

Shashi Tharoor's *The Five-Dollar Smile*: a Cheeky Exposition of Society with an Adolescent Sensibility

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Abstract

The Five-Dollar Smile (1990) by Shashi Tharoor is a collection of crisp and pungent stories that entertain the readers with their zestful humor and deriding the superficial aspects of society as observed by the author in his teens. Tharoor acknowledges in the preface that "the stories largely reflect an adolescent sensibility; their concerns, assumptions, and language all emerge from the consciousness of an urban Indian male in his late teens." Most of these are creative endeavors of a collegiate aimed at leisure reading. However, these college-time compositions are far more promising and ambitious in their scope. They are rife with social realism. Even as a teen, Tharoor has examined minute aspects of life with a microscopic eye. He says, "These stories reflect aspects of modern Indian life which are still relatively ignored in more serious writing." The stories become platforms where the Western and Indian values interact, commingle, and clash. He used his real experiences as the material for his craft, and the story's timeline spans from 1978 to 1981. The research paper analyses the anthology from the lens of social realism.

Keywords: *The Five-Dollar Smile*, Shashi Tharoor, social realism, adolescent sensibility, irony and satire

Aim of the Study

This research paper brings into the limelight an early collection of stories by Shashi Tharoor written in his late adolescence. *The Five-Dollar Smile* reveals Tharoor's precocious writing talent and razor-sharp perception of people and situations. The stories in this anthology present a dissection of the society from multiple perspectives. This research paper aims to highlight the social realism embedded in the stories. These pieces underscore the follies and foibles of human beings, made entertaining to read when presented with the author's humorous and sarcastic flair. The subjects and themes have been handled both sensitively and sardonically. The paper stirs up the melting pot of stories and presents its contents with delightful seasoning to enhance the taste of the dishes conjured up by a teen Tharoor.

Review of Literature

Sathyaraj V. and Joe Verghese Yeldho, in their paper titled "History in Shreds: A Reading of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*," focus on *Riot* as a space where history and fiction mix. They have highlighted the notion embedded within *Riot* that history is a fictional reconstruction, much like a literary text. It is open to interpretation. They have further highlighted that 'writing' history also uses formal literary properties like "emplotment, tropes, narratives, intertextualities, and diegesis."

In her web article "Shashi Tharoor: Word Class," Nandini Nair discusses Tharoor's love of words. In *Bookless in Baghdad: And Other Writings About Reading* (2005), Tharoor recounts how reading and writing have molded him. He developed his love for words from his father, with whom he played word games, whereas his mother launched him on his reading journey, starting with Enid Blyton and Noddy. He also takes an unapologetic stance for writing in English, even if it is only a tiny minority that speaks the language in India. He asserts that the "rural peasant," "the small-town schoolteacher with his sandalwood-smeared forehead," "the punning collegian," and the "Bombay socialite" are all equally part of India's reality, as they all belong to India's multitudes.

Swati Daftuar, in her web article "Wizard of words: Shashi Tharoor," discusses his most recent release, *The Less You Preach the More You Know: Aphorisms for Our Age*, co-authored with Joseph Zacharias. It is a compilation of short, pithy witticisms and sayings. Some gems include: "Life is a paradox. We celebrate each birth, even while knowing it comes with the death sentence" and "The easiest thing in life is letting go. It is also the hardest thing."

Scope of the Study

The Five-Dollar Smile has not been subject to as much analysis and interpretation as his other gigantic works like *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and *Riot* (2001). The reason is that it is a compilation of stories from his teenage and college life, and no systematic effort had been made to compile it together before the insistence of his readership to make his early stories available. Therefore, this research paper contributes to the body of research on the author by taking up his relatively lesser-known work and analyzing it so that the reading public, especially the young age group, can relish it. The stories are relevant to a college-going youth for their quintessential themes, such as friendship, love, desire, conflict between urban and rural values, and class consciousness. Reading Tharoor's works is like opening up to a world full of fancy words. The stories are peppered with puns and humor.

The Five Dollar Smile: Peeling off the Humanitarian Mask

The anthology starts with the title story, written when Tharoor embarked on his first assignment with a humanitarian agency in Geneva. Joseph Kumaran is an orphan and a poster boy for the HELP agency. He is exploited and ill-treated by the agency claiming to be his benefactor. His picture on the magazine cover page earns the agency money. Three American families try to adopt him and send five dollars a month to the agency. One lovely family sends him gifts on Christmas, which Joseph has to share with other orphans. He writes touching letters to the families to win their

sympathy. Finally, a "nice couple" proposes to see the boy, so they enclose an air ticket for him. He is excited to go to America. However, once he embarks on the plane, his innocence and excitement get a rude shock. The "Sisters" of the agency show no sensitivity and tenderness towards his simple, childlike needs. They teach him, "Let them know you are poor, but you are smart because we knew how to bring you up" (14). The airline staff also shows a contemptuous attitude. Their authoritative is "more powerful than philanthropy." On the plane, he feels

"suffused with a loneliness more intense Than he had ever experienced.

He was alone, lost somewhere between a crumpled magazine clipping and the glossy brightness of a color photograph." (26)

Thus, the author has exposed these so-called charity organizations, which raise idealistic slogans beneath which lie hypocrisy and meanness. Besides, he has also subtly commented on the lack of commitment of foster parents. Three foster families insist on adopting Joseph specifically because he is the poster child. They want "to make him smile again" as if he is a toy. However, as their interest gradually fades, so does their communication with him. Both the agency and foster families treat the orphan as expendable.

The Boutique: Glitzy World Revealed

The following story, "The Boutique," depicts an ambiance that the author had observed firsthand — "the brittle sophistication of world parties and the surreal decadence of air-conditioned salons where shirts were sold at prices that could have fed the neighborhood" (27). Upon her insistence, the narrator accompanies his mother to a new boutique as she wants to see "the mod sophisticates ... in their natural habitat." From the moment they step into the elevator dressed in plain attire, they are greeted by the critical eye of the haughty liftman. The "wall-to-wall carpeting, the air-conditioned atmosphere, the little groups of suited-and-booted people" (29) make the narrator feel that they "did not belong here." The waiter passes by them without offering them coffee. The most striking and touching instance of their humiliation is when Amma is searching through the impressive array of jackets. The salesgirl picks on her and forbids her from touching the articles. Her scornful question, "Don't you know English?" (30), is a presumption based on their plain-looking dress.

The privilege of 'trying on' fancy clothes is so flatteringly served to a famous radio disc jockey. Amma, at last, annoyed, raises her voice to draw attention to this unjust treatment. The congregation looks at them for one moment and, in the very next moment, forgets this "clumsy intrusion." The narrator and his mother exit quietly and wait in a queue at the bus stop. After all, they did not need to be ostentatious in the world where they belonged.

Sugar, Spice, and a Dash of Irony

"How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink" attempts to imitate P.G. Wodehouse, whom Tharoor had admired since the age of eleven. In the story, Bobby, despite being a "confirmed misogynist," gets attracted to an advertisement model. He feels less like a man than someone who looks down upon his "effeminate" clothes and subtle personality. Convinced by his presumed rival in love, Bobby assumes a brash persona and offends Myra, who ironically likes men with subtle and

straightforward personalities. Thus, he frustrates his attempts to get the girl he wants, thereby turning to alcohol.

"The Village Girl" is an updated version of the old children's tales of 'The Country Mouse and the Town Mouse.' Two opposite worlds come face to face and lay bare their contrasting scenes. Sunder, a Delhiite, is taken by his parents to their village in Kerala to spend the summer because they need "to renew [they are] roots." Sunder only sees Delhi as his home, where he was born and bred; thus, the countryside could be a more attractive holiday destination. Sunder's unwillingness to visit his home village is also echoed in Tharoor's experience. The writer says,

As a child... my experience of Kerala had been as a reluctant vacationer during my parents' annual trips home. For many non-Keralite Malayali children, there was little joy in the compulsory rediscovery of their roots, and many saw it as an obligation. For city dwellers, rural Kerala ... was a world of rustic simplicities and private inconveniences... However, as I grew older, I came to appreciate the magic of Kerala—its beauty...(Davidar, "The Literary Journeys of Shashi Tharoor")

Sunder embodies urban Indian culture, and thus, he dismisses the girl he meets at the village as "*behenji*." Slowly, however, as they both break the ice, they get a peep into each other's worlds. While Susheela is mesmerized by his glittering accounts of city life, Sunder feels "deracinated urban outrage welling up in him" (53) when he learns that she is an intelligent, capable girl being pushed into marriage without her approval. Just when the reader is expecting a sweet summer romance blossoming between the two, the story ends with a sting in the tail as Sunder thoughtlessly seduces the girl.

He, the experienced city slicker with the smooth talk, the plastic fantasies, and the fishnet T-shirt, had cynically taken advantage of an innocent village girl. She had sought admission to his world, and he had taken her body. (54)

In the next story, "The Temple Thief," a god-fearing man is stealing an idol of Lord Shiva to earn his livelihood, but the temple priest hoodwinks him. The holier-than-thou priest lectures him on religion, sin, and redemption so eloquently and persuasively that the thief feels guilty and retreats from his plan, leaving the hunt for the priest, who quietly carries it away. Similarly, in "The Simple Man," the central character successfully deceives his naïve listener into believing his pitiful story of being cuckolded. Inspector Nayar in "The Political Murder" plays Sherlock Holmes and arrests the wrong person, whereas the real culprit, Jacob, is promoted to Deputy Commissioner.

Quintessential Adolescent Escapades

"The Professor's Daughter," "Friends," and "Pyre" are campus stories brimming with "ribaldry and callow obsessions of collegians." "The Professor's Daughter" is sure to call to one's mind the excitement, immaturity, and silliness of one's college days filled with adventures and blunders. The all-boys college is suddenly all agog, and they find that their boring Professor Chhatwal has a considerably pretty daughter. Their lack of interaction with the opposite sex makes the Professor's daughter, Jaswinder, a college sensation and somewhat of a mini-star.

Boys make prurient assumptions about her and nicknames her "Jazzy." One day, when the narrator has to visit the Professor's house, he meets Jazzy. In trying to converse with her, he finds she does not live up to the hype the boys have created. She was a "frightened mouse about whom such a collection of myths had been built." The story also highlights the narrowness of the so-called educated coterie. The Professor, despite being an educationist, terrorizes his daughter and keeps her caged.

"Friends" explores what being or having a genuine and mature friend means. The meaning of friendship, as the narrator understood in his college days, was to "cut class together, [go] to movies together, act[ed] in plays together, chase[d] girls together. The duo was inseparable and iconic in their college for their puns, as illustrated below:

...the liquids he sells are pretty *tea-ribble*, too.

Do you mean they are *kaafi* bad? Rekha asked

You felt you had just delivered an epigram for which Wilde might have won an Oscar.

Eat and be merry, and for tomorrow, you may diet. (87)

However, their friendship ends with a thunderclap when his friend passes derogatory remarks about a girl who has fallen for his superficial charm. The narrator realizes that his friend could be a more high-value man to be looked up to. He gains a new perspective on the true meaning of friendship: "A friend was more than just a guy to enjoy jokes with, to go to movies with, to chase girls with — that it was justifiable to demand understanding, empathy" (93).

"The Pyre" is a bitter admonition of caste discrimination that has been eating into the fabric of Indian society like a moth. The narrator recounts an accident, a scooter crash, which he luckily survives, but his friend is not so fortunate. The narrator recalls his friend as one who "dared" and chose to "defy every convention the world had thrust upon him" because he hailed from a Scheduled Caste. The friend, Sujeet, was bold and outspoken and asserted:

I know what many of you thought about me when I first entered your elite little college. One more *chamar* on an affirmative action program... Well... it is correct, my right, and that of my people because you bastards have got to pay for centuries of bloody discrimination. Moreover, I will enjoy that, right, Ram, and I will not be apologetic. I am going to enjoy everything this bloody college has to offer, the library, the theatre, the rich buggers' mobiles, the booze, and the parties — and I am going to enjoy the girls. (100)

"Auntie Rita" is surcharged with the heat of illicit passion. A seventeen-year-old boy falls hard for his aunt and loses himself in her sexual fantasies. To his surprise, the aunt also reciprocates the desire, and they enter a passionate physical relationship while her husband leaves the city for official work. As expected, the carnal bliss is short-lived because soon, her husband returns. However, that does not dishearten the young boy. Instead, it gives him a boost to pursue girls with confidence. "The Other Man" encapsulates the deep pain and longing of a man married to a woman who never moved on from her old lover. "The Solitude of a Short Story Writer" is a smart, self-aware, Woody Allen-esque exploration of a writer's

conflicted relationship with his psychiatrist. The short story writer gives painfully accurate portrayals of characters drawn from real life, much to their chagrin and the detriment of his relationship with others. "The Death of a Schoolmaster" is a bittersweet story where a politically ambitious son becomes a catalyst in his father's death.

Farce of Emergency

The book is wrapped up by a two-act farce, "Twenty-two Months in the Life of a Dog." Set against the backdrop of the Emergency Period, the play is a biting satire that ridicules influential people who use and abuse their authority and position to grind their axes. In contrast, the common folk are reduced to street dogs with no say in the matters of their own country.

Conclusion

The Five-Dollar Smile is a cheeky exposition of human follies and foibles by an adolescent, Tharoor. He has dealt with mature subjects like hypocrisy, deceit, love and lust, social discrimination based on class and caste, and death. "Irreverent tales of college life mingle with family dramas: a seventeen-year-old carries on a brief, torrid affair with his married aunt, and "the professor's daughter" is brutally beaten by her father because of her presumed flirtations. "The Solitude of the Short Story Writer" shows the protagonist scandalizing his friends by writing acerbic, revelatory stories about them. Except for "The Solitude of the Short Story Writer," which is set in the United States, most of the stories are set in India, where cosmopolitan city-dwellers may have a lingering sentimental affection for the countryside they long ago left but are seduced by an increasingly Western culture" (Kirkus Reviews). Snippets from college life and youthful escapades have been faithfully photographed and transcribed into fiction. Tharoor's piercing eyes cut through the superfluity of politics and society, and his infallible ink presents the reality with a keen understanding. In this sense, he is a social critic and offers well-informed perspectives to the common folk, allowing them to see beyond the power-play of politics. Tharoor presents social and political scenarios in the garb of a well-knit narrative, made all the more compelling with his mordant humor and crisp dialogues. The humor mainly arises from witty exchanges between the characters and a recurring use of puns. "His fondness for wordplay—especially puns, alliteration, clever coinages, and all manner of bon mots—is on display in almost every form of his writing. So is a humor and a lightness of touch" (Davidar). The style is marked by Tharoor's refined diction and eloquence characteristics.

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