

## INDIAN CULTURE THROUGH AN ADOLESCENT'S EYE: READING SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE FIVE DOLLAR SMILE*

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### Abstract

Capturing life in the raw seems to be one of the chief sources of appeal in all Tharoor's creative writing, be it a fiction or non-fiction. His short stories, *The Five Dollar Smile* (1990) -a collection of fourteen short stories and a farce, have emotional coloring which enhances the emotional and imaginative impact of the story. Character is the central focus of many stories in which one can see the revelation of a psychological portrait of a disturbed personality. His stories are about delightful childhood and early adulthood anecdotes.

A proper evaluation of the stories in *The Five-Dollar Smile* shows that the writer has dealt with different shades of life--love, hate, loss, hypocrisy, deceit, sycophancy, pride, immorality, ego, etc. He has also referred to some social evils like early marriage, the dowry system, unmatched marriages and caste system. Most of his stories are saturated with social realism, but some of them are deliberately kept away from realism. Even as a teenager, Tharoor could look into some mature subjects like death, hypocrisy, deceit, loss and honour. The majority of his stories are about urban life but a few like 'The Village Girl' and 'The Death of a School Master' depict Kerala village life realistically and vividly. The paper attempts to explore Tharoor's short stories (*The Five Dollar Smile*) in the light of his idea and understand of Indian culture and society

**Keywords:** India, culture, diversity, social realism, adolescent, satire, irony

Tharoor's *The Five Dollar Smile* is a collection of fourteen short stories and a play published in 1990. Most of the stories were written when the writer was in his late teens and early twenties. With the exception of 'Solitude of the Short-Story Writer,' the stories are set in India and they deal with cosmopolitan city-dwellers who, in spite of being increasingly seduced by western culture, still retain an emotional attachment with the countryside they had left long ago. The most moving piece in the anthology is, of course, the title story in which a lonely orphan, who is used as the poster child of an organization that raises money for the purpose of charity, is determined to visit the family in America that have adopted him. He writes to them

touching letters about his ambition which results in an air-ticket for a three-week visit to the U.S.A. But during the flight, the boy-surrounded by strangers--experiences a bout of intense and inexplicable loneliness that leaves him completely dispirited. By turn, funny and touching, the stories also deal with the trauma of youth as well as death, deceit, hypocrisy and the conflict of cultural change. He writes in the early pages of the book regarding his purpose of writing the stories:

The stories largely reflect an adolescent sensibility: with one or two exceptions their concerns, their assumptions, their language, all emerge from the consciousness of an urban Indian male in his late teens. If I presume to inflict them years later on a new public, it is not because I think they represent an enduring contribution to literature, but because I hope that, in their own modest way, they might be fun to read . . . For one thing, they reflect aspects of modern Indian life which are still relatively ignored in more serious writing. (TFDS 10)

Observing social realities in the stories and finding no use of myths and fantasies, Ambuj Kumar Sharma is of the view that these stories were primarily written for magazines with an objective to entertain the readers of Indian magazines in English. He observes: “Primarily the short stories of Shashi Tharoor were written for magazines like *Junior Statesman*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Eve’s Weekly*, *Youth Times*, *The New Review* and *Cosmopolitan* when he was in his adolescence and childhood. His objective was to entertain the readers of Indian magazines in English” (76).

*The Five-Dollar Smile* should be considered Tharoor's first book of fiction, although chronologically it is his third. In any event, the three volumes he has brought out so far suggest that he uses fictional form to express certain playfulness. *The Great Indian Novel*, for example, brims over with playful high spirits, assembling the entire cast from the *Mahabharata*, the ancient Indian epic, and having them descend upon the modern Indian scene to enact a latter-day version of the events of the *Mahabharata*. In his playfulness he crams stage techniques, screenplays, film songs, makeup-room gossip, bedroom scenes, and moves to *Show Business* to create a simulacrum of the celluloid world. The stories in the present collection are no different in their form and content. *Riot*, based on Hindu-Muslim relationship brought about by Ram Janam bhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, is a fictional departure in the career of Shashi Tharoor as a writer. Here he takes liberty with the fictional form. The story is unfolded in an unconventional style through news paper cuttings, interviews, letters, journals, poems and even birthday card. This helps him in portraying and perceiving a single event from various angles. Several aspects of India as a nation are explored through the characters of the novel.

*The Five-Dollar Smile* contains fourteen stories published in Indian mass circulation magazine when he was in his teens. They are distinguished by their authentic presentation of India. He deals with the slice of Indian society he knows best which entails leaving out the stereotypes of poor peasants, godmen and so on.

India is a vast and complex country; in Whitman’s phrase, it “contains multitudes.” Tharoor’s imaginative sympathy is such that one of the best stories in the book is ‘The Village Girl’ which reveals the true status of a girl in India. ‘Death of a Schoolmaster’ is the most moving story in the collection; it shows how well-meaning attempts at land reform need not always have good results, and reflects the political realities in India.

In fact, Tharoor is extremely fascinated by India’s remarkable diversity which resides in almost everything. So his writings, fictional or non-fictional, are his personal exploration of

India. Tharoor is the best when he expresses his sentiment regarding Indianness and its nationalism interlinked with its pluralism. Despite his international career in UN, Tharoor has set all his books for India simply because all his formative years, from the age of three to 19, were spent growing up in India and so India matters to him: “India shaped my mind, anchored my identity, influenced my beliefs, and made me who I am. India matters immensely to me, and in all my writing, I would like to matter to India. Or, at least, to Indian readers” ([www.shashitharoor.com](http://www.shashitharoor.com)). Wherein lies the real or true notion of Indianness? Tharoor finds in it multiple abstractions: “The notion of Indianness is of paramount importance to Tharoor: “Indianness lies more in the soul of the country than in its body and the soul of the country lies in its thought, aesthetics, philosophy, science and technology, its way of living in entirety and totality, in a word, it’s entire culture from the ancient times to the present day” ([www.shashitharoor.com](http://www.shashitharoor.com)).

Regarding his books and personal exploration of India, he is much more clear and firm in his books-more so in his non-fiction as compared to his fiction. Sometimes he is completely unequivocal about books and states:

My eight books have all, in different ways, been about my personal exploration of India, of the forces that have made and unmade it, of the historical and philosophical traditions that have shaped the Indian identity. While this is explicit in my four books of non-fiction, my fiction has also sought to explore the Indian condition, particularly by looking at the kinds of stories Indians tell about themselves (whether the stories of our epics and of our nationalist struggle, as in *The Great Indian Novel*, or the stories of our popular cinema, in *Show Business*, or the stories of the identities and histories we construct for ourselves, as in *Riot*). In all three novels, though each is very different from the other two, it is true to say that the architecture of the book speaks of an India of multiple stories, multiple perspectives, multiple tellers, multiple truths. (BIB 228-229)

Indian short story also provided an opportunity of moulding his taste as well as creating in him an awareness of the contemporary social situation. The advent of English journalism had a salutary effect especially on the short story writer in that it helped the writer to have his reader constantly in mind and thus evolve a style that is simple, direct and attractive and make the best use of suspense and surprise - the two qualities which can make effective narration. The journalistic writing forces a writer to keep himself in touch with the contemporary situation. The readers, Shashi Tharoor had in mind, were that of the Indian magazines written in English. His main intention, as he himself observes, was to entertain and yet they reflect aspects of modern Indian life which are relatively ignored in more serious writings: “I wrote essentially for a specific audience the readership of Indian magazines in the English language; Most of these stories do not aspire to do more than entertainments” (*The Hindu* 2001).

The stories were written for mass-circulation magazines and, as such, were intended to be read while waiting for the train at the railway station. ‘The Five-Dollar Smile’ was written in adulthood when Tharoor was twenty-two years old. In this story he recalls the incidents of his childhood and “what it felt like to be a child” (TFDS 13). Joseph, the central character in the story, recalls as well as reveals a certain colonial ambience that surrounded the missionary school system. Tharoor depicts India of post-independence as a land full of underfed children who need both money and help to remain live. Joseph is handpicked to go to America as a part of a charity drive and thus becomes a surprise Indian advertisement for ‘Health’ – an Indian

advertisement. While boarding in a plane to the U.S., Sister Celine’s words echo in his mind- “Let them know you’re poor but you’re smart, because we know how to bring you up” (14).

Joseph was hardly seven years old when the photographer took his snap and ironically said, “We want a hungry child, not a feeding one” (15). In fact they wanted to depict Joseph as a tribal child with infant malnutrition who lost his mother in his early childhood and his father left him with the nuns. Considering him a suitable child for their purpose his picture has to be taken: “So there’s nothing really wrong with him, right? I mean his brain’s okay and everything? I’ve gotta be sure I’m selling the American public poverty and not retardation, if you see what I mean. So he’s normal, huh” (16).

Joseph was sensed and promised by Sister Celine that his photograph would get a place in every significant and famous magazine and paper of the world and, in this way, it would help them to get money to help the other children. “MAKE THIS CHILD SMILE AGAIN’, the black type on the crumpled, glassy news weekly page read. ‘All it takes is five dollars a month” (13). This poster becomes a joke with Joseph’s friends; they called it ‘The Five Dollar Smile’. Joseph is visiting America because his foster parents want to see the child and so they paid for his visit to America. On the plane this boy recollects his orphanage and boarding experiences. Tharoor in this story outlines the life of these boarding schools. This story deals with the psychology of a young boy on his trip to a foreign country. For this Adivasi lad, America was a land of magic dreams. His mind goes back to all the small incidents especially one of the seeing movies in the boarding school: “Joseph had only seen one movie before. That was a documentary about HELP’s activities among orphan children . . . . But what a movie this was . . . It was like nothing he had ever seen before” (22).

As Tharoor says in the introduction of this story:

*The Five-Dollar Smile was an attempt to come to terms with a number of my most immediate concerns--the experience of geographical and emotional dislocation, the internationalization of aid for the needy, the nature of the charitable impulse. Consciously rejecting my own new-found perspective as a UN official pledged to serve the world’s refugees, I tried to write the story from the point of view of the recipient--I cannot say beneficiary--of assistance rather than the provider of it. I had often seen advertisements like the one described in the story, and wanted to look beyond their obvious message to the needs and feelings of the children they depicted. Joseph’s situation is a universal one--he could easily be an African, Latin - American or Indo - Chinese child, and the story would not change. (Italics in the text 13)*

In his teenage time, Tharoor was much fond of reading P.G. Wodehouse and, simultaneously, was much impressed his writing style. This is clearly reflected in his next story entitled ‘The Boutique’ in which tries to paint as well as confront the Calcutta world of his teenage time:

*“The Calcutta of the short stories I published in urban English language magazines at the time - was not the Calcutta of politics and poverty of foetid slums and flowery songs, of Coffee House communism and vibrant culture, that later occupied my concerns. As the son of a newspaper executive growing up in the city through his early teenage years - I grew up in a Calcutta of ex-colonial clubs and Vintage Car Rallies, imbibing the brittle sophistication of ad world parties and the surreal decadence of*

*air- conditioned salons where shirts were sold at prices that could have fed the neighborhood” (27).*

The story, “The Boutique,” is about a visit by an Indian boy and his mother to the opening of a posh boutique in an American city. The ambience makes them feel like strangers, unwanted and unwelcomed. Despite the “Please don't touch” warning, the mother begins to fondle a jacket she likes and is duly reprimanded by the salesgirl. Other guests arrive and are treated with respect. One of them casually flips through the ties on the rack without disapprobation from the salesgirl. The mother becomes furious and protests, but this is taken as the aberrant behavior of an unwanted person best handled with cool, calculated indifference. The momentary hurt soon subsides into resignation, and the boy and his mother walk out. The writer comments, “No one noticed their exit, it was as if an insect had been removed from a cup of tea” (Agarwal 432).

A.K. Sharma finds the problem of class discrimination emerging or being highlighted through this story. He writes: “In this story Tharoor has alluded the class discrimination embedded in the Indian society. The lift man, the waiter and the sales girl belong to lower stratum of Indian society, but they do not hesitate in discriminating between the middle and the upper class people” (78).

The story by Tharoor presents before us a true picture of the attitude and behavior of snobbish people in our society. Tharoor very aptly paints this story on the canvas of social realism. He enlivens the boutique environment through the vivid description of Anima and her son as they are invited to the inauguration of a new boutique at the Plaza Lounge. The aura of this five star magnificent building is meant only for the rich, the famous and the glamorous. They felt as alienated outsiders. Their way of clothing displayed their middle class status compared to the people wearing branded clothes and making a fashion statement: “Amma in her plain cotton sari with her slightly greying hair done up in a traditional way at the back, clutching the invitation card as if for security and looking very plain and rather proletarian; me in my loose kurta that fell awkwardly from bony shoulders, in narrow trousers that went out of fashion five years back, sporting an unshaved underchin, looking more unkempt than dashing” (27).

At the very outset they were humiliated while entering in the Plaza Lounge when the lift man looked them disrespectfully, ‘He lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly’ (27). The second stance of insult is when even a waiter who serves coffee passes them by without a look and they feel thoroughly insulted. Another instance of humiliation is when the salesgirl curtly reminds Amma of ‘Please Do Not Touch’ card around the clothes. She forgot that the arena into which she has stepped in is not for the middle class people but only for the rich or the elite. Amma’s enthusiasm to buy a jacket for her son vanishes when she tries to touch it. He immediately realizes that the price tags in this boutique are only for the rich. The price of the jacket is fairly high for Amma to buy it as it is a whooping 700 rupees. Contrastingly after a couple of minutes a famous radio disc jockey (DJ) enters the boutique and becomes the centre of attraction. The same salesgirl who had forbidden Amma from touching the articles did not utter a word when the DJ freely sampled the clothes. The salesgirl forgot all about that dreadful sign and suddenly Amma said vociferously, “I thought we weren’t supposed to touch the clothes” (31). Amma’s son suddenly felt sick, he wanted to go back to his world where he actually belonged to: “And suddenly I realized I didn’t know, what I was doing there, and the question mark straightened itself out in my mind to an arrow, a line, and I knew where the line led--outside, to the relief of the hot pavements and the elegiac gloom of the evening shut out by the and the brocaded, mirrored walls of the Plaza Lounge” (31).

Drenched in anger and resentment by the humiliation, Amma confronted the sales girl. The face of the sales girl hardened by the issue created by Amma and ultimately Amma and the son decided to leave the place. This story is about the alienation and isolation faced by the middle class people like Anima amidst the glittering yet smothering aura created by the rich men and women who form the cream of the society. The narrator witnesses this humiliation and wants to retaliate by throwing a stone on the impeccable polished glass of the hotel door but he knows, he is a third rate citizen. Amma and her son walk out of the world they do not belong to:

*I was introduced to the wonderful world of P.G. Wodehouse at the age of eleven by an otherwise wholly unpleasant schoolteacher who read a passage from the Master as part of a dictation test. Five years later I sought to pay the inimitable humorist homage by writing a Wodehousean story set in Calcutta- more specifically, in the Saturday club, of whose dread committee my father was a member, and whose fabled Light House Bar, I was too young to enter myself. (33)*

‘How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink’ is an emulation of the world of P.G. Woodhouse. It departs from the traditional style and intent. The Horse Bar is a hub for Bobby Chatterjee and he is a regular visitor to the place. As per the general consensus, the crowd of the bar is constituted of the people who have been jilted by their beloveds and after finding their love out of gear, such people take resort to heavy boozing. He muses over the anecdote of the model Myra he fell in love with. But he comes to know that Myra is double crossing him with another man called Au, who belongs to the IAF. The whole drunken conversation between Bobby and Cedric is just a ploy for Bobby to overcome his frustration for having lost 1000 bucks on his favorite horse ‘Happy Boy’ who is seventh, last in the horse race. Tharoor shows how indulgence and fantasy concocting imaginary characters and narrating a masterful incident that has never occurred, helps people to cope with disappointments in life through escapism.

The inborn literary genius of Shashi Tharoor is also visible in ‘The Village Girl’ where in he beautifully paints the life of Kerala, and its inhabitants, the Malyalis with special focus on the social structure of Malyalis. Again, in this story he displays the contrasting aspects rampant in Indian society between the urban and the rural social behavior and morality as well as the unintended seduction. Sunder is a Delhi university student who travels to Kerala for holidays. He remembers the fashionable girls in the campus as he sees a Malyali girl sitting with him in the living room: “Sunder has never met a girl like her before. He knows . . . the term for its members was behenjjs’ (respected sisters) . . . it was clear that a behenji was what she was. And, horror of horrors, he was going to be introduced to her” (43- 44).

In most of his stories, the locale is a big city of India, but in a few he has depicted the countryside of Kerala which he visited annually. ‘The Village Girl’ is an example of vivid portrayal of the village life. He is fascinated by the serenity, tranquility, greenery and beauty of the land. This story ‘The Village Girl’ is nearly flawless in its description of the Kerala village life. As a teenager he was quite familiar with the traditions and culture of his father’s native place. By dint of his penetrating eyes, Tharoor has been able to draw a contrast between the urban society and rural life. He has shown the ignorance of the masses in the story. Narayani Amma in the story represents the general attitude of the village people who feel that girls’ higher education spoils them.

The conflict between modern and outspoken Sunder and shy Sunita is a remarkable example of the gap that exists between the urban and the rural culture. The socialization of girls and women in Kerala that shapes them into reticent, passive and shy woman is brought to the

forefront. These villages enjoy their primitivism and are completely impervious to the modernity of the urban. These social visits are irksome for Sunder as he finds them repulsive and needless. He feels that he has been dragged to Kerala but his father explains that such trips are essential for him to preserve his identity and “to renew our roots. I may be working in Delhi, but this is where we’re from and where we all belong; Sunder bitterly asked once why, if they wanted to renew their roots, he had to go uprooted” (44-45).

Sunita is only seventeen and about to marry a widower much older than her. She finds it strange that Sunder uses words like ‘sorry’ and ‘thank you’. There are no equivalent words for this etiquette in Malayalam. Sunita’s father is a school teacher who cannot afford dowry hence giving his daughter to an old man who demands fewer dowries. Her father believes that -- ‘a girl has to graduate from homework to house work’ (52). Sunder cannot comprehend how a seventeen year old girl can marry a widower who has a two year old baby, and be happy. His reaction to such rural customs fuels anger in him which was nevertheless impotent. He cannot do anything about it since these marriage transactions happen in millions of Indian families.

During the conversation both of them come closer to each other and in a quiet corner of the house Sunder seduces the girl: “It was not a conscious motion, and it should have simply fallen to his side, but it did not. It fell upon her breast, and after that there was nothing any more he could do to prevent what happened” (54).

Sunder asks for forgiveness before his departure: ‘I am sorry’ and he is startled when the simple village girl whose face lit with a strange radiance who has changed into a woman replies ‘Thank you - Sunder’. This story is a social commentary on the marriage - institution in India. Keen observer as Shashi Tharoor is, ‘The Professor’s Daughter’ is his probe into the recesses of the teenagers, their mutual chemistry and his impression of the young girls. He delineates their psyche and the social realities in which their life flowers itself. ‘The Professor’s Daughter’ is a story of one such young girl who is unfortunately a daughter of a sadist Professor Chhatwal. The girl Jasvinder known as Jazzy becomes the imaginative elusive beauty whom the boys on the college campus express their adolescent desires to have a glimpse of her. The Professor is known to be an isolated man but one day during his jogging rounds they see a young girl with him and then the speculations on the campus begin. She is a slim young girl whom the professor hides away from prying eyes of young men on the campus. The rumor mills start working overnight and everybody dreams of Jazzy. There are wild imaginative ideas circulated about her. She becomes the much thought about female on the campus, and more boys begin visiting Prof. Chhatwal for tutorials.

Professor Chhatwal realizes that the girl has caused a sensation, the jogging abruptly stops. This girl, according to the narrator, is denied her rights and freedom; she is forbidden to speak with any boy. One day the narrator Har Bhajan Singh, everyone calls him H.B. tries to talk to Jazzy and is caught by professor, who beats Jazzy mercilessly. The introductory dialogue turns the death knell for the girl. H.B. watches the wooden rule crushing down Jazzy’s pale skin. The myth created by the campus gossip is shattered. Tharoor brings out the pathos of a young girl’s life, who lives with a sadistic father. At the age of seventeen she is subjected to unspeakable misery even when her father is a highly educated person. These two stories are sketches of the condition of millions of girls in India, whether they live in urban or rural area. The story exemplifies a remarkable contradiction prevailing in Indian society. Ideally, women are worshiped as the symbol of goodness but in reality treated inhumanly.

‘Auntie Rita’ is a short story in which Tharoor has a different story with a different approach towards human relations. The story has been spun around Auntie Rita and her

husband's nephew who share an adulterous relationship. The way Tharoor has realistically carried out his probes into the psyche of the characters is remarkable. Arjun, the nephew of Kumar uncle is in his adolescence and is infatuated with a girl of her age, yet he falls a prey to the snares of Auntie Rita and her sexual enchantment. Consequently his moral and emotional world falls apart and he finds himself in a shocked and bewildered state. He is unable to find a way out of the maze of sensual encounters and all his efforts to rationalize the issue fall flat. The plot of the story reflects the issues that were prevalent in Indian Cinema at that time: aged lady falling in love with a young boy. The sexual encounter with his auntie in absence of Kumar uncle leaves Arjun astounded; the adolescent finds it difficult to rationalize the sensual encounter with his family member: "The sin of self-obsession attributed to him by the well-rounded nymphet could now be washed away in the purificatory waters of the all-excusing ego. What a difference between a mature, wise woman of the world and a flighty sixteen-year-old slattern who flirted with you and never gave you a chance to find out where exactly you stood with her . . . ." (119). The uncontrollable carnal desires of Auntie Rita lead them to the cauldron of love-making during Uncle Kumar's absence. Arjun finds himself in a pathetic situation when he is asked by Auntie Rita to buy a condom. The young boy hasn't even seen one, he is red in the face when he asks the medical store owner for a box of contraceptives, and much to his surprise the store has none. It is true Arjun does have a sense of guilt but: "His initial vague stirrings of conscience were smothered in the incipience by a line of rest from Somerset Maugham's *The Bread-Winner* that auntie Rita pointed out to him: You know, of course, that the Tasmanians, who never committed adultery, are now extinct . . . ." (127).

This story may also be an example of contradictions within Indian society. Very minutely and intricately, Tharoor psychologically unweaves the fabric of sensuality shared by an older woman and a young boy. The difference lies in the aftermath of their sensual encounter. Tharoor beautifully explicates the unaffected psyche of Rita who has neither remorse nor guilt on her part whereas Arjun is in the river of remorse and emotional loss. There is only physical attraction for Rita who is well passed her prime and has no children. The aged woman in her weaker moments of life tries to substitute her barrenness. Nothing has changed for her even when her husband returns, she is very normal to him but for Arjun, his world has been totally changed. Adolescents take their first sexual experiences very seriously. In a pathetic scene the young boy Arjun weeps into his pillow when he hears affectionate sounds emanating from the other room. In his depression he eavesdrops and is shocked to see the same Rita who has had romantic interludes with him. She is most comfortably at ease in the arms of her husband but Arjun is happy for the reawakening "Arjun smiled in anticipation. This was only the beginning (129). 'The Other Man' is a story of a woman impregnated by a lover who bids her goodbye forever as he never comes back to her. She is a girl of eighteen in search of unknown. The story is a scathing satire on realities that happen in society yet due to social taboos such realities die under the rock of societal codes and never surface up due to social constraints. The girl is in an amorous relationship with the man who leaves her in the lurch and goes abroad for not returning ever again: "Left her for the attractions of an alien land where there was money and pride and that intangible thing you termed satisfaction. Left her with a ring and a promise that you would return to redeem the pledge it represented. And she let you go, accepting your departure as unavoidable, refusing to be tempted in to hoping for your return. Because she loved you" (115). Through the eyes of the narrator a beautiful dedication of a husband is seen. The narrator is the husband who has unfaltering faith that one day his love will be reciprocated by his wife. When he marries this beautiful woman, he knows that she is in love with Arvind but was extremely



patient that one day she will love her husband as much as he loves her: “Loving her, I slowly learned not to expect anything in return, or even from myself. All along I was gentle and loving and patient. And all broken up inside” (115).

Tharoor doesn't romanticize the idea of sacrifice by the adolescents of both the genders. He finds such societal ideas as futile and senseless as well as without reflection. This story is different because the Indian male in its power and pride as a governor of his wife's life is unable to tolerate the intrusion and encroachment of another man in their life or a competitor to the husband. In this story the 'other' man we come across is a rare sort of man -- husband who knows that his wife yearns for another man but still loves her. This story is also a popular theme in Bollywood. The theme is of magnanimous husband waiting for his wife to return to him. The climax of the story startles readers from a complacency that comes from traditionality:

That the ring she wears in the second finger is not yours but mine. That the surname she bears today is not the one you wrote on the airmail you addressed to her but the one I signed on our marriage register. That she chose at all to marry me when she was still yours. For there is one thing I know that you will never learn and that the world will never tell you. That six months after she became my wife, she bore me your son. (116-17)

'Friends' is a story that dwells deep into another aspect of adolescent life where a beautiful friendship of three boys shatters due to the entry of a beautiful girl in their lives. The story is based on his personal experience of St. Stephen's days. It is about three fast friends who are room-mates as well and fall in love with the same girl. There is a perfect understanding between these two friends: “It wasn't that just we were always together; what surprised people was the infinite delight we found in each other's company even after all that time” (83).

Ramlal Agarwal, in his review, observes:

'Friends' deals with two friends who end up quarreling over a girl. 'City Girl, Village Girl: A Duet' is an example of slick writing: in the first part a westernized boy visits his ancestral village only to end up in a sexual encounter with a simple village girl; in the second a westernized girl makes a similar trip to her ancestral village and ends up in an identical sexual encounter with a village youth. (Agarwal 432)

Rekha's image has been projected very positively by Tharoor. She consciously doesn't play any part in breaking their friendship yet indirectly she becomes the bone of contention between V.V. and P.M. She is wise, judicious and intelligent girl with good oratory and debating skills. She has the capacity to impress people. The trio is formed when Vicky and P.M. see her in an Inter-Collegiate debate competition and are impressed by her. Vicky and P.M. are fast friends with contrasting qualities. Vicky is a playboy sort of boy whereas P.M. is serious in life regarding relationships. Rekha is a good friend to both but she is smitten in love for Vicky. Their friendship is known to the whole campus. But as Vicky is an easy going chap with no seriousness in relationships he carries on with his flings with other girls whenever he finds better opportunities. This nature of his leads him to ignore Rekha and move to another girl. P.M. has developed feelings for Rekha simultaneously and has respect for her. The situation is worsened when he cannot tolerate the obscene remarks of V.V. about Rekha:

Vicky added, 'I don't think I've ever seen anyone less sexy than dear Rekha. Hell, man--she's got shoulders like a clothes- hanger, and there's less on her bosom than in my pockets on a Monday morning.' 'Shut up', I said, suddenly venomous. He didn't seem to sense the change in my tone,

‘If I took her to our room and the Warden came in, he’d really find a skeleton in our cup-board’, added Vicky. Suddenly I hit him. (92)

Consequently the action of P.M. brings an end to their beautiful friendship. P.M. is in a fit of uncontrollable rage and hits V.V. Shocked V.V. too gets furious, packs his bag and leaves the room thus leaving his friend sulking inside. P.M. is apologetic and is unable to give vent to his feelings as he finds himself choked and then he expresses: ‘I sat down heavily on the bed, and for the first time in many years, I wept’ (94).

‘The Solitude of the Short-Story Writer’ is not like the earlier stories of Tharoor. It is about an American writer and the world of American Fiction. The story centers around psychiatrists and their thoughts, perception and emotions. Through this story, Philip Roth and Woody Allen have immortalized their relationship. The story is a sort of explication of his skill, his art and his craft of story writing. By profession, Jennings contributes story books to the newspapers which are published serially. His skill of story writing has earned him name as well as fame and he is not unknown to anybody in America: “Jennings learned to measure his success by the number of calls he no longer had the courage to make. Each brilliant, honest, revelatory short-story proved apocalyptic for some friend, ruined some relationship, shattered some illusion” (131).

The problem area of Jennings’ writings is that his works are not fictitious rather his own experiences and encounters with people around him form the substance of his stories. And this leads to his distancing with most of the people he has written about. People when identify themselves in his stories prefer to move away from him rather than coming closer to him. And a very important factor is that Jennings is interested in projecting a negative image of the characters which his real life people find impossible to accept. ‘The Shanks of the Shrunken Shrink’ too is such a story which earns him more enemies than friends. The ‘Shrink’ in the title refers to psychologists who counsels patients. The modernized society of America has its problems of isolation, loneliness and dejection and this leads to majority of people seek psychiatric help. When Jennings’ stories are read by people, their self-identification invokes a feeling of hatred in them towards the writer. When Jennings is unable to bear the burden of rejection and loneliness, the ultimate resort left for him is to seek the help of a shrink named Dr. Clausewitz. In a candid conversation, Jennings confesses that the urge and compulsion to write is overpowering, Dr. Clausewitz questions why he has to write about people. He knows why he can’t write about fictitious people, Jennings replies: “Publication is important to me. *Communication* is what writing’s all about. If my fiction about real people doesn’t communicate something to other real people, if it doesn’t disseminate the message, the insight, I feel it contains, then the entire purpose of my writing is negated. I need to publish as much as I need to write (133).

The psychologist takes no time in identifying the illness of Jennings. He realizes that Jennings is writing biographical sketches of real men under the guise of fiction. He is recounting about real people whereas he is supposed to write fiction about fictitious people. The doctor finds that Jennings is a psycho patient and his uncontrollable desire to write about real people is taking a toll on his relations. Being in a profession of writing, a man is supposed to develop more social relations but Jennings’ case is exactly opposite. Jennings is losing people. His writings cause more loss to him than gain in terms of social relations. The shrink suggests that Jennings’ should shift his attention to Women- no matter it be a relationship of friendship, courtship or companionship. But Jennings proves to be completely impervious to the suggestions of the doctor. During one such encounter, when Jennings says: “Every writer of short-stories *is* a

reporter, an investigative reporter of society. Besides, it's a question of the appropriate mode of expression" (135-36).

According to Dr. Clausewitz, the complexity of Jennings doesn't lie in portraying real life characters. Actually, problem is that he writes stories only about those people of real life who at a certain point have a negative side of their life- a negative and a darker side that would bring humiliation to them. The turn of the story is seen when Cheryll, who is the live-in partner of Jennings responds to Jennings in an unexpected way. Jennings is startled to know that Cheryll has no embarrassment if her story 'Vodka and the Virgin' gets published. In fact, she is glad that the story would be a ladder to success for her because the day the story gets published, she would have ample offers of modeling assignments.

'The Death of a Schoolmaster' is yet another account of his personal experiences and has autobiographical elements like the 'Friends'. It is based on maternal grandfather, 'Papa' and who is an epitome of gentility and sensitivity. The Schoolmaster Achan is a humble, human being who is an erudite and a fantastic teacher. The setting is again a Malyali village. Achan the schoolmaster has scholastic leanings and doesn't bother much about the materialistic gains from life. His dutiful wife Amma too is a complement to him with no complaints and thus completes him. Achan and Amma are portrayed as the typically contented village couple living for each other and for the family. As good fortune would have it Achan inherits Valiamamann's assets after his sudden death. This sudden change of fortune especially vast paddy fields added to their happiness but before coming to the inheritance they too have their fair share of ups and downs.

The small troubles of life don't distract him too much. When the eldest daughter of the household falls sick, he anyhow manages to pay the doctor. His scholastic interests enrich his scholastic treasure on one hand but his other duties and works suffer. He is unable to produce in his agricultural land and so he appoints Balan to take care of his fields. Kerala is in a state of flux and agricultural and social revolutions are churning the hitherto status quo maintained till then. The real shock to Achan comes when Balan approaches to pay for the cancer treatment. This sudden jolt brings Achan out of his dreamy world of zamindari and the pride of ownership. Balan is adept at paperwork and as he knows the intricacies of paperwork, he confiscates his property and proclaims himself to be the owner of the fields of Achan. His story brings to the fore the tragic plight the older generation who doesn't move with the transitions and transformations going around and thus suffer. Those who don't cope with the dynamism of the society are not fit to survive and vanish.

Another story 'The Pyre' has an autobiographical element. When he heard about his friend's death in a motorcycle accident, he articulates his reflections on it. His 'The Temple Thief' and 'The Simple Man' are typical magazine entertainers. But Shashi Tharoor as a rationale conscious political thinker cannot justify the murder of democracy during the proclamation of Emergency by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. As a great believer in human rights he understands the importance of Democracy. A. K. Sharma has some words of appreciation for this story because he notes a kind of seriousness and a remarkable maturity in the growing artist through this story: "The Pyre deals with the serious theme of death. It is worth noting that this story was written when Tharoor was merely seventeen. In such an early age no one thinks about the ultimate end. The death of his two friends in accident compelled him to write this story on such a serious theme" (83).

‘The Political Murder’ is a story of how police during the emergency concocted the urgency to justify the political murder and during emergency period those who solve the murder are amply rewarded with high positions. In cross examining the witness on fatal day of Govind Sen’s murder, a member of West Bengal legislative assembly, the needle of suspicion pointed to the odd job man and his wife. Finally they are framed for the murder. Years later, Jacob the Sub-Inspector is elevated to the rank of Deputy Commissioner of Police because he has solved the most celebrated murder in Calcutta (now Kolkata), has learned the political lessons very well and rewarded by the political leader.

Shyamala A. Narayan is of the opinion that emerging new and contemporary writers like Tharoor have secured a position in the mainstream of Indian English Literature:

Younger Indian English novelists feel secure of their place in the mainstream of Indian literature; this is revealed not only by their pronouncements but by their work. There is no consciousness of any foreign audience to whom India has to be explained, nor do they feel that they are writing in a ‘foreign language’. As there is no parade of erotic India, few Indian words are used, and they are explained by their context. Books like *The Five-Dollar Smile*, *Shadows in Dream Time* by Indu Mallah, Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Allan Sealy’s *Hero* do not carry notes or a glossary of Indian terms, though they present India in depth, not just traditional India but the modern India of westernized college students, woman doctors, advertisement agencies and film-stars-turned-politicians. (89)

No writer is free from criticism and Tharoor is also not an exception. He has also to bear the brunt of some harsh criticisms. Tharoor has been criticized by a few that his writing is artificial and un-Indian. He refutes these charges mildly and defends himself as he writes:

I am surprised to still hear suggestions that there is something artificial and un-Indian about an Indian writing in English. Those who level this charge (usually in English) base themselves on a notion of “Indianness” that is highly suspect. Why should the rural peasant or the small-town schoolteacher be considered more quintessentially “Indian” than the pun-dropping collegian or the Bombay socialite who is as much a part of the Indian reality? Indian is a vast and complex country; in Whitman’s phrase, it contains multitudes. The world depicted in the stories is a very narrow slice of it, but it is Indian for all that. The critic M.K. Naik once suggested that the acid test ought to be, “could this have been written only by an Indian?” For most, though not all, of my stories, and certainly of my novel, I would answer that this could not only have been written only by an Indian, but only by an Indian *in English*. In that, and in the pleasure I hope these stories will impart, lies their principal vindication. (12)

The study of Tharoor’s stories in *The Five-Dollar Smile* clearly brings out his concern with different shades of life--love, hate, loss, hypocrisy, deceit, sycophancy, pride, immorality, ego etc. He offers a criticism of social evils like early marriage, the dowry system, unmatched marriages and caste system. Most of his stories are saturated with social realism, but some of them are deliberately kept away from realism. Even as a teenager, Tharoor could handle some serious subjects like death, hypocrisy, deceit, loss and honour. The majority of his stories are

about urban life but a few like ‘The Village Girl’ and ‘The Death of a School Master’ depict the rural life of Kerala.

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