh. The historian Rajbans Khanna’s is a typical reaction, although he perhaps expressed it more strongly than most. He writes:

The film shows Ray’s unfortunate failure to understand either the atmosphere of the period dealt with or the character of the pivotal figure in the tragic drama that unfolded in 1856 – the character of Wajid Ali.

Khanna indicts Ray for his “British-inspired view” of Wajid as an “effete and effeminate” character, a characterization that is marked by what he considers to be Ray’s lack of courage “to restore this much-maligned character to authenticity.” Fourteen years later in 1992 (after Ray’s death in the same year), Amaresh Misra writes that *Shatranj ke Khilari* lacks focus because it is inscribed by Ray’s “humanist predilection” which led him to search for “redeeming” features in Wajid and also by his “desire to comment on a larger political historical event.” Another Indian film critic Khalid Mohamed caricatured Wajid’s fourteen-minute speech scene “we watch him belt out singsong soliloquies.” Indian film distributors refused to screen the film, calling it a film made for foreigners while most film critics abroad considered *Shatranj ke Khilari* to be “not one of Ray’s best films.”

The debate about the historical accuracy of Ray’s representation of Wajid is mired in the colonialist nationalist binaries of cowardly versus manly. It ignores Ray’s intellectual, artistic, and critical investment in the figure of Wajid and his substantive thesis about Wajid. I intervene in this debate by suggesting that Ray’s Wajid continues to invoke such powerful reactions from postcolonial commentators and critics because in Ray’s portrait of Wajid we come face to face with our own subject position as postcolonial subjects. Specifically I attempt to delineate the viewing process by which the gendered Westernized educated and alienated postcolonial subject is produced. I diagram this process as a triangulation between the historical-fictional figure of Wajid, Ray’s Wajid, and Ray