

ACRIMONIOUS TRUTH OF THE GLAMOUROUS WORLD OF BOLLYWOOD IN THAROOR'S *SHOW BUSINESS*

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ABSTRACT

Show Business, a novel by Shashi Tharoor, exposes a decorated picture of Bollywood, the Bombay film world with its tinsel opportunities, hollow relationships and subsequent bitter truths. In exposing the various events behind the hero's success story, Tharoor gives his justification of mass market taste into an intellectual context. In fact, *Show Business* (1992) is a fiction of the power of cinema and is a fable of present time, which conveys the message that illusion is the only reality and nothing is what it seems like at prima facie. It is Tharoor's third fiction narrating the story of a protagonist who is a Bollywood star whose journey of career commences with ambition and greed, passes through love and deception and ends with a pathetic condition on death bed in an ICU of a hospital. The title of the novel *Show Business* itself hints at the Bollywood, India's Hindi film Industry and portrays the journey of its fictional superstar, Ashok Banjara in it.

Key Words: English-language theatre, blissfully confident, monologue, largest electoral plurality, comatose Ashok, unceasing vigil, calculating bastard, Gypsy account, romantic entanglement, gentle vulnerability.

Ashok Banjara is very ambitious son of a politician. He is a Secretary of the Shakespeare Society at St. Francis College but he is not content with. He leaves theatre in Delhi for he considers that "What we're doing is artificial....in Delhi, putting on English plays written for English actors, in a language the majority of our fellow Indians don't even understand. What's more artificial than that?"^(SB.6) So, he comes to Bombay in an attempt to earn big bucks and garner fame. Ashok once says to Malini why he has been to Bombay, filmy capital of India, and joined film industry: "We're an irrelevant minority performing for an irrelevant minority in a language and a medium that guarantee both irrelevance and minority-hood.....how many people watch English-language theatre in this country? And how many

of those watch us?”^(SB.6) “.....English-language theatre in India has no place to go but in circlesThe same old plays rehased for the same ignorant and illiterate crowd. Who cares? Films are for real.”^(SB.7) After the moderate struggle and high success of his first film, Choubey Production’s ‘Musafir’, alongside the legendary Abha Patel, he achieves superstardom by his second film ‘Godambo’. It stands Banjara as an action star. He shares the celluloid with the star whose bust, vividly painted by a proletarian social-realist on a cinema hoarding, once caused a celebrated traffic jam. After “Godambo”, Ashok Banjara moves from success to success. He is as successful in real life as his reel life. He weds Maya, an intellectual but shy co-star. He wants her keep away from films for the sake of family, fathers triplets, beds his heroines especially the delectable Mehnaz Elahi. While doing this, he makes a number of trashy formulaic films all of which are hits and earns so much money that he has to worry how to hide it from the tax-collectors. Finally, he salts away his unaccounted wealth in Swiss bank account. Though the small amount of his filmy remuneration that comes by cheque is dutifully banked, the larger amount goes to unaccounted black money in Swiss bank. For this, he takes the help of Mehnaz Elahi’s brother who is in Gulf. Whenever her brother and his associates needed money in India, they got it from Ashok and Swiss francs were deposited in his account there. It was as if helping each other and saving tax, and in turn magnifying the unaccounted black money.

The tax officers may wish to examine the registers of his accounts, but they never yet so did, because Ashok’s father’s party has never yet been out of power. Even though his father has not made any attempts to protect him, no official ever tries to prosecute him. That is the advantage of being important and influential in India-the number of things one gets without having asked for. Many tell him to invest the unaccounted money on gold mines of Karnataka and liquor distilleries of Kashmir. Ashok was not interested in all that. He buys the inevitable bungalow for some outrageous sum, most of which does not figure on the deed of sale. It indicates that Ashok has invested the number 2 money in the deal that is black money. His father is not that sort of person. He is against such black money. He had no friends who involved in such things. His opinion is that “undeclared revenue is the curse of our country. If the money that is lost every year to the parallel economy could be ploughed back into the official one, half our problems of underdevelopment could be solved.”^(SB.113) His father even says that “I am not a fool.....I know there is black money in politics. I have never touched any of it myself, but ever since we idealistically abolished company contributions to political parties, businessmen have found this other way of financing their preferred candidates.”^(SB.115)

Life for Ashok Banjara is like a film, each event and character stay true to a script made for this superstar. A time comes when Ashok is at the pinnacle of success that his producers are ready to sign him up for numerous films and he cheerfully 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 in different story with different characters as in real life. And he refrains from immersing himself in the story line neither in real life nor filmy. But, he is

blissfully confident and thinking that the scripts will take care of themselves and his name will take care of the film's success and his success in real life. He once says to his wife "The best scripts keep getting offered to me because I'm Number One. I do them, so I stay Number One."^(SB.203) The author exactly shows the reality of the mindset of Indian people about the Hindi films that the film's name means nothing, but most Hindi film names mean nothing to anybody. In reality, most of the superstars of the film industry are like Ashok Banjara who express their mind sets in the words exactly as done by Banjara: "I have long since given up looking at scripts; there are too many of them and they all read alike, and in my case it's too much to keep up with three convoluted plot-lines a day."^(SB.218) MehnazElahi's opinion is that Ashok is the role each time, or may be the role is he himself. The directors write a part that is as much as possible like the other parts they have seen him playing. And so he is what he has been on the screen and the screen helps him to be as he is, and no one comes across the difference, if there is any one such.

When Banjara is with Maya in his living-room, he gets himself in the mood of discussion to the questions raised in his own mind. He finds his marriage with Maya a Film's Dream Marriage. What he got in her is "a lovely face, a pretty smile, a gentle vulnerability that made me wanted to reach out and hold her, protect her against the world. Simplicity, too, of a kind I'd never come across in Delhi-asimple girl, good natured and kind, with simple tastes, modest, unassuming, soft-spoken, a girl whom everyone loved."^(SB.81) This shows another face of Banjara who is completely different in case of other co-actresses. His real mind towards Maya gets clear in the words of Banjara himself: "It was the marriage of the decade, for God's sake. Not just in the film press - we made the front page of *The Times of India*. And I don't want to give her up.....My marriage to Maya is important to me. If it ends in disgrace, it'd destroy me."^(SB.83) When Ashok Banjara turn into a father, he says that he is a proud father: it is a role that sits uneasily on his expansively-padded shoulders. But he gets happy to play it. And he even recognizes the role he has to play. Though it is uninteresting, he says, "she's reminding me all the time that I'm not merely Ashok Banjara, megastar, I'm also part-hell, I'm the head-of a unit of five. Paternal responsibility's the role, and I guess I know the script."^(SB.129) When it comes to working of both husband and wife, and the ayah has to take care the babies, Maya has to quit acting in films. Ashok alone has to work and due to his hectic schedules he spends little time with the daughters. Even Maya once expressed the same. It clears that Ashok spends so little time with even Maya. In the opinion of Ashok, one of them must be with girls as much as possible as he goes out and earns the *daal* and *chawal*. Maya had become bound to stick herself up to the family. But, she worries about the hard work of Ashok. Once, she had said to him that they can afford all the *daal* and *chawal* they can possibly want, and more. He convinces her that she has no any idea what to do with all the black money that was pouring in. In saying this, what she really meant was, Ashok should not to do so many films with MehnazElahi, who, as she had heard of through the rumours like everyone else, is the mistress of Ashok. But, she never discussed about it. She never even mentioned Mehnaz's name while talking. She is a proud woman;

Ashok likes her and her pride. Though Ashok Banjara is having good opinion of Maya, MehnazElahi, his mistress considers her as a shrewish little wife, because she was denied an entry into the hospital where Ashok was admitted. Mehnaz also says to herself that “as long as you’re (Ashok) going to lie there and not tell me what I can and can’t say, I’m going to say what I think. And what I think is that that precious Maya of yours is an absolutely insufferable little prig. There’s nothing she wouldn’t do to put me down, to humiliate me. Me! The only woman who has been a real woman to you.”^(SB.183) MehnazElahi never admits Maya as the real wife of Ashok. Many a times she had termed her differently: shrewish little wife, little pocket-edition of a wife, dried-up little minx and so on.

But, Mehnaz gets very upset with Ashok for the way he treated her all the way. In her monologue in the hospital she had uttered that she was prohibited “from visiting her own husband”, ^(SB.183) which created curiosity in a man called Bannerji, who is outside the ICU and in a shock he admits her inside the ICU, where Ashok was put in. She used the words ‘own husband’ because he had married her in front of some Gods. She was very cheerful when Ashok took her to the temple and offered a garland of marigolds around her neck and gave her his ring and said, “In the eyes of God we’re husband and wife.”^(SB.184) She was so moved then. She took it really. But one of her friends Salma explained her that it was all bullshit and If he really had wanted to marry her why did he take her to a temple, instead of converting to Islam and marrying her properly?. For this, Mehnaz had no answer. She understands that she was not his lawfully wedded wife, but RadhaSabnis calls her awfully bedded wife. It is painful on the part of Mehnaz. She never gossiped their relationship with anybody and kept her promise to the good of Ashok. What had happened was all his idea. She never asked for marriage. She says, “You took me there, you bought the *mala*, you put it round my Muslim neck and pronounced me your Hindu wife. And ever since then you’ve tried to pretend it never happened. Oh.....I’d have loved you with or without your *mala*. I want your love, not your name or your money. Why have you turned away from me, my life?”^(SB.185) This under-curtains clearly the relationship between Ashok and Mehnaz and attitudes of both of them towards each other. Salma’s opinion is that Mehnaz is a poor sap; she is going to fool herself. Once she said to Mehnaz about Ashok, “That man of yours, or rather *not* of yours, is a selfish, calculating bastard and the sooner you realize it the better.”^(SB.186) Even then Mehnaz did not heed to Salma and sent her out of her house. But in exchange what she has got is annoyance, negligence and humiliation. Ever since he enters politics, he avoids her. Even then she does wait for him. Because her expectation was that “A married man is still a man” and for that Salma retorted: “A married man doesn’t have to stay married-if he’s a man.”^(SB.186)

In politics, politicians are always looking behind and between the lines, tracing hidden agendas, seeing into the motivations for any position that is taken, understanding that what is said is not necessarily what is meant and that what is meant is not necessarily intended to mean the same thing for all time. But in Hindi films there is nothing beyond the surface;

everything is meant to be exactly what it is shown to be. There are no hidden meanings, no inner feelings and no second layer to life. All is big, clear, simple and exaggerated. Life is black and white, in Technicolor. Once, his father had said to Ashok “our worlds are not that far apart after all. You function amidst fantasies, playing your assigned role in a make-believe India that has never existed and can never exist.”^(SB.118) As a politician his father too contributed a role in a world of make-believe, a world in which he pretended that the ideas and principles and values that brought him into politics could still make a difference. Perhaps he too was performing in an India that has never really existed and can never exist. His father had joined politics in the days of nationalist struggle, in the Quit India movement. Though he tells all of his experiences in politics, Ashok had never shown much interest and curiosity. Ashok does not have much interest to his father’s political career. His father continues showing the difference in their worlds. This is how they are both involved in pretense. Politicians deliver speeches in which they pretend as if that their actions and positions are inspired by policies, principles, ideologies, the interests of their constituents, their vision of India, whatever; and they pretend that they wish people to support them, vote for them, give them money, on that basis. He even says, “Politics is the art of the expedient: no politician can afford to look beyond the next election, and the means that will help him win it. Politics is an end in itself, just like the Hindi film.”^(SB.120)

At the height of his superstardom, Ashok is persuaded to join politics. He enters the electoral fray from the seat which his father has been persuaded to give up. Banjara wins the seat easily. It all happens suddenly. Ashok says, “After all, it’s in my genes. I am my father’s son, even if I’ve tried to deny it all my life.”^(SB.222) He experiences entirely different after getting elected in the Parliament. He has to stand up on a rickety platform in *churidar* and *kurta*, declaiming the virtues of the Prime Minister’s party in chaste Hindi to a rural throng. It proves an unlikely turnabout in his life. Now, it is he, it is his mouth that is moving in political recitation, it is his arms that are under the shawl draped toga-style over his *khadi kurta*, it’s his voice calling for social justice, rural development and votes. Whatever he did in his life till now, he had never been able to win his father’s approval. Now he is able to make him proud and politics is the only possibility and he does it by joining it, which is his world that his father had wanted him to join. And it is true that he knows politics. In fact, his brother Ashwin had an ambition to contest the election from his father’s constituency. But the Prime Minister himself wants Ashok to contest against the opposition stalwart Pandit Sugriva Sharma because it is going to be a tight election. One has to attract the slum-dwellers, untouchables, Muslims and the ‘left’. It is possible only to Ashok as he is the popular film star and he is known to everyone. Once in a silver jubilee function it is said about Ashok Banjara that he is the most popular man in India; no political leader not even the fellow with his name in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the globe’s largest electoral plurality, can come close to his popularity anywhere in the country. In his victory in the election his brother works like anything. His father admits his position due to his hard work to deserve this opportunity. He has involved himself in the problems of my constituents. He

knows the names of hundreds of them, their difficulties, and their hopes. He has walked the roads and tramped through the fields; he knows each village by sight. The people recognize him, trust him and love him-and he does not suffer from my handicaps of age, unrealized ambitions and unfashionable beliefs. Ashwin considers that people come out of curiosity, not out of support. He further says that in our country, elections are a popular *tamasha* that occur every five years, a spectacle, an entertainment for the bored masses.

But, soon he realizes that what success in Bollywood he had, doesn't translate into a similar kind of success in politics. Expecting yet again to be the unchallenged and unrivalled hero of every scene, he finds to his dismay that the party has relegated him to the back benches in the parliament where he languishes. Ashok thinks that the party would at least make him a minister. Because he is more widely recognized than everyone and conquered the most dreaded Sugriva Sharma. But when the Cabinet list was announced, he scoured it in vain. Maya consoled saying that he is after all new to the Government. He used to be in the last benches. He observed, "Some snore sonorously, undisturbed in the innocence of their ignorance. Others are awake, but equally immune to contamination by ideas. The most knowledgeable are the most powerless.....That is the ultimate clincher in the parliamentary democracy."^(SB.213) When Subramanyam asked him to go with both films and politics and not to give up politics, Ashok replied, "I'm just a back-bench MP, the political equivalent of the fat-arsed females with tree-trunk thighs who dance behind the heroine."^(SB.280)

At this disappointed stage of his life, he makes a film, titled "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 a big failure in his life. His father once asked Ashok regarding this film and growled, "Can you imagine for a second a real Indian mechanic in a romantic entanglement with a real MehnazElahi? It's impossible: all these rich girl-poor boy fantasies the Hindi films churn out fly in the face of every single class, caste and social consideration of the real India just giving the lower classes the wrong ideas."^(SB.185)

Sometimes, he 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. Ashok Banjara, the premier Hindi film hero, is more rapidly reduced to unproved villainy. A columnist suggests that he was brought into the Party due to his film world connections with smugglers, black-marketeters. 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. Ashok is obviously a politician of no consequence who couldn't possibly have any connection to a major national political transaction. Ashwin observes it and criticizes Ashok, "you stood with no other thought than that you could win. Very useful for the Party: by winning in your constituency you helped them deflect the threat of Sugriva Sharma. You served a very

specific purpose. But did you think for a minute about whether they had any other purpose in mindwhose interests you might have served by winning, who wanted you out of the way the moment you'd fulfilled your purpose"^(SB.247) Banjara is unable to stomach this exoneration so he quits politics saying that there will be no criminal charges against him, but politically he is as finished as acabaret-dancer on crutches. His sojourn in politics not only destroys what his father and brother worked hard over many years to build up, it also isolates him from his father totally and ensures that no Banjara would ever dare to have a career in politics again. Ashwin, his younger brother and the earlier designated political heir sums the fall out very succinctly, "What a waste your political career was Ashokbhai. All gone. And you don't even know why. You don't even understand what the game was....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) Ashwin thinks that being right-hand man to Ashok Banjara was probably just as good a way to come to matter in national politics. But with the fall of Ashok, Ashwin also loses his chance and says to Ashok that "you destroyed all that, Ashok, destroyed your career and mine, and now you've all but destroyed yourself."^(SB.250)

Still, the worst was yet to happen for Ashok Banjara. With the freezing of his Swiss account, Banjara finds himself faced with the prospect of having to revitalize his film career. He says to Cyrus that he would never forgive the bastards for they had frozen the Gypsy account, into which the commission had been paid, without cautioning him to get his own money out first. And he was practically shaken. But somewhere along the unraveling of his political career, Banjara no longer remained the hero for his audience. People then viewed him as a part of all that he fought against in his celluloid avatar. Moreover the effects of 'Mechanic' still linger and producers are loathe to sign him. Banjara once the undisputed Badshah of Bollywood discovered that now producers made him wait for hours for meetings that were never held and that now he could not get a part.

Desperate, Ashok Banjara was at last convened by a friend to start in a kind of film that he hated from beginning - a mythological. This one was about Kalki, who towards the end of Kaliyug comes to destroy all the evil on this earth. Banjara played Kalki and it was during the shooting of this film he met an accident. The entire set burned down and so many people including the producer died. Ashok was severely injured. The novel thus comes to a full circle and moves from the various flashbacks to the present where the comatose Ashok gets his life and career flashing in front of his eyes. The irony was that, Kalki was supposed to destroy all the evil on the earth and it was while playing Kalki that Ashok met with an accident that potentially may destroy him and his way of life. Also Kalki the film, was likely to establish Banjara solidly once again with his audience. However, his accident on the sets of Kalki had set everyone in the nation praying for his recovery and thousands of his fans gather outside the hospital in an unceasing vigil. Mehnaz said, "The whole country is praying for you, Ashokji. Really. There are open air prayers in mosques and temples

and *gurudwaras* and churches and fire temples and *jamatkhanas* and wherever else it is that people get together to ask their Maker for favours. I even hear the Prime Minister is planning to break an official journey tomorrow to visit you in the hospital.....You're special. Not just to me-you're special to the whole country, to India."^(SB.188) Ashwin also says that "I'm dreadfully upset about your accident..... I want you to get well soon. The whole nation is praying for your recovery."^(SB.254) To get again the focus of the national attention this accident helps a lot. Even the Prime Minister comes to see him. This accident could actually be the rebirth of his political life. Once he will come out of this, perhaps, he will again be the hottest property in the history of Bollywood. There are prayer meetings at street-corners; little boys were neglecting their homework to ask Heaven to intercede on his behalf. He is Number One again, not only at the box-office but also in India's hearts. May be this was possible when he should have joined politics.

Thus, it is Tharoor's third fiction which narrates the story of a protagonist whose journey of career starts with ambition resulting in greed, passes through love leading to deception in love and consequently ends with a pathetic condition on death bed. The title of the novel itself, *Show Business* describes the working of Bollywood industry, India's Hindi film Industry along with the career journey of the fictional superstar, Ashok Banjara.

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