

Dynamics of “Reel Life” and “Real Life” in Tharoor’s Show Business

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Normally people think that Hollywood is the most flourishing film industry but they miss the point that the world's biggest film industry is not located in the USA but in Mumbai. It is Mumbai where 'hundreds of gaudy, fantastical, escapist, preposterous, action-musical-romance-epics are churned out to entertain the subcontinent's movie-obsessed masses' (William Boyd, 1992:1). In fact, Mumbai is usually synonymous with Bollywood. It is a film land and so it is purely a show business. Bollywood is also called a Tinsel-town where there is always a big gap between appearance and reality and where people live a life of show and therefore show business flourishes in a big way. In this world, the relationship is at times based on falsehood and selfish interest, not on commitment and loyalty towards each other. So, everything is make-believe.

In fact, mostly this cinema (show business) does not end with entertainment only. This stretches itself to educate, enlighten and at times also to create an impetus for a social change. Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business*, likewise, brings to the fore the 'reel life' as well as the 'real life' of an actor and tries to convince us that at times these two lives complement each other but at other times they appear diametrically opposed to each other. This paper is an attempt to evaluate how successfully Tharoor has brought the fusion of these two different lives in his novel. Besides, it also tries to assess how wonderfully actors live these two lives simultaneously. In addition, the paper also aims to discover if this novel has been able to expose us with the social, political and cultural realities of contemporary India.

At this point, it is desirable to note some of the observations about Tharoor's novel *Show Business* made by critics and reviewers. *The Seattle Times* considers it 'hugely entertaining and a 'delightful portrait of India's popular silver screen' where Shashi Tharoor 'educates us while wielding a needle-sharp satirical rapier.' Prita Maitra discovers a witty connection between the world of filmmaking and of politics, so adds that 'success in either involves the finding of effective ways of duping the masses.' *Earth Times* finds the novel 'capturing the corrupt milieu of contemporary India and ... satirizing it mercilessly.' Besides, it also sees the novel portraying 'the social, political and cultural realities of India [with] insight.' Saros Cowasjee in *Toronto Star* views it as a 'withering satire on Bombay's film industry ... raised to a new and more universal pitch by showing what is common between films and politics.' Like The *Earth Times*, *India West* discovers 'deeper meanings, about India's social and political reality' in this novel. For T. N. Dhar, *Show Business* is an extension of Tharoor's personality:

Shashi Tharoor's involvement with the political culture of our country filters into his novel. For its title is a metaphor for both cinema and politics... The novel abounds with short and pithy remarks about Indian institutions... Tharoor has a sense of humour and writes with verve and enthusiasm.

Melissa Pierson also finds the novel great in many ways:

Tharoor allows the complexity of India's social fabric – economic realities, the political exigencies of an enormous entrenched system built equally of corruption and necessity - to arrange itself around [his protagonist] ... As in the larger-than-life movie it both lampoons and celebrates, pain and pleasure mix until the final fade.

Taking a note of all these viewpoints, we can easily infer that this novel attempts to capture not only the reel life but also the real life of contemporary Indian society. Geeta M. Patil (2007:105) also expresses her fascination for Tharoor's presentation of kaleidoscopic view of Indian life –‘in its poverty, its backwardness, its diversity, cultural specificity of each state ... and a multilingual babel of languages and tongues.’ *Show Business*, according to *Earth Times*, truly captures the corrupt milieu of contemporary India and satirizes it mercilessly.

The story of *Show Business* charts the career of socially well placed and a very famous theatre actor, Ashok Banjara who had Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter as role models. He goes in for big bucks and great fame in Hindi Cinema. To his surprise he succeeds in the film world and his second film ‘Godambo’ projects him as a matinee idol almost overnight. Thereafter there is no looking back for him. He marries his co-star, becomes a father of three children, earns a huge amount of wealth and beds anyone who takes a fancy for him. The effortless rising graph of Ashok’s fame gets eclipsed when he is persuaded to quit the film and join politics just to fit into his father’s shoes.

He (Ashok) has been portrayed both fiercely and lovingly. William Boyd (1992:2) finds a chronology of the rise, fall, and rise again of Ashok Banjara in a way that replicates the crazy razzle-dazzle of the Hindi film world and this makes Tharoor comment on the unimaginable parallels between India’s unique film culture and the swarming, baffling and beguiling variety of aspects of India –the vivacity of corruption, the serenity and chaos, the sophistication and naive self-delusion. While reading the book, it becomes obvious to the readers that Ashok Banjara shares many of the characteristics of India’s biggest film star Amitabh Bachchan. According to Jehangir (2001:2), ‘The novel is ... a satirical look at the Indian film industry and also a look at India through the lens of a movie star.’

Indians have cinema under their skin. So, Indian film stars enjoy enormous popularity and celebrity. This celebrity status grants them, at times, political power and mileage too. Salman Rushdie, in his famous book *Midnight’s Children*, traces the origin of the vast popularity of films and remarks:

... in Indian film, miracles take place right before us ... where scenarios eschew logic. (p. 148)

Jennifer Takhar (2002) perceives that *Show Business* ‘shamelessly lampoons the Indian film business and its superficiality.’ She goes on to say that in this novel:

Nothing is as it appears, something that movie megastar Ashok Banjara finds out when he undresses the legendary actress Abha Patel, famously known for her beauty and the abundance of her bosom. Ashok remains stupefied when his eyes lay impaled on the actress' full frontal nudity.

Further, Tharoor believes that viewers, 'dream with their eyes open' (p. 20). Fantasy is a part of everyday life in India. Dom Moraes (1972:143) supports this philosophy in his famous book, *East West*:

The bulk of the people are deeply influenced by the films they have (seen) ... they believe in these dreams more uncritically than any other audience in the world. To forget the squalid reality of his own life, a poor man will visit the cinema everyday.

Films represent the prime vehicle for the transmission of ideas. They have always reflected the diversity of pluralist society and their pleasures and pains. Besides, they are being used to foster communal harmony and a feeling of tolerance and brotherhood among different communities in India:

1970 mega hit "Amar Akbar Anthony", for instance, was an action adventure film about three brothers separated in infancy who are brought up by different families – one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. As a result, one is a smuggler, one a street fighter. How they discover each other and turn on the villains is why the audience flocked to the films ... : but in the process they also received the clear message that Christians, Hindus and Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavor for justice. (Tharoor, *The Hindu*: 2 Sept 2001)

So this brings one idea to the forefront that the popular entertainment can maintain communal harmony to a great extent.

A show business is based on T. S. Eliot's observation that human beings cannot bear much reality. Indians are no exception to this universal fact. They run away from reality and find solace and happiness in films, which transport them to a different world of make-believe. Besides, the vast crowd of humanity runs to the films to embrace the 'reel life' rather than 'real life.' Raj Kapoor became famous in the film world as he was a champion of selling dreams. He knew that most of the people were interested in seeing the reality of life. At times, he sold these dreams wrapped with religion and sensuality.

In fact, Mumbai film industry is the microcosm of India and keeps on churning out hundreds of films every year. The popular cinema is the new home of the non-rational. It is, according to Patil (2007: 108), 'a collective fantasy, a group dream, a bridge between desire and reality, a vehicle of hope healer of trauma, cleanser of the soul.' Like religion, cinema is also used as opium for the masses. Their senses are made inactive and dull, so they are made to believe whatever goes on the screen. Ramanan (1997:118) very cleverly tries to highlight the glamour of tinsel town portrayed in *Show Business*:

The celluloid city (Mumbai) is famous for what is called Bollywood. Cinema is a big business and this tinsel town is famous for its big spending, its

creation of huge illusions, its escapist entertainment and its yellow journalism, scandals and hypocrisy. Tharoor chooses to satirize this world.

Indian films mirror the social, political and cultural realities of common Indians. So it is not surprising that Shashi Tharoor lampoons the Indian film industry for its artificiality, superficiality and occasional hypocrisy and uses the conventional framework of a rich boy meeting a poor girl or vice versa or love at first sight. However, in Bollywood, this love at first sight is looked at with disapproval and hatred. It invites lots of fighting sequences but finally, everything ends on a happy note.

Tharoor's *Show Business* is not devoid of affair. Mehnaz Elahi happens to be Ashok's heroine in several films. She is cast opposite him mostly at his own request. Later, we come to know that they were in love with each other and on some occasion, they decide to get married in some temple in spite of the fact that Mehnaz is a Muslim woman. However, Mehnaz is never given the status of a lawfully wedded wife, as this would affect Ashok's reputation as a public figure especially his image of a politician. Mehnaz Elahi herself makes confession of some of the facts unknown to the whole world when she is grilled by the media. She becomes more confessional when she starts self-introspection and finds herself cheated in the relationship as Ashok values his social prestige and his self-esteem more than her feelings for him. Besides, Mehnaz finds him devoid of any feeling of love for her except some initial melodramas, which she found so real that she agreed to marry him:

That's all I wanted, Ashokji, to matter to you. ... That's all I ever asked of you. Not just being away at me when you need me and pretend in public I don't exist ... Remember, that first time, when I was practically melting in your arms, and I said, as a feeble last attempt at resistance, 'But you're a married man?' And you said, 'A married man is still a man.' That was all I needed, that line, in that voice of yours... (p. 186)

Ashok's heroine, Abha, initiates Ashok into the realities of Hindi cinema and the lobbying for getting roles in Hindi films. Abha plays the role of Ashok's mother in *Judai*, which is based on the old theme of the separation of two brothers. Ashok plays a double role – one as an inspector, the other as a slum dweller. Mehnaz Elahi falls in love with Inspector Ashok. After a great disturbance, finally reconciliation is reached in the family. Such a script runs parallel to Ashok's real life.

It is strange, isn't it, how so many of the events of your life seemed to parallel your films, and vice versa. Life imitating art ... The most astonishing thing was your doing that film in which you played a pair of twin brothers, precisely when Maya was delivering your own triplets! ... And it was at that time, you took up with that Mehnaz Elahi of yours. She was in that film, cast opposite you ... How could you do that, Ashok? When your wife was undergoing a difficult pregnancy and bringing your heirs into the world? Shame on you. Yes, Ashok: shame on you. (p. 122)

As a policeman, Ashok Banjara does not hesitate to take the law into his hand and become dictatorial. His brutality and ruthlessness are never shown genetic. They are the results of deprivation of love and care given to a normal child or social injustice or both. Usually, he tries to be good:

...today we have with us a man who has sampled Kama, accumulated *artha* and seeks to fulfill *dharma* of service to the people. (p. 216)

In fact, a person is not good or bad on his own. He is a product of society. So his goodness or badness depends on the social forces and social values prevalent at a certain point of time. Ashok's character runs parallel to Amitabh Bachchan's to some extent. Like Bachchan, Ashok gets married to Maya, his co-star. This co-star has already worked in three movies. Nonetheless, just after her marriage to Ashok, she decides to quit the film world on Ashok's advice. In this way, the film industry loses a very talented star:

What you did was a crime, Ashok Banjara. You deprived India of the most cherished celluloid daughter; you deprived the Hindi film industry of its finest actress... (p. 64)

It is highly unprofessional to quit her profession at the height of her career but this is a truth for Bollywood. In the Mumbai film world, there are two standards of life – one standard for male artists and the other for the female artists. Male artists can take all sorts of liberty including the liberty of continuing in that world even in the old age but female artists become old and invalid for this world as soon as they start ageing or they get married. Tharoor is also aware of the plight of women in the Indian film industry. These heroines constantly face the plight of being replaced by the younger ones. The case of Asha can be taken as a point of study. After achieving the peak of her career, she starts to play the role of a mother to survive in the industry.

The theme of exposure in Indian cinema has also been taken very seriously by Tharoor. In the garb of exposure, Patil (2007:115) thinks the novelist has used irony and satire. First, there is a conflict between the aesthetics of the film and the people's demand or expectation of the film. Most of the time, producers submit to people's demand ignoring the aesthetic value of the film. In addition, at times, the censor board has some unrealistic expectations of the film. For instance, even if the film requires a bar scene, the members of the board would not tolerate the hero drinking publicly and creating problems because of over-drinking. Then there is the conflict arising out of generation gap. Every generation has its own yardstick of dos and don'ts or values and ethics. As films are the mirrors of a fast changing society, so many persons become critical of these films if they do not conform to the values and ethics of their generations.

In addition, films, unlike life, provide retake of some scenes as these scenes decide the fate of the film. These scenes are made extra-sensual to suit the taste of the majority of cine-goers. To explain, in *Show Business*, Mehnaz Elahi, a sex symbol, acts opposite Ashok and gets a really sensual treatment:

The rain falls, my enthusiasm rises, her blouse falls and rises and we sing-dance to the throbbing climax. (p135)

Tharoor also highlights the scandalous relationship in Bollywood. This is the world where an actor is privileged to develop his/her relation with many at the same time, though, these relations are very transitory. Naturally, faces of lovers and beloveds also keep on changing. Even Ashok has been accused of such relationships for different types of selfish gains:

You treat most women alike. Where they're sleeping with you, co-starring with you, merely writing gossip columns about you ... The casual observer would find it difficult to tell just from your conduct which woman is actually your lover and which is the bitchy columnist you are trying desperately to avoid without showing it. (p. 19)

Mehnaz, a magnificently charming woman, falls in love with Ashok. However, Ashok is not serious about this relationship. He is only interested in using this relation for temporary pleasure and gain. Maya, his wife, is not ready to allow him to drift aimlessly. Pranay also talks about his (Ashok's) relation with Mehnaz and implores Maya to break her relation with her husband, as he has not maintained the sanctity of marriage:

'But Maya, stop thinking only of your duty to him! What about your duty to yourself?'

'My duty to my husband is to myself,' Maya says slowly, 'When I married Ashok I gave my heart to him, and my life. I cannot love anyone else ever again.'

'...Don't waste your life like this, Maya,' Pranay adds.

'My life is committed,' Maya says nobly. There is no waste in fulfilling my *dharma* as a wife. But I do not intend to sit idly and let my husband drift away from me. I must have done something wrong. I shall undo it now, and win my husband back.' (p. 179)

Ashok's entry to politics appears to be sudden but it is somewhat a very calculated move. It was the desire of his father to join politics to gain power and glory. Ashok's shift to politics is not a new phenomenon. Even earlier personalities like N. T. Rama Rao, M. G. Ramchandran, Vaijayntimala, Sunil Dutt, Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Shatrughan Sinha, Vinod Khanna, Hema Malini etc. turned to politics and many of them earned several laurels as politicians and statesmen. The same happens with Ashok also. He emerges as people's messiah in a very short time. But political career, like film career, is normally unpredictable. Besides, as a politician also one has to wear several masks depending upon the situation. Further, when a leader gets unmasked before the public and then his career as a politician comes to an end. Ashok cannot maintain a balance between his film career and political career. Politics

does not leave him happy and contended. Further, his film *Mechanic*, which is based on various humanitarian appeals, turns flop on the box office making him somewhat broke and frustrated. Somehow, he manages his victory in an election. However, party bosses use him to collect and then deposit money in the Swiss-bank account. Thus, he is exposed in helping others in amassing funds and depositing in foreign banks. This leads to his resignation. Perhaps Tharoor tries to remind the audience of the Bofors case and connected financial irregularities when a big film actor gets involved.

After his political debacle, no producer wants to help him and he is compelled to come back, join again the film world at a lower ladder and starts accepting films of a lower budget. To elaborate, he begins with the mythological film, *Kalki* playing the role of Lord Vishnu. In the course of acting, his flaming sword hurts his horse and catches some dresses and then the entire film set is on a great fire with dozens of deaths. This incident is reminiscent of the shooting of *Coolie* when Amitabh got seriously hurt and he remained hanging between life and death. Then the whole country wished and prayed for his speedy recovery. Similarly, Ashok also suffers severely and lies in hospital for a long period before his recovery.

We share our view with Talvekar (2006) who asserts that several events of Ashok's life runs parallel to Amitabh Bachchan. For example, both of them pass through three phases of life-rise, fall and rise again. Like Ashok, Amitabh too belongs to a family which has a great association with political personalities. Haribansh Rai Bachhan, Amitabh's father, was closely associated with Nehru family. Besides, like Ashok's wife, Amitabh's wife, Jaya Bachchan, too sacrificed her acting career for the sake of her family's progress and development. She started acting again after her children had settled in life. Further, Amitabh too gets injured while acting. Both of them unexpectedly survive the injury. The Big Bachchan emerged on the screen as an angry young man and a messiah of the downtrodden. Arguably, he influenced every section of the film lovers and also heroes who began to imitate him in different ways. So, there is a clear echo of real life in Ashok Banjara's life.

Ashok's personality can be understood better if he is judged on two planes- 'reel' plane and 'real' plane. As he lives life on two planes, he is constantly suffering the conflicts of living two different personalities. On the screen, he projects himself larger than life. However, in the real life, he has to confront the ground reality so different from the reel life. He himself admits:

I feel reality leaving me. I feel it all flow out from me through the deep ravine of my mind, the reality I have known and held, dissolving in the flames that envelop my being.

...You are not real. None of you is real. This is not real, only the pain is real. And me, I am not real either, and I will never be real again. (p. 306)

Ashok has been treated lovingly and affectionately in the novel. He is quite prepared to work with his wife and mistress (again parallel to the great Hindi Movie *Silsila* where Amitabh is trying to do justice to both his wife, Jaya

Bhaduri, and his said mistress Rekha). His relation with the film columnist is also quite warm and mostly supportive of his work. This columnist helps to make him larger than life and grants him the status of a big celebrity.

Tharoor has his personal comments to make on the yellow journalism where stars are always under a camera and therefore, they are always a part of gossip columns. This does not allow them to live their private lives. Therefore, this creates several problems for them in their families as well as private lives. Another dimension of this journalism is that stars themselves, too, want to remain the topics of discussion to remain alive in the public's consciousness. Therefore, they also invite media hype. Thus, the relationship between the media and stars is quite a confused one. On the one hand, they hate media as it robs them of their privacy. However, they also require being in focus so that they should always remain a part of people's memory. *Showbiz* is the creation of Ashok Banjara, but later we realize that Ashok himself is the creation of *Showbiz* as the magazine can make or mar him. *Showbiz* makes him the undefeatable hero who is always ready to fight injustice and excesses and who is bold enough to stand and face challenges as a brave man. However, in real life the same man weeps, cries, and moans on occasions like any other common person.

This novel, like *The Great Indian Novel*, ends with Dharma. All is said and done, according to Dharma, which saves humanity. The novelist (Tharoor) echoes, Guruji's voice:

.. 'from dharma comes success, from dharma comes happiness, everything emerges from dharma, dharma is the essence of the world.' (p.300)

...Dharma is what life is all about, the upholding of natural order. (p. 300)

To conclude, Shashi Tharoor has tried cinema as a new metaphor to explore different aspects of the Indian condition. We find Patil (2007:1222) correct in her considering 'films to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of the fictional experience to the majority of Indians.' Tharoor illustrates the film culture in India against the background of contemporary myths. He selects the Mumbai film world only to present a satirical story of hits and misses in the world of films and politics. In fact, he invents a fictional world to transmit his ideas of deeper concern. Arguably, we can safely infer that Tharoor's *Show Business* not only entertains but also enlightens us about some dark realities of contemporary India: it not only transports us to a magical world of sensual pleasure but also highlights some of the social, cultural and political realities of India. In addition, it reflects the diversity of pluralist society as well as the pleasures, pains, procrastinations and predicaments of the majority of Indian people.

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