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## ***Show Business* by Shashi Tharoor: A Book Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The novel *Show Business* begins almost as a farce and ends in widescreen panoptic drama and acute personal pain. The perfect medium for such a sweep of the matter is film. For a story set in India, the perfect medium is, of course, Hindi film. In India, the film has a mystic power and its main characters are near-gods. Often religious in content, shown to multitudes, sometimes on huge outdoor screens that glow like apparitions over an enchanted crowd hunkered down in the street, Hindi films are the embodied dreams of millions of the poorest people on earth. Their stars are some of the richest, most known, and therefore most powerful, people in India. The film-making quarter of Bombay and its people makeup what is known as Bollywood, a community as vulgar in some ways as Hollywood itself, but still - just - publicly respectful of religious and sexual codes of good observance and behavior. The casting couch, big egos, glitz and various forms of exploitation are just as much a part of India's film industry as of Hollywood, to judge from this entertaining, occasionally uneven satirical novel. Bombay superstar Ashok Banjara, a government minister's son, is a personable, egotistical cad. He courts a co-star while his wife is pregnant with triplets, flaunts his affair across the nation and later runs for a seat in the Indian parliament long held by his disapproving father.

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Tharoor unreels a tale of multiple betrayals in the alternating voices of the main characters, intercutting extended movie scenes that, while not advancing the plot much, effectively contrast an inane celluloid fantasy land with a society burdened with economic disparities and caste conflicts. Although the parallels he draws between Bombay's tinsel town and Indian politics and religion are a bit strained, Tharoor has a flair for creating vivid characters, such as a cranky gossip columnist, an embittered friend betrayed by Ashok, and the hero, who meets a fiery fate. Hindi movies are the metaphor for all that ails the subcontinent in this satirical tale from Tharoor (*The Great Indian Novel*, 1991), all about life in India's Tinsel town-- "Bollywood," Bombay. Cutting and splicing monologues, lengthy synopses of movies, and excerpts from "Bollywood's" sharp-clawed Show-Biz columnist, the Cheetah, Tharoor relates the rise, fall, and apotheosis of handsome Ashok Banjara--eldest son of a prominent politician, a connection that helps him get his first role. Ashok's rise to mega-stardom in the Hindi movie industry--which churns out films with simplistic plots and plaintive theme songs to please the rural masses--is swift. The quintessential movie star, Ashok lives as if life were a movie starring him, along with a supporting cast of beautiful women and servile men. He marries a costar but cheats on her; becomes a Member of Parliament--just another starring role, he assumes--but is framed in a tax-evasion scheme and must resign; in disgrace, he accepts the lead in a low-budget movie, then in a terrible accident on the set is mortally injured. Apotheosis is assured as throngs of loyal fans keep vigil outside while he lies dying. As entertaining and diverting as this sashay through glitzy "Bollywood" is characters like Ashok's father and brother, and a fellow actor who always played the villain, offer more serious commentary. For them, the politicians and films are the same: "We are both involved in pretense, [and] politics is an end in itself, just like the Hindi film," the father says to his dying son. Corruption and illusion are rife; politicians behave like movie villains, and shallow movie stars are heroes of the people. Nothing is real. Tharoor is one of those rare writers who felicitously combines gentle satire with an urgent concern for society's ills. Another eloquent--and entertaining--commentary on contemporary India.

One of the primary sources of generating and telling "fiction" in India is by watching a movie. We are the largest producers of celluloid fiction in the world, churning out hundreds of fantastic and escapist films packed with protagonists (performing the most ludicrous actions, stunts, and songs with the straightest of faces) who are no less than superheroes. These garish and preposterous concoctions are lapped up by the masses and each year, of the dozen-odd hits in Bollywood, you can be fairly sure that at least half of them are rehashed formulaic films. What is it that makes these stories compelling to so many Indians? And what does that tell us about ourselves as individuals and as a society? In an interview with Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies, Shashi Tharoor admitted that his 1992 novel, *Show Business*, was born when as a writer seeking to understand "stories," he asked himself these questions about the world of cinema and India, "What do these stories tell to Indians? What do they tell about Indians? What can we know about the world from which these stories come? That is the world of the filmmakers and the actors who make these films. And in turn, what does this all reveal about India as a society today?" *Show Business* parodies and satirizes formulaic Bollywood cinema, using it as a metaphor in an attempt to answer these questions.

*Show Business* stars Ashok Banjara, a superstar in the Hindi filmworld who is content and confident enough to skim through every part that life has to offer without understanding what it was all about, supremely sure that the script will always make him the hero. When the curtains go up and the screen comes to life, Ashok Banjara lies suspended between life and death in the intensive care unit of a hospital, watching his entire life in Bollywood flashing in front of his eyes like a Technicolor film. It is within this "frame" of a flashback that Shashi Tharoor narrates Banjara's story through a procession of first-person narratives by Banjara himself, interspersed with tongue-in-cheek summaries of the superstar's movies that parallel events in his life and soliloquies by the co-stars in his films and his life — ranging from his discontented wife to his self-absorbed and vainglorious mistress, from a bitter co-star to a resentful younger brother. A young Ashok Banjara leaves the theater in Delhi and comes to Bombay in an attempt to earn big bucks and garner fame. After the moderate success of his first film *Musafir*, he achieves superstardom with his second film *Godambo*. *Godambo* establishes Banjara as an action star and makes the character of an angry young man one who fights for the poor and the helpless against the establishment, his very own. After *Godambo*, Ashok Banjara moves from success to success. He is as successful in real life as his reel life. He marries Maya, a talented but shy co-star, convinces her to stay away from films for the sake of family, fathers triplets, beds his heroine especially the delectable Mehnaz Elahi (who becomes his mistress), and whilst doing all this makes a number of trashy formulaic films all of which are hits and makes so much money that he has to worry how to hide it from the tax-collectors, finally salting away his unaccounted wealth in a Swiss bank account. Life for Ashok Banjara is like a film, each event and each character staying true to a script made for the superstar. It is in describing Ashok Banjara's success and in describing Bollywood's working that you see Tharoor's gift for satire. A time comes when Ashok is so successful that he producers sign him up for numerous films and he merrily works on three or more films at the same time. With every change in a working shift, Banjara finds himself in a different studio, on a different set, and indifferent stories. And he refrains from immersing himself in the storyline, blissfully confident that the formulaic scripts will take care of themselves and his name will take care of the film's success.

Impressively, like in Hindi films, the songs serve to further the novel's narrative and tell Banjara's story. While on one level, Tharoor parodies a formula rain song, he also uses it to show the throbbing passion between Banjara and his mistress, Mehnaz. Banjara continues to notch success after success. At the height of his superstardom, Banjara is convinced to join politics. He enters the electoral fray from the seat which his father (Minister of State for Textiles) has been "persuaded" to give up (and for which his younger brother had been preparing all his life). Banjara wins the seat easily but soon realizes that success in Bollywood (or for that matter winning an electoral seat) doesn't translate into similar success in politics. Expecting yet again to be the "unchallenged hero of every scene," he finds to his dismay that the party has relegated him to the backbenches in the parliament where he languishes "while cretinous netas in crumpled khadi, their eyes and waistlines bulging, hold forth inarticulately on the irrelevant." Real-life mirrors reel life. Banjara makes a film, *Mechanic*, in which he starts 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." This film turns out to be Banjara's first flop. After some time, he is suckered by the wily politicians in his party to divert unaccounted party funds for the sake of convenience into his Swiss bank account. But soon the "dung hits the punkah" and Ashok Banjara, a premier Hindi film hero, is rapidly reduced to unproved villainy. 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 highlights the fact that Banjara was a backbencher and therefore "obviously a politician of no consequence who couldn't possibly have any connection to a major national transaction." Banjara is unable to stomach this exoneration based on the "reiteration of his absolute irrelevance," and he quits. His sojourn in politics not only destroys what his father and brother worked hard over many years to build up, but it also alienates him from his father totally and ensures

that no Banjara would ever have a career in politics again. Ashwin, his younger brother, and the earlier designated political heir sum the fallout very succinctly, "All gone. And you don't even know why. . . It was just another part of a story you thought you didn't need to understand. But on this shift Ashokbhai, somebody gave you the wrong lines."

The worse is yet to come for Ashok Banjara. With the freezing of his Swiss account, Banjara finds himself faced with the prospect of having to revitalize his film career. But somewhere along with the unraveling of his political career, Ashok Banjara no longer remained the hero for his audience. His political shenanigans have ripped apart his screen persona of a general all-purpose do-gooder who takes on the establishment on 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 *Mechanic* still linger and producers are loathed to sign him. Banjara, 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 apart. A desperate Ashok Banjara finally is convinced by a friend to star in a kind of film that he hates a mythological. This one is about Kalki, who towards the end of Kaliyug comes to destroy all the evil on this earth. Banjara, of course, plays Kalki and it is during the shooting of one of the scenes of this film that he finds himself in an accident. The entire set burns down and many people including the producer die. Ashok is badly injured and 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. Readers will not miss the irony of the situation here. 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 Banjara solidly once again with his audience. His accident on the sets of Kalki has everyone in the nation praying for his recovery and thousands gathered outside the hospital in an unceasing vigil. Does Banjara survive this fatal accident? What about the other characters his "co-stars"? How does this script end for Banjara? Are there any final twists (there's one)? Show Business will give you the answers. The novel's subject-matter determines Tharoor's characterization. Ashok Banjara, the hero of so many films, and the protagonist who dominates this novel is by far the most "rounded" of all the characters. In films, he is, of course, the single-dimensional "general all-purpose good guy." In real life he is also a bit of a cardboard cut-out a shallow and unscrupulous rogue who seldom looks beyond himself and who is supremely sure that as in films, so in real life he is the chief character of any script while the others are supposed to fill in the gaps when the camera is not on him. Yet, despite his many failings, like the hero of a Hindi movie, he is never loathsome, and often people (and the readers) love him without really understanding why.

Maya, his wife, is largely the prototypic good wife of films who gives up a career for the sake of the family and who maintains her silence on her husband's antics so as not to impugn the family's honor. She is the kind of "beti" that screen in-laws fawn over. Mehnaz Elahi, the mistress, never moves beyond the role scripted for her. Throughout she remains confined within the role of "the other woman," who is thoroughly infatuated with the hero and who feels no need to legitimize the relationship with her man. Pranay is the archetype villain, a thorough baddie on the screen but one who in real life seems to have a heart of gold. Ashwin, Ashok's brother forever in his shadow and Kulbhushan is his righteous father who can never forgive him for joining the films and who loathes him once Ashok destroys his carefully built political legacy. And the book is populated with many who put in small "guest appearances." Show Business very postmodern in spirit. Parody and satire, in Show Business, enable Tharoor to cleverly reinvent Bollywood and narrate the history of a Bollywood superstar in a way that amuses but at the same time provokes serious thought about the industry and the stories told by the industry about itself and India. Show Business has numerous humorous bits, but the underlying satire and parody with which Tharoor undercuts every event and every character, never allows the reader to lose sight of the inherent seriousness of the issues and questions raised in the novel. Show Business is postmodern at another level as well. In India, there's a lot of hagiography about our public figures, especially our cricketers and the superstars of our films (Politicians have now lost out on this idolization, though we still do it with those who fought for our freedom). Satire and parody enable a writer to make the reader view this hagiography in a new light. Readers of this novel, even those who have a mere nodding acquaintance with the Hindi film industry, will immediately notice how Ashok Banjara's life in many ways parallels Amitabh Bachchan's (they even share the same initials). Readers with more knowledge of Bollywood would probably be able to draw one-to-one parallels between the films that Ashok Banjara acts into those Amitabh Bachchan acted in as an "angry young man." Yet the parody of the hagiography is so clever, that the story is familiar, and yet unfamiliar.

The greatest achievement of Shashi Tharoor in the novel though is not the characterization, nor the parody and the satire. It is the elaborate narrative structure of the novel. The novel in many ways mirrors the structure of a Hindi blockbuster. How many Hindi films have we seen that begin with the wailing of an Ambulance's siren as it rushes the critical hero to the hospital. And it is as the hero battles for his life on a hospital bed that the story gets told in a flashback. The narrative of Show Business similarly begins in medias res, "in the middle of things." From then on, Ashok Banjara's story is revealed in a series of first-person flashbacks by Banjara himself. However, the flashback

is not monolithic. Shashi Tharoor, in keeping with the postmodern spirit of the novel, punctuates the first-person narrative of Ashok Banjara with a polyphony of voices — monologues by the co-stars in his films and his life. This narrative structure is further interspersed with tongue-in-cheek summaries of the superstar's movies. Altogether, it is through these fragments of various stories and chronology that the narrative pieces together the story of Ashok Banjara. However, the multitudinous and fragmented narratives serve another important purpose. Each narrative, be it the monologue of a character or the satirical summary of a film, serve to highlight or comment not only upon some issue or the other that plagues Bollywood or our politics but also on those that affect the nation at large. The intricate and involved narrative structure of *Show Business* allows the framing of many small stories all of which contribute to the overall story of the novel but which at the same time, either through the griping of the characters that narrate them or through the parody of the film plots that they are trying to tell, also capture other more serious stories. At every point, the characters in the novel are involved in different stories that tell a larger story and in the telling also tell something about the story itself. The narrative of *Show Business* reflects its subject matter at another level too. The story is narrated in six "takes." Every "take" begins with a story from Ashok Banjara. The story is then continued through the summary of a film's plot and ends with the monologue of a co-star. As a film in India, "take 3" has an interval. The end of a film usually focuses only on the superstar. "Take 6" which brings the action back to the present only has Ashok as the narrator. The plurality of voices, the multi-layered intricate narrative structure and the gimmicky (but appropriate) use of cinematic takes to push the story forward again make *Show Business* a very postmodern work. *Show Business* is also often very "presentational." The heavy use of irony and the occasional self-conscious authorial comment (often made in such brackets) bring in elements of metafiction into the narrative. Readers at times, through the ironical comments, are made aware that they are reading a story. Notwithstanding its serious agenda, *Show Business* is a light and easy read. *Show Business*, I feel, is not as good as the two other fictional works by Shashi Tharoor: *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot*. But it suffers only slightly in comparison. First-time readers will find *Show Business* quite entertaining. A second reading, while it would still amuse, would also bring out the underlying serious concerns of the novel.

Shashi Tharoor has taken this small community of disproportionate influence as an epitome of the moral upheaval of modern India and the accommodation it has been making with the West. He can lay a vast burden of allegory upon Bollywood because its showiness is inexaggerable and its cinema fantastically elastic, being untrammelled by fact, logic or explanation. Hindi films offer spectacle, emotional catharsis and a moral. In the city streets of India, film stars made out of propped towers of the billboard are extravagantly painted by poster artists suspended in rope swings. They touch in here a suggestion of cleavage the height of a horse, there a nose-ring as wide as a man's arms. The stars are substantial, fat has been until recently an aspirational issue, and also insubstantial, the fantasies of millions made flesh. They are celebrities even in rural areas. Cinema consists mostly of light, a light so bright that eventually, it penetrates everywhere but the deepest shrines and most sequestered monasteries. Film stars are better known than politicians, more revered than holy men.

Shashi Tharoor's characters seem at first appropriately large-writ and crude. Ashok Banjara, the hero, is the son of a politician and also a would-be actor. The spectacularly bosomed Abha is a star on the verge of fading. Maya, the heroine, is a good girl. Pranay is the stubby-nailed villain; Mehnaz is a sultry temptress. Other characters arrive with the enjoyable suddenness of Hindu gods in stories. As the book progresses, often in the form of a screenplay, these characters are put through their paces in plots that seem preposterous but that reflects events taking place in what could be called real life. The effect is cumulatively funny and sad. Stock characters become known to us, developing attributes that at first were invisible, as Tharoor turns his creatures this way and that in the light of ever more complicated marital contortions. Ashok fails to seduce Abha, whose bosom was anyway a false promise. He becomes an actor, then a star; marriage to Maya follows, and dalliance with the ankle-braceleted Muslim beauty Mehnaz. His triplets by Maya are born. He undergoes a form of marriage with Mehnaz. Maya wishes to engineer her comeback to the screen and the downfall of Mehnaz. The story is told in a deadpan style combining Hindu myth, the comic book effect of Malory, the hyperbole of film, and a pastiche of film-magazine gossip talk from between the nymphomaniacal fangs of 'The Cheetah', an old wretch who writes a column of the highest camp and smut - such as may be found in Bollywood's actual movie mag, *Stardust*. Tharoor has a terrific ear for how much of talk is padding and repetition. His wit is peppery and alert. Just as one feels this might be enough, the story turns serious, touching, and at the same time plunges deeper into bad taste. As in India itself, nothing is unmixed but nothingness. This highly colored, entertaining, faintly monstrous book takes its risks with panache and triumphs spectacularly.

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