

India As A Thali: A Cultural Metaphor For Diversity In Shashi Tharoor's Show Business

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This Research Article explores India as a Thali: A Cultural Metaphor for Diversity in Shashi Tharoor's Show Business, examining how the novel mirrors India's pluralistic identity through the metaphor of a thali an assortment of varied yet harmonious elements. Tharoor's narrative reflects the coexistence of multiple languages, religions, and traditions, much like the diverse dishes in a thali that together create a unified culinary experience. The study highlights how the thali metaphor encapsulates India's socio-cultural complexity, unity in diversity, and evolving national identity.

Keywords: India as a Thali, cultural metaphor, diversity, Shashi Tharoor, Show Business, pluralism, unity in diversity.

Introduction

Modern Indian Fiction in English: A Brief Overview

Modern Indian Fiction in English refers to literary works written by Indian authors in English, particularly from the post-independence period to the present. Emerging prominently after 1947, this body of literature reflects the complexities of a newly independent nation grappling with issues such as identity, tradition versus modernity, communalism, gender, caste, and globalization. Key early figures like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao laid the foundation with stories rooted in Indian realities while using English as a medium of expression. The 1980s and 1990s saw a global breakthrough with writers like Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), and Shashi Tharoor, who brought experimental narrative forms, postcolonial themes, and global attention to Indian English literature.

Contemporary Indian fiction in English continues to evolve, embracing diasporic voices, feminist perspectives, and postmodern storytelling. It serves as a space where Indian socio-

political life, cultural pluralism, and historical memory are explored with linguistic innovation and global appeal.

The Role of Shashi Tharoor in Indian Fiction

Shashi Tharoor occupies a unique space in Indian English fiction, blending literary artistry with political and historical insight. As both a diplomat and a writer, his work reflects a deep engagement with India's cultural complexity, postcolonial identity, and global positioning. His novels most notably *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and *Show Business* (1992) stand out for their use of satire, intertextuality, and metafiction, challenging traditional narrative structures and national myths.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor reimagines the Indian independence movement and post-independence politics through the framework of the Mahabharata, creating a layered political allegory. This fusion of mythology and modern history showcases his innovative approach to national storytelling. In *Show Business*, he satirizes Bollywood and the symbiotic relationship between celebrity culture and politics, offering a critique of modern India's image-making machinery.

Tharoor's fiction is marked by its cosmopolitan language, rich intertextual references, and a keen awareness of India's pluralistic ethos. He contributes to modern Indian fiction not just as a storyteller, but as a cultural commentator who uses fiction to interrogate history, nationalism, and identity in postcolonial India. His role is particularly significant in positioning Indian English fiction as a space for political engagement and intellectual discourse.

Introduction: Shashi Tharoor

Shashi Tharoor is a prominent Indian author, diplomat, politician, and public intellectual whose contributions span literature, international relations, and Indian politics. Born in London in 1956 and educated at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University, USA), Tharoor served at the United Nations for nearly three decades, including as Under-Secretary-General.

As a writer, Tharoor is known for his articulate prose, sharp wit, and incisive critique of colonialism, nationalism, and cultural identity. His body of work includes both fiction and non-fiction, addressing themes ranging from Indian history and politics to global diplomacy. In the realm of Indian English fiction, he gained critical acclaim with novels like *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), a satirical reworking of the Mahabharata against the backdrop of Indian political history, and *Show Business* (1992), a metafictional critique of Bollywood and celebrity culture.

Tharoor's literary style is characterized by intertextuality, irony, and a deep engagement with India's pluralism and postcolonial legacy. His work plays a significant role in shaping modern Indian English literature, offering readers a blend of intellectual rigor and cultural commentary.

Shashi Tharoor's Academic Life

Shashi Tharoor's academic journey reflects a strong foundation in humanities, international affairs, and public discourse, which has significantly influenced both his literary and political careers. He completed his early education in India and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts

degree in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, where he was recognized for his academic excellence and debating skills.

Pursuing higher education abroad, Tharoor earned his postgraduate degrees from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, USA. He completed his M.A. in International Affairs, followed by a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy (MALD), and eventually a Ph.D. in International Relations at the age of 22 making him one of the youngest doctoral graduates in Fletcher's history.

His academic training, especially in international relations and diplomacy, laid the groundwork for his later work at the United Nations and deeply informs his literary themes, particularly in works dealing with postcolonial identity, global power structures, and cultural diplomacy.

Shashi Tharoor's Fiction

Shashi Tharoor's contribution to Indian English fiction is notable for its intellectual depth, narrative innovation, and critical engagement with history, politics, and culture. As a novelist, Tharoor blends satire, intertextuality, and postcolonial commentary to present a nuanced and often provocative portrait of modern India. His fiction is characterized by a hybrid narrative style that fuses myth, media, and modernity, offering a literary space where the complexities of Indian identity and nationhood are interrogated.

Thematic Concerns

Central to Tharoor's fiction is the exploration of Indian pluralism, postcolonial identity, and the intersection of politics, culture, and history. His novels often challenge grand nationalist narratives by juxtaposing them with mythology (*The Great Indian Novel*), popular cinema (*Show Business*), or fragmented personal testimonies (*Riot: A Love Story*). Through these lenses, Tharoor critiques political hypocrisy, communalism, media manipulation, and the commodification of culture.

Major Works

The Great Indian Novel (1989) A satirical reimagining of the Indian freedom struggle and post-independence politics using the structure and characters of the *Mahabharata*. It parodies political figures and events, blending epic mythology with contemporary history to question the foundations of Indian democracy. *Show Business* (1992) A metafictional critique of Bollywood and its convergence with political and religious life in India. The protagonist, Ashok Banjara, embodies the performative nature of public life, and the novel uses a fragmented structure interspersed with fictional film scripts to emphasize the blurred boundaries between illusion and reality. *Riot: A Love Story* (2001) A serious, documentary-style novel centered on the mysterious death of an American woman during a communal riot. Through diary entries, interviews, and newspaper clippings, Tharoor presents multiple perspectives, highlighting the unreliability of official narratives and the socio-political roots of violence.

Narrative Style and Technique

Tharoor's narrative style is postmodern in its approach marked by: Intertextuality, Drawing from Indian epics, popular culture, history, and journalism. Metafiction, Self-aware narratives

that question the act of storytelling itself. Satire and Irony: Used to critique institutions and public figures. Fragmented Structure: Especially in Riot, where multiple voices and formats create a collage of perspectives.

Literary and Cultural Impact

Shashi Tharoor's fiction has played a critical role in expanding the thematic and stylistic boundaries of Indian English literature. His works have been studied for their innovative use of Indian mythology, their political satire, and their exploration of postcolonial realities. By weaving together India's past and present, myth and modernity, Tharoor offers readers a layered and dynamic vision of Indian society.

Through his fiction, Shashi Tharoor not only entertains but provokes critical thought about the nature of Indian democracy, culture, and identity. His novels stand at the crossroads of literature and political commentary, making him a distinctive voice in modern Indian English fiction. His works continue to be relevant in academic and literary discourse, particularly within postcolonial, cultural, and comparative literature studies.

Shashi Tharoor's Show Business as a Cultural Fiction

Shashi Tharoor's novel Show Business (1992) stands as a significant example of cultural fiction in modern Indian English literature. Blurring the lines between cinema, politics, religion, and national identity, the novel functions not just as satire but as a lens through which the cultural fabric of post-independence India is examined. By centering the narrative on the life of a fictional Bollywood superstar-turned-politician, Ashok Banjara, Tharoor offers a compelling commentary on the performative nature of modern Indian society.

Defining Cultural Fiction

Cultural fiction refers to literature that deeply engages with the traditions, institutions, and everyday practices of a society. It reflects how culture shapes, and is shaped by, people's lives. In this context, Show Business functions as cultural fiction by portraying Bollywood as a microcosm of Indian society and revealing how cultural narratives influence political and personal realities.

Bollywood as Cultural Mirror

In Show Business, Bollywood is not merely a backdrop but a symbol of Indian popular culture, where myths are recycled, identities are manufactured, and collective desires are projected. The protagonist, Ashok Banjara, rises to stardom by playing stereotypical heroic roles in formulaic films, which reflect common Bollywood tropes justice, masculinity, morality, and melodrama. These films, fictionalized within the novel through script excerpts, mirror the aspirations, contradictions, and stereotypes that permeate Indian society.

Through this portrayal, Tharoor critiques the way cinema becomes a substitute for cultural truth, shaping the public's expectations of politics, religion, and morality. The title itself Show Business is a metaphor for how real-life politics and religion have become performative, commodified spectacles in contemporary India.

Politics as Performance

The novel explores the overlap between cinema and politics, especially in the way politicians adopt cinematic strategies to cultivate mass appeal. Banjara's transition from actor to Member of Parliament illustrates how celebrity culture and political populism often reinforce one another. Tharoor presents a society where image overrides ideology, and public discourse is shaped more by charisma than by substance.

This blending of roles reflects India's cultural reality, where several real-life actors have entered politics, and where myth and spectacle dominate political narratives. Tharoor satirizes this through sharp irony, suggesting that both cinema and politics rely on illusion, storytelling, and performance.

Cultural Pluralism and Fragmentation

Show Business also subtly addresses the diversity of Indian culture by highlighting the multilingual, multi-religious, and multi-class audience of Indian cinema. While films project unity through nationalistic themes, the novel exposes the underlying fractures in society, including communal tensions, religious manipulation, and gender inequalities. Thus, Tharoor uses fiction to critique how cultural unity is often constructed and superficial, masking deeper societal divides.

Justification of the Title

India's cultural identity has long been described through metaphors that attempt to capture its vast diversity of language, religion, ethnicity, cuisine, and customs. Among the most evocative of these is the metaphor of India as a thali a traditional Indian meal composed of multiple dishes, each distinct in Flavors and texture, yet collectively forming a cohesive whole. Unlike the Western "melting pot" metaphor that implies cultural assimilation, the thali emphasizes unity in diversity, allowing each element to retain its individuality while contributing to a greater composite identity.

Shashi Tharoor, a prominent figure in Indian English literature, frequently invokes this metaphor in his political writing and fiction. In his novel Show Business (1992), Tharoor explores the intricacies of Indian identity through the intersecting worlds of Bollywood, politics, and religion. Though the thali metaphor is not explicitly stated in the novel, it is embedded in its structure, themes, and characters. The narrative reflects India's fragmented yet interwoven realities, where various cultural, religious, and regional identities coexist sometimes harmoniously, often in tension.

This paper examines how Show Business functions as a literary thali, offering readers a taste of India's pluralistic identity through a blend of satire, metafiction, and cultural critique. By analyzing the novel through the lens of the thali metaphor, this study aims to uncover how Tharoor articulates the contradictions, cohesiveness, and cultural performativity that define modern India. In doing so, the paper positions Show Business not just as a satire of Bollywood and politics, but as a cultural narrative that mirrors the diverse, complex, and layered nature of the Indian nation itself.

Objectives of the Study

➤ To explore the metaphor of India as a "thali" as a framework for understanding cultural diversity, pluralism, and identity in the Indian context.

- To analyse Shashi Tharoor's Show Business as a work of cultural fiction that reflects the complex and layered nature of Indian society through its narrative structure, characters, and thematic concerns.
- To examine how the novel critiques the performative aspects of Indian public life, particularly in the realms of cinema, politics, and religion, and how these elements mirror the fragmented yet interconnected dishes of a thali.
- To investigate the representation of regional, linguistic, and religious identities within the novel and how they collectively contribute to the portrayal of a culturally diverse India.
- To assess the use of satire, metafiction, and intertextuality in Show Business as literary tools that reinforce the thali metaphor by presenting multiple perspectives and narrative voices.
- To contribute to the broader discourse on postcolonial Indian identity by highlighting how literary metaphors, such as the thali, offer alternative models to Western paradigms of nationhood and cultural integration.

In the context of India as a Thali: A Cultural Metaphor for Diversity in Shashi Tharoor's Show Business, cinema emerges as a vital medium for conveying complex ideas and showcasing India's pluralistic ethos. Much like a thali that brings together a variety of distinct yet complementary dishes, Indian films encapsulate the multifaceted nature of the nation its languages, cultures, and social strata. For Tharoor, cinema is not merely entertainment but a reflective surface that captures the evolving social landscape of India. It offers a narrative space where the joys and struggles of different communities are portrayed, allowing audiences to engage with the country's diversity through a shared cultural experience. Besides, they are being used to foster communal harmony and a feeling of tolerance and brotherhood among different communities in India:

1970 mega hit *Amar Akbar Anthony*¶, for instance, was an action-adventure film about three brothers separated in infancy who are brought up by different families – one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. As a result, one is a smuggler, one a street fighter. How they discover each other and turn on the villains is why the audience flocked to the films ...but in the process they also received the clear message that Christians, Hindus and Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavor for justice. (The Hindu)

So, this brings one idea to the forefront that the popular entertainment can maintain communal harmony to a great extent.

In Show Business, Shashi Tharoor portrays the Mumbai film industry as a symbolic microcosm of India's cultural plurality much like a thali, which unites diverse Flavors on a single plate. Cinema, described by Patil as a “collective fantasy” and a “vehicle of hope,” serves both as a mirror reflecting societal truths and as a mask offering escapist illusions. Tharoor satirizes Bollywood's dynamics, particularly its male gaze, as an exercise of power that reduces women to objects of desire “you urban sophisticates know that ultimately all women are reducible to what you want out of them. And it's always the same thing” (SB 58). Through the rise and fall of Ashok Banjara, a fictional superstar, Tharoor transforms Bollywood into a metaphorical stage where the lines between reality and performance blur, exposing the theatrical nature of not only cinema but also politics and religion. All three, he suggests, are forms of “show business” that sell curated dreams to the masses. The novel

critiques how cinema stylizes and distorts harsh social realities like poverty, revealing the tension between lived experience and cinematic representation. Ultimately, Show Business emerges as a layered narrative that celebrates and questions India's diversity, turning storytelling itself into a cultural performance within the thali of national identity.

In Show Business, Shashi Tharoor highlights the paradoxical relationship between cinema and politics in India, noting that while both operate on similar structures of spectacle and narrative, cinema often skirts around pressing social issues unless incentivized, such as through tax benefits for promoting national integration. Tharoor uses cinema not just to depict the film industry but as a metaphorical lens to critique societal power dynamics and the public's preference for escapist fantasy over stark realism. He justifies this choice by pointing to the country's high illiteracy rate, positioning film as the dominant medium for storytelling and cultural transmission. Tharoor is intrigued by how popular Hindi cinema especially its formulaic, commercial variety constructs modern myths and reflects collective desires. He questions both the content and the method of storytelling, probing what these narratives reveal about Indian identity and how they resonate with audiences. Scholars like Fareeduddin Kazmi affirm cinema's unparalleled influence in India, recognizing it as the most accessible and impactful form of mass communication. Tharoor's narrative, set in Bombay the symbolic heart of Bollywood underscores the city's deep entwinement with the nation's cinematic and cultural imagination.

In Show Business, Shashi Tharoor foregrounds the dichotomy between reality and illusion that defines the Indian film industry, using the protagonist Ashok Banjara's journey to illustrate this tension. The novel opens with a debate between Ashok and Malini, highlighting the perceived authenticity of cinema versus theatre. Ashok argues that Hindi films resonate more with the masses than English-language theatre, which he views as elitist and inaccessible. Malini, however, challenges this notion, exposing the paradox of seeking truth in an inherently artificial medium. Tharoor constructs a dual narrative one rooted in the chaotic, democratic reality of India, and the other in the exaggerated, fantastical realm of Bollywood. Through Ashok's awkward initiation into film acting, including his failed attempts at romantic scenes and his disillusionment upon discovering the artificiality of a celebrated actress's appearance, Tharoor critiques the constructed nature of cinematic spectacle. The novel thus interrogates whether cinema in India serves merely as escapist entertainment or plays a deeper cultural role in shaping public consciousness. By juxtaposing the reel and real, Tharoor reveals that in the world of show business, appearances are deceptive and fantasy often masquerades as truth.

Tharoor Use of Cinematic Metaphor

Tharoor's Show Business opens with a vivid portrayal of Bollywood as a metaphorical thali an eclectic mix of flavors representing India's cultural diversity. The novel uses the film industry as a symbolic space where fantasy and reality collide, offering insight into the contradictions of Indian society. Through the protagonist Ashok Banjara, a fictional superstar, Tharoor explores how cinema becomes a vehicle for both mass escapism and subtle social commentary. Shashi Tharoor's Show Business, as a narrative of cinema, is focused upon Hindi commercial cinema, especially, the popular formulaic movie. Fareeduddin Kazmi observes of the conventional movie as the most effective medium in India since:

The cinema is the cheapest, most accessible and effective medium of mass communication and image building. Psychologists, Political Scientists, Sociologists, anthropologists' folklorists, structural linguistics, for long cocooned in their disciplinary orthodoxies, are now being forced to come out and take note of this strange 'and curious 'medium ... (134).

Duality of Reel and Real:

The narrative oscillates between the reel world of Bollywood and the real world of Indian democracy, politics, and religion. Tharoor constructs a layered reality where cinema is not just entertainment but a reflection of societal aspirations and illusions. Ashok's journey from a theatre enthusiast to a Bollywood icon reveals the tension between artistic integrity and commercial success, highlighting the artificiality embedded in cinematic storytelling. In Show Business Tharoor 's protagonist affirms the power of the male gaze, which shapes the identity of the female body, she is also passive, the object of the hero 's adoration and the villain 's lust (SB14).

Bollywood as Cultural Performance

Tharoor critiques the performative nature of Indian cinema, where exaggerated depictions of poverty, romance, and heroism distort lived realities. The novel satirizes the industry's obsession with spectacle, as seen in Ashok's awkward attempts to enact romantic scenes and his disillusionment with the physical falseness of a celebrated actress. These moments underscore the theme that nothing in show business is as it seems, reinforcing the metaphor of cinema as a curated thali of illusions. As Suhasini Vincent notes, Tharoor's Show Business "uses the film world as a mirror to reflect the illusionary nature of Indian popular culture, where artifice becomes authenticity and performance replaces truth" (85).

Politics and Religion as extensions of Show Business:

Beyond cinema, Tharoor extends the metaphor of "show business" to politics and religion. Ashok's transition into politics mirrors his film career, suggesting that both domains rely on performance, manipulation, and public spectacle. Characters like Guru represent religious figures who, like film stars and politicians, sell fantasies to the masses. This convergence of roles emphasizes how public life in India is often theatrical, blurring the lines between authenticity and artifice.

A Fable of Illusion

Ultimately, Show Business is a fable for contemporary India, where fantasy often replaces reality. G.M. Patil, the renowned scholar Criticizing the social Taboo reflected in his work "—Did you ever wonder why you were so much more popular a filmic hero than a politician? Why the mass adulation you enjoyed as an actor failed to translate into mass political support when you needed it?" (294). Tharoor's satirical tone and metafictional structure challenge readers to question the narratives they consume whether on screen, in politics, or in spiritual life. By presenting India as a thali of diverse yet contradictory elements, the novel celebrates pluralism while critiquing the seductive power of illusion in shaping public consciousness.

Conclusion

In the concluding section of Show Business, Tharoor masterfully blurs the boundary between cinematic illusion and lived reality. As Ashok Banjara faces death, his perception of the world dissolves into abstraction only pain remains tangible. Yet, even in his final moments, Ashok clings to the conventions of film narrative, refusing to accept a realistic ending devoid of justice or resolution. Tharoor subverts the traditional closure of fiction by suggesting that true completeness arises from the fusion of fantasy and reality. This metafictional approach critiques the formulaic structure of Indian cinema, which often avoids confronting systemic issues and instead offers superficial victories over individual antagonists. The novel thus questions whether cinema in India serves merely as escapism or can evolve into a medium of meaningful social engagement.

Tharoor employs satire and irony to expose the glamorous yet morally ambiguous world of Bollywood. Through vivid depictions of romanticized scenes, casting couch dynamics, and fleeting relationships, he critiques the emotional and ethical hollowness behind the cinematic façade. The protagonist's entanglements reflect the chaos and contradictions of the film industry, where public personas mask private disillusionment. Show Business ultimately transcends entertainment, offering a layered commentary on India's socio-political landscape. It reveals the pluralistic nature of Indian society its joys, struggles, and contradictions while challenging the audience to look beyond the screen and confront the realities that cinema often glosses over.

Shashi Tharoor's Show Business serves as a compelling cultural allegory that mirrors the diversity and contradictions of Indian society through the lens of Bollywood. By framing cinema as a metaphorical thali an assortment of Flavors representing India's pluralism Tharoor critiques the performative nature of film, politics, and religion, all of which sell curated fantasies to the masses. The novel's interplay between reality and illusion, especially in its metafictional structure and satirical tone, underscores the blurred boundaries between public spectacle and private truth. Through Ashok Banjara's rise and fall, Tharoor exposes the emotional, moral, and political complexities of contemporary India, revealing how cinema both reflects and distorts societal narratives. Ultimately, Show Business is not just a story about storytelling it is a layered exploration of identity, aspiration, and the seductive power of illusion in a culturally diverse nation.

(Note: Quotations taken from Shashi Tharoor's Show Business indicated in this research article as SB)

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