

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

REALITY VERSUS ILLUSION: BEHIND THE TINSEL WORLD OF  
SHASHI THAROOR'S *SHOW BUSINESS*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* is a delightful portrait of India's movie industry, pervasively capturing and mercilessly satirizing the corrupt milieu of contemporary India. The real and the reel running parallel at times and not so parallel at other times is an important technique of the novel. The difference between illusion and reality, between films and life, is carefully built up on one hand, and is systematically demolished on the other.

**Keywords:** reality, illusion, film industry

Shri Shashi Tharoor is recognized as a well-known Indian English writer, scholar and international civil servant. He is also a columnist, journalist, human-rights advocate, humanitarian and advisor of fellow of various institutions, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Aspen Institute, and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.

Shashi Tharoor published his second piece of fiction *Show Business* in 1991. The novel is a delightful portrait of India's movie industry, pervasively capturing and mercilessly satirizing the corrupt milieu of contemporary India. However, the author's extended use of satire in the story has rendered it as a funny, clever and a pointed manifestation of India's glamorous and political realities.

*Show Business* charts out the career of a socially well placed, theatre actor, Ashok Banjara. Almost an instant success in the film industry with the second movie *Godambo*, Ashok is elevated to the stature of a dashing matinee idol virtually overnight. He moves undeterred from one success to another. With every change in a working shift, Ashok finds himself in a different studio, on a different set, and in a different story. He refrains from immersing himself in the story line, blissfully confident that the formulaic scripts will take care of themselves and his name will take care of the film's success,

'Gimme dates!' scream the producers, sounding like socially – starved American teenagers, 'Gimme dates!' So my secretary, the efficient Subramanyam, gives them dates, and sometimes they're the same dates for three different producers. Which means I shuttle back and forth, leaving one shift early and arriving at the next one late, sometimes decamping after one shot and promising to be back for the next, not always keeping the promises. What the hell, the films seems to get make anyway, and as long as they have my name on them they don't do too badly at the box-office. (SB 75)

Ashok marries Maya, his co-star and an excellent actress, and fathers a set of triplets. His professional career includes fifty conventional movies replete with the mundane, meaningless and hollow messages

decorated by shallow verse. Apparently, with his growing success Ashok acquires a lot of illegal wealth, which he salts away in a Swiss bank account. Ashok gradually distances himself from his family and his morals during his journey to success and fame, satisfying his lust for money and beautiful company.

Ashok continues to notch success after success. At the height of his superstardom, he is convinced to join politics. He enters the electoral fray from the seat which his father, a Minister of State for Textiles has been persuaded to give up and for which his younger brother had been preparing all his life.

Ashok wins the seat easily but soon realizes that success in Bollywood, or for that matter winning an electoral seat, doesn't translate into a similar success in politics. As an MP, Ashok attends endless diplomatic receptions, dinners, weddings and "spiritless lunches of spiritual books... teetotal cocktails hosted by alcoholic party-men... to a new government contact (SB 264). To attend the Parliament and all the functions, Ashok lives in Delhi while his family lives in Bombay. The satire mounts as this separation is considered as a sacrifice for a national cause.

Yet Ashok Banjara expects to be the unchallenged hero in a political scene also. But to his dismay he finds that the party has relegated him to the back benches in the parliament where he languishes. Thus given to his real life wishes mirrored in reel life, he makes a film, *Mechanic*, in which he stars off as a mechanic who can fix anything and ends up as a political leader who sets out to fix the political system and along with the people march on to a new dawn. Shashi Tharoor reduces Indian democracy to a state of mockery. But this film turns out to be Ashok's first flop.

After sometime, Ashok is suckered by the wily politicians in his party to divert unaccounted party funds for the sake of convenience into his personal Swiss bank account. But soon, Ashok Banjara, premier Hindi film hero, is rapidly reduced to unproved villain. However, it is the defense that the party springs up for him that proves to be the proverbial final straw. An anonymous government source informs the press that Ashok Banjara was brought into politics to win a seat, not to run affairs of government. Another Government source highlights the fact that Ashok was a back bencher and therefore

Obviously, a politician of no consequence who couldn't possibly have any connection to a major national transaction... 'Ashok Banjara was brought into politics to win a seat, not to run the affairs of government' ...reiteration of his absolute irrelevance. (SB 275)

Ashok is unable to stomach this exoneration and he quits.

Ashok Banjara's sojourn in politics not only destroys what his father and brother worked hard over many years to build up, it also alienates him from his father totally and ensures that no Banjara would ever have a career in politics again. The father is disheartened that his younger son should be overlooked by the party. Ironically, the party ignores a sincere political worker for a popular film star. Ashwin, his younger brother, and the earliest designated political heir sums the fallout very succinctly,

All gone. And you don't even know why... it was just another part in a story you thought you didn't need to understand. But on this shift Ashokbhai, somebody gave you the wrong lines. (SB 249)

The worse is yet to come for Ashok Banjara. With the freezing of his Swiss account, he finds himself faced with the prospect of having to revitalize his film career. But somewhere along the unraveling of his political career, Ashok Banjara no longer remains the hero for his audience. His political shenanigans have ripped apart his screen person of a general all-purpose do-gooder who takes on the establishment of behalf of the helpless. People now view him as a part of all that he fought against in his celluloid avatar. Moreover, the effects of the film *Mechanic* still lingers and the producers loathe signing him. Ashok, once the undisputed Badshah of Bollywood, discovers that now producers make him wait for hours for meetings that are never held and that now he cannot get a role.

A desperate Ashok Banjara finally is convinced by a friend to star in a mythological film that he hates. It is about Kalki, who towards the end of Kaliyug comes to destroy all the evil on this earth. Ashok, of course, plays Kalki and it is during the shooting of one of the scenes of this film that he meets with an accident. The entire set burns down and many people including the producer die. Ashok is badly injured and is in a coma.

The novel thus comes a full-circle and moves from the various flashbacks to the present where the comatose Ashok finds his life and career flashing in front of his eyes. The irony of the situation cannot be

missed. Kalki is supposed to destroy all the evil on the earth and it is while playing Kalki that Ashok meets an accident that might potentially destroy him and his way of life. Also, *Kalki*, the film, was supposed to establish Ashok solidly once again with his audience. His accident on the sets of *Kalki* has everyone in the nation praying for his recovery and thousands gather outside the hospital in an unceasing vigil. The distinction between films and life is distinctly shown in *Show Business*.

However, there is another assertion, contrary to the above, running throughout the novel. To most people, there is hardly any difference between an actor and the part he plays. Ashok is Ashok irrespective of the roles he plays, whether in life or in films. Similarly, all the major characters are described in the movies under their real names. The Guru says that

...there is no duality between the actor and the heroes he portrays. He is all of them, and all of them are manifestations of the Essential Hero. Therein lays the subconscious appeal of the Hindi film to the Indian imagination, and the appeal, along with it, of the Hindi film hero. (SB 213)

Though the speech is farcical, the point is relevant.

Thus the real and the reel running parallel at times and not so parallel at other times is an important technique of the novel. The difference between illusion and reality, between films and life, is carefully built up on one hand, and is systematically demolished on the other.

The ending of the novel is an interesting instance where the thread of reality is shown as inextricably intertwined with the cinematic illusion. Ashok is dying, he feels reality leaving him, the people surrounding him cease to be real and are out of focus,

And me, I am not real either only the pain is real... the pain is gone now, in its place there is the limpid clarity of darkness and glowing and shadow and fire, always the fire, the final fire that will shoot me to the sky. (SB 306)

But the narrative does not stop here. It cannot, because it is uncinematic for the hero to die at the hands of the villain; there must be justice and retribution. To quote the last paragraph:

But not yet, someone will find out how to stop the pain, someone will find out who did it, someone will arrest the villain for the crime, someone will find the lyrics to the theme song, someone will gather the crowds for a joyous celebration, and then, only then, will it be, only then can it be, the end. (SB 307)

Ashok Banjara cannot accept his end; this sort of ending happens only in life, and he is waiting for the cinematic turn that events must take in order to make it a 'proper' ending. For the novelist, it is a refusal to give a conventional ending to the story with the death of Ashok. On the level of reality, Ashok dies; but the reality must ever be complemented by illusions. Improbable as these things are, it is equal to saying that the story never ends. The 'end' perhaps means, not just the end, but completing, and then completeness depends on the fusion of both reality and illusion.

Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* reveals the realistic pictures of hypocrisy, degenerated values, double standards of the filmi people and how they are successful in hiding their real personalities with money and power. These novels revolving around the Bombay cinema mirror the shattering human values of the society that is too preoccupied with glitter to be real. Woven into the texture of these novels the themes of overpowering materialism, lack of human concern and the resulting inner-conflict and the lack of identity and lack of human dignity.

The factors that drive the filmi people over the edge – loneliness, insecurity, the pressure of the job, denial of economic freedom and privacy, betrayal, avarice of kith and kin, and false values – are exposed through the plight of the central character of *Show Business*.

The film world is an isolated and unreal world as it is understood from Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business*. It is built on illusions and technicolored films. The people inside this industry hardly know a single person outside the film industry. They do not have the time to get to know the real world – whatever and wherever that is. This industry is a ruthless place. It is a bit like a jungle and the law that applied here is the survival of the fittest.

The novel is a timely recounting of the story of many a young man or woman who has bestrode the cinema screen and reflect the dream of millions of audience. Those who are behind the silver screen seem to tell that they can make the audience see their dreams come alive while they are awake. The audience can take the fate of heroes on screen, to be their fate and at last, both feel triumphant. Cinemas have given chances to each Indian, to associate himself closely with the hero on the screen and live in his mind the sheer joy of the unattainable girl and the final glorious victory. Thus, the films fail to project the real India or its real issues. This art media fails to stir and inflame the minds of the people to challenge a corrupt system. The films project a make-believe India that has never existed and can never exist.

Thus the illusion, created by the film and sustained by people's 'ignorance' and 'willing suspension of disbelief', finds its way into their hearts and becomes a dominant influence whereby the distinction between reality and illusion becomes rather tenuous. It is in this borderland that Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* acquires its power as works of art.

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