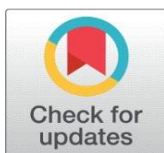
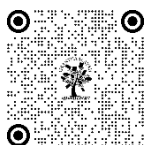


FAME, FICTION, AND FALLACY: UNMASKING THE DUALITIES OF INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE IN SHOW BUSINESS

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.3485](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.3485)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* (1992) is a sardonic investigation of the Indian film industry, offering a piercing analysis of celebrity culture, the commodification of art, and the indistinct boundaries between illusion and reality. It is through the rise and fall of its protagonist, Ashok Banjara, a Bollywood superstar turned politician that the novel delves into the moral compromises and ethical impasses inherent in the quest of fame and power. Tharoor employs a metafictional narrative style, combining the protagonist's introspective monologues with exaggerated film scripts that mirror the dramatic episodes of his life. These scripts not only parody Bollywood tropes but also emphasize the performative nature of identity in both cinema and real life. Combining humour, irony, and pathos, Tharoor's narrative serves as both an engaging story and a profound commentary on the intersections of culture, politics, and human ambition. The novel critiques the socio-political fabric of India, highlighting the pervasive influence of media and the public's complicity in perpetuating the cult of celebrity. *Show Business*, at its core, is a tale about the alluring and seductive stardom and the cost of living in a world where spectacle often trumps substance.

Keywords: Metafiction, Deconstruction, Willing Suspension of Disbelief, Celluloid Saga, Subversion, Multiculturalism, Postmodernism

1. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor's novel, *Show Business* is a panoramic vision of the celluloid life in the Bollywood film industry. The novel unconventionally is divided into 'takes' rather than chapters, The novel contains six takes and each take begins with the same subtitle 'Ashok' and the dialogue by Ashok, 'I can't believe I'm doing this'. Ashok Banjara, the protagonists of the novel is a product of the finest public school in independent India. He is also Secretary of the Shakespeare Society at St. Francis College and the son of the Minister of State for minor textiles, Mr Kulbushan Banjara. 'Lights! Camera! Action', are the three magic words that prompted Ashok to leave the world of amateur theatre and move on to the 'real' and 'artificial' world of celluloid as remarked by his friend Tool Dwivedi and Malini respectively. These words profoundly influence Ashok who wanted to turn a new page in his life.

2. REEL AND REAL: DECONSTRUCTING STARDOM

Ashok in his early life reveals the life of theatre artists in India. His brief stint as an amateur theatre actor is not economically beneficial and does not receive much recognition either. The theatre artist, however great exponent in acting he may be, falls behind the real recognition that he deserves. The theatre thespians work for paltry remuneration

which forces them to leave the stage early in their career. There are only a few, who stick onto the stage for a long period. Ashok is fortunate to get a big-screen appearance; however, numerous theatre thespians seldom get a chance to appear on the big screen. Their acting skills remain untapped, and the masses devoid of great performances. Ashok finds Hindi films real, real than anything else done in India. It is a profession and an industry. The manufacturers of mass escapism are producing films for entertainment which in turn provides numerous persons the means for livelihood. Films provide jobs directly and indirectly to many. They all work hard only to be satisfied with meagre remuneration and remain eluded from the most important factors glamour and fame. Bertolt Brecht comments:

For the actor, the stage is not merely a place of entertainment but a platform for change. Every gesture, every word, carries the weight of potential transformation. The actor must not only portray life but question it, using the theatre as a means to challenge injustice, provoke thought, and inspire action. This is the essence of the actor's responsibility: to awaken the audience to the reality of the world they inhabit. (81)

Ashok has a younger brother Ashwin, who is mesmerized at the colourful prospect of his brother. Ashok feels Ashwin as a surplus shadow and even fools around with his girlfriend. Even before entering the film industry, Ashok has the quality of becoming a hero. He has scant regards for his brother's girlfriend and doesn't find faults with his attitude. Ashwin oblivion of the fact is all- ready to worship a new Bollywood hero. Ashok with his cowboy character and conduct is perfectly fit to suit the Bollywood industry which thrives on masala matters. Bollywood is a suitable place for Ashok to lead an artificial and real life of a cowboy.

The conventional Indian film doesn't require the heroines to reveal much as like their counterparts in Hollywood. Indian screenplays do not require it, and if they do, Indian censors would not permit it. Films are representations of life itself. They give the audience the relief they need. It is not only entertainment but also realism which is presented on the big screen. The conventional norms of Indian censorship, however, do not provide enough freedom to present the bare facts of life as it is. India is proud of its largest industry that is textile industry.

Kulbushan Banjara, father of Ashok Banjara, in the novel is a Minister of State for minor textiles. It is ironical that while the son of the textile minister enjoys his wardrobe in life and films, his female counterparts don't have much opportunity for the same in life as well as in films. In Indian films nudity has remained a taboo, but not in a society where women on the street have less to wear. Ashok remarks, "Nudity is commonplace in our countryside of course, where many women cannot afford much to be, but it is banned on our screens; whereas fist cuffs and homicide, which are illegal, are energetically portrayed." (12) Ashok is always baffled as to how illegal scenes like homicides are vividly portrayed in films. Both nudity and homicide, certainly has undesired effects on people, however, in Indian cinema both negatives are perceived differently where one gets censored to be a taboo and the other shown gracefully terming realistic. Indian cinema with its double standard in portraying negatives is caught in a web of ironies and paradoxes, but it still remains an indispensable part of the Indian society.

Abha Patel, the co-star of Ashok Banjara in his first film is asserting her presence with an 'unprofessional' approach. During the shooting, annoyed by retakes she leaves the set much to the dismay of the director and hero. However, Ashok's conversation with him confirms that she is not disturbed by the actor's incompetence but by the impertinent behaviour of the director. She is anguished at the attitude of the whole Bollywood film industry that is trying to sideline her with supporting or parallel roles. As a veteran, she's not ready to accept defeat easily and is trying to keep and look young though with the help of artificial means. The make-up used by the actors and actresses suggests the artificiality of a world which is viewed by tens and thousands of people every day throughout the country. Lee Strasberg states:

The work of an actor is not merely to recite lines or perform actions. It is to dig into the deepest recesses of their own psyche, to connect authentically with the emotions of the character, and to communicate those emotions truthfully to the audience. This process is rigorous, often painful, and demands total vulnerability. Yet, it is also what makes acting such a profound art form-it is the actor's courage and commitment to truth that make theatre a mirror of life itself. (109)

In the second film of Ashok Banjara that is *Godambo*, the first fight scene on the plane reminds the readers of the scenes of 70s and 80s Bollywood Eastman colour feature films. The films of the then period highlighted the macho image of the actor. The angry young hero symbolically represents the male virility and it becomes a vital part of every script that transforms itself into the silver screen. The masculinity enables the hero to reach the pinnacle of success by thrashing the bad guys and simultaneously upholding the virtues of law. In *Godambo*, in a night club scene, Ashok donning as a CID Inspector in the film is seen in a tuxedo. As given in the novel:

He is in a tuxedo, complete with black bow- tie not the standard off-duty garb of your average police officer, but the cinema-loving villagers don't know that. (Nor for that matter will they ask what on earth an honest, middle-class cop is doing in a place like this. The Indian film industry is built on their ignorance and on their willing suspension of disbelief). (28)

It is a matter of fact that an average Indian police officer can't afford to visit such expensive places with such expensive clothes. However, the viewer deliberately immerses themselves in 'willing suspension of disbelief' to believe the make-belief scenes occurring before their eyes on the big silver screen. There is no place for logical or rational questioning of the recurring scenes which in real life is quite impossible to happen. The illusionary scenes created by the screenplays and the director never face the danger of being subjected to critical thinking. The exploitation and subjugation of junior artists in films is also a compelling moment of truth elucidated in the novel. The lead actors and the junior artists are the two faces of the same coin in which the former enjoys and entertains and the latter is pushed into the dark abyss of oblivion. Constantin Stanislavski comments:

The life of an actor is filled with perpetual self-improvement, self-observation, and self-discipline. Unlike other artists, the actor carries his instrument within himself—his voice, body, and emotions. He must master them all, not just for one performance, but for every single time he steps on stage. This requires not only talent but also a ceaseless effort to refine and perfect one's craft, even amidst the uncertainties of a life in the theatre. (45)

Ashok is a maverick constantly courting ladies of his choice. He uses his charm and personality to lure women. Ashok's unruly and unfaithful conduct forces his wife Maya takes solace in the arms of Pranay, her husband's arch villain in celluloid and life. Pranay gives a, what Ashok had failed to deliver. The 'Virgin Maya' as like 'Virgin Mary' gave Ashok, Aashish the son of Pranay. Thus, Pranay becomes the father of the son of Ashok Banjara. Ashok's disapproval of Maya's acting career was an illegitimate act to a promising actress, who in turn delivers him with an illegitimate son. The novel also focuses on wretched dualities of celluloid. In films Ashok is the angry young hero overpowering and annihilating the villains and evils. However, in real life he makes intimate personal relationships with real-life villain Nadeem, brother of Mehnaz Elahi, a Dubai-based businessman and smuggler who helps Ashok to stash away black money worth crores in Swiss bank. Later, it can be a divine intervention that Ashok loses his credibility and a Swiss account is frozen owing to allegations of black money that rocks the Central government and costs him his MP seat and constituency. Thus, he is unsure of himself and becomes modern-day 'Hamlet', confused and bewildered in everything he performs. The flaw of his failure is inherent in himself.

Maya is a promising actress who sacrificed her professional career for a happy married life with Ashok Banjara. She behaves like a 'dharmapatni'- a duty-bound and responsible wife and mother. Ashok always took advantage of her by exploiting her emotionally and always making her remember the family obligations and commitments. Maya needed Ashok's care and attention, the latter however, drifted away from her and lost himself in worldly pleasures. Maya finds herself imprisoned in the golden age of responsibilities. It is undoubtedly the indifference of Ashok that prompts Maya to take solace in the arms of the 'villain' Pranay. It is undoubtedly left to the readers to identify and comprehend the 'dharmapatni' in Maya. John Stuart Mill states:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and... it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (1)

Mehnaz Elahi belongs to an affluent Hyderabad Muslim Nawabi family. Her ambition to act in Bollywood films made her disowned by the conventional family. The convent educated Muslim girl from an orthodox background had visions of stardom, fame and glamour. As a model turned actress, she becomes a quintessential feature of Bollywood films. Her affair with Ashok Banjara gives her torment and trauma and above all her alienation reaches the zenith when Ashok enters politics and begin to avoid her owing to libelling gossips. The relationship becomes too sour so that it turns out to be a harbinger of the 'curse' that is going to befall upon Ashok's career and life.

Kulbushan Banjara, the father of Ashok wants him to become a politician or a classical sitarist or a test cricketer than a film hero, lost in a never- never land, which never shows the accurate perception of an India in which we live. Kulbushan compares and contrasts the real India and an India shown in Bollywood films. Kulbushan is of the opinion that the film world is like a swamp which engulfs the identity and the reality of life. The usual masala film always depicts zamindar as a wicked one who is only interested in doing evils. The falseness of the film gives false hope to the hapless

and the hopeless poor villages. It is a kind of make belief in which reality is never plausible. The evils shown in the films are so evident in life that ignoring or neglecting them will result in disaster and ultimate catastrophe. However, he confides that as a politician he also indulges in playing a role in a world of make-believe, a world in which he pretends that the ideas, principles and values that brought him to politics can still make a difference. He is also performing in an India that has never really existed and can never exist. As Neil Postman aptly comments:

Politics has become a branch of show business. It is no longer about debate and ideology but about creating images that entertain. The politician, much like the actor, must learn to appear authentic on camera, to craft a public persona that satisfies the audience's need for drama and spectacle, rather than truth or substance. (126)

Kulbushan states that his participation in the 'Quit- India' movement i.e., 'Nationalism', gave him a British degree and at the same time kept him out of the trouble and the Second World War. He also criticises the attitude of Communists, who aloofed themselves from the mainstream nationalism. He also accuses the communists who betrayed their own nation for the sake of a foreign nation. Kulbushan, however, agrees that both Ashok and himself are engaged and involved in pretence Both politics and acting are used to baffle people with their colour and the flavour. In short, they are the means to fulfil the vested interest of their practitioners. Kulbushan later, acknowledges that he used to enjoy Hindi films when it had heroes like Dilip Kumar, who were intense, sincere, full of dignity, nobility and the two had the willingness to make sacrifices. Those heroes always inspired the masses just like the heroes of national movement like Mahatma Gandhi. Tharoor states in the novel:

The politician is no different from the actor. Both are expected to perform on stage, to wear masks that the public will accept, and to deliver lines written by someone else. But unlike the actor, the politician cannot walk offstage after the performance; he must live with the consequences of the roles he plays. (217)

Bollywood films are like opium in India. They have got their own typical texture and allure the muscles to words themselves. The hero in Bollywood films is thus an omniscient perceiver and preserver of good. However, today the whole scenario has changed. The men in power today are hustlers, smugglers, fixers etc. Thus the heroes of today's celluloid are also men of the same corrupt system. The novel also sheds light on the temperament of the Indian masses. The ordinary' Indians never name their children with 'Pranay' or 'Prem Chopra', for they are the symbolic and literal representatives of villainy.

The womenfolk never like their names and equate them with that of rapists. Pranay, however, considers himself as the one belonging to the sect of people who are the vanguard of revolution. He also speaks about the class origin, the lower-and middle class, struggling for a lifestyle and is proud to state that spirit and in class origin, he's one of them. Ashok's film image, says Pranay, was that of an angry young man, the righter of wrongs, the rebel against injustice and the enemy of the establishment. Ashok becoming a politician makes him the part and parcel of the same establishment which once he used to oppose. As a politician he reveals what he is the opposite of the screen image. As a politician's son, an MP, the PM's man, he becomes a part of a corrupt system. The people who accepted him as a hero do not have the equal reverence for him as a politician, as he no longer meant anything to them. Joseph Schumpeter comments:

The corrupting influence of money and the pursuit of power in politics leads to the degradation of democracy. When politicians focus on maintaining their power, rather than serving the people, they become beholden to special interests. Democracy, in such a scenario, no longer serves the public but is a tool for elites to retain control and manipulate the masses. (244)

Pranay is aware of his limitations and believes that by looks, he is not a bad actor. It's just he is typecast as villain, and is a damper to his heroic spirit. He continues to say that films give opportunity to the proletariat to overcome the class distinctions. In the novel, through the character of Ashok Banjara, the novelist tries to portray the different faces of life. Life too is like a cinema as it has to wear various persona (mask) at various stages. Ashok in his life, like in cinema, wears various masks at different stages of the life. From an amateur theatre artist to a marketing manager his odyssey continues till he becomes a megastar of Bollywood and then later adorning the attire of a Member of Parliament. His meteoric rise in professional and political life finds its balance in a pathetic personal life. The life and film of Mr. Ashok Banjara do not end here as it is only the beginning of the 'End'.

3. CONCLUSION

Show Business undoubtedly is many books rolled into one. It is story about the telling of the stories, funny tale about the romance and folly of cinema, a novel on an epic scale of ambition, greed, love, deception and death. The reflective and

critical tone, highlights the themes of illusion, reality, and the pursuit of fame in the context of India's film industry. The protagonist, Ashok Banjara, finds himself grappling with the consequences of his choices and the superficiality of the world he once dominated. The novel's ending highlights the emptiness of celebrity culture and the moral compromises that come with it.

As the narrative comes full circle, Tharoor uses the conclusion to critique the glamorization of showbiz and its impact on personal integrity and societal values. Ashok's journey is emblematic of the broader struggles between tradition and modernity, authenticity and performance, and the individual versus societal expectations. The metafictional elements of the novel also leave readers questioning the nature of storytelling itself, emphasizing that what we perceive as reality is often constructed and manipulated. The novel, in a nutshell, ends on a sobering note, serving as both a satire and a cautionary tale about the seductive yet destructive power of the entertainment industry. It is a story more or less a fable which teaches us that we live in a world where illusion is the only reality and nothing is what it seems.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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