

PRISMATIC PERCEPTIONS:
AN ANALYSIS OF THAROOR'S
MINOR WORKS

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CHAPTER VI

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Tharoor's collection of short stories entitled *The Five-Dollar Smile* (1990), which also includes a farce, by name "Twenty-two Months in the Life of a Dog," reveals the sentimental, creative and thereby human aspect of the author's mental personality. It is proposed in this analysis to show that however dissimilar and unrelated the stories are, the elements of multiple perceptions and the blending of fact and fiction into Fiction are present in each of them. The stories are individual and independent in plot, construction and theme. While in certain stories like "Death of a Schoolmaster" and "Friends," facts are made to resemble fiction, other stories like "The Boutique" and "The Other Man" are designed in such a way that pure imagination looks real to us and the story or the character haunts the reader's mind for days to come.

An Indian weaving Indian stories has to have every fibre coming out of an Indian loom. The case of Tharoor's novels and short stories are no different. K. S. Ramamurthi reflects on the 'Indianness' of Indian writing: "A novel written by an Indian will certainly be Indian without any conscious effort on the part of the writer, to the extent to which it depicts Indian life and culture, reflects faithfully, the life and spirit of the Indian ethos" (4). Tharoor's short stories teem with Factional elements,

deliberately construed or otherwise. Realism, history or protruded biography, fantasy, imagination, self-consciousness where the author determinately makes us feel his presence in between sequences, stream-of-consciousness, intertextuality, narrative, myth, comedy and redaction, are all scattered in plenty here and there, making Tharoor's minor works, comprising fourteen stories and a one-act play, a beautiful example of Faction. Real episodes of his youthful life, taken in their intensity, sometimes ameliorate and at other times deteriorate and are given to us in a fantasized and fictional text. The background for every story is social reality—but the author communicates this social reality through the medium of imagination—thus every story is a mixture of **fact** and **fiction**. The same is applicable to the farce entitled “Twenty-two Months in the Life of a Dog.”

In the Foreword to *The Five-Dollar Smile*, Shashi Tharoor tells us that after the publication of *The Great Indian Novel* and *Show Business*, a variety of people showed interest in his early work; hence his decision to bring out the present volume. He says that he began writing at a very young age, “his first ‘story’ emerging when he was only six” (11). The stories collected here, however, were written during his adolescence. In fact, one of them was composed when he was fifteen. Tharoor clarifies that he wrote for audiences of mass-circulation magazines and to be published and read, not to pursue an obscure literary aesthetic.

The Five-Dollar Smile is one of the earliest of Tharoor's ventures into fiction. Like the entire gamut of his works, this collection of short stories also attempts a postmodern assessment of contemporaneity, employing parody, playfulness and multiple perceptions. *The Great Indian Novel*, similarly, 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 epic. In his employment of the technique of playfulness, Tharoor crams into the narrative of *Show Business* stage techniques, screenplays, film songs, makeup-room gossip, bedroom scenes and more, to create a simulacrum of the celluloid world.

The first story of the volume, "The Five Dollar Smile," was an attempt to come to terms with a number of Tharoor's most immediate concerns—the experience of geographical and emotional dislocation, the internationalization of aid for the needy, and nature of the charitable impulse. He tried to write the story from the point of view of the recipient of assistance, rather than the provider of it. Tharoor 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. Joseph Kumaran, the boy hero of the story grows up in an

orphanage belonging to HELP—an international organization for the poor and the needy. One day he is asked to be a model for a photograph—a photograph with the caption.

“Make This Child Smile Again.” (19)

This photograph was to become internationally famous. Joseph became a symbol, even a synonym for the suffering, refugee juvenilia in the world. The photograph touched the chord of sympathy in many a maternal and paternal bosom. People start sponsoring the poor children of HELP. Joseph himself gets sponsors from America. His tearful face involves the sympathy of one couple in America. The authorities of HELP receive five dollars every month for his needs. People said he had the “Five-Dollar Smile” but he is not intimidated. Three couple send money for the “boy in the photograph” and Sister Celine was happy along with Sister Eva and Sister Angela that “Joseph Kumaran’s five-dollar-smile was actually getting HELP fifteen dollars a month” (20).

He is made to write three identical letters of thanks to the three couples. Once, he takes the liberty of showing interest in seeing America, adding sentences like “I suppose it is cooler in America. . . I think I would enjoy America very much . . . I often wonder whether America, has trees like the ones in my drawing . . . if I come to America, do you think I might like it?” (21) as postscripts after the censoring of the letters by the nuns got over. It works. His ‘parents’ express their wish to see their

'adopted' child. Since they would never be able to manage a trip to India, would it not be possible for young Joseph to be sent to America instead? Sister Celine smells a rat. She shows the letter to Joseph and asks, "You haven't been up to anything, have you?" (22). In the end Sister Celine agrees. He is not just a little brown face in a crowd around the gruel bowl; he is Master Joseph Kumaran and he is going somewhere. Joseph boards the plane to America. He is awed and at a loss as to how to manage or conduct himself in the aircraft. He asks and gets a pair of earphones to hear the sounds of the movie shown but has to give them back. Joseph looks at the four year old paper clipping which carried the picture of his face. He experiences mixed feelings. He was not sad to leave the orphanage on a month's holiday to America because he himself had contrived it. He tries to think of the magic of America—the movies, parties, delicious food of infinite variety, outings to the beach and to Disneyland. But his eyes dilate and the photograph blurs.

He does not know why he feels suffused with loneliness more intense, more bewildering in its sadness than he had experienced in the gruel-crowds of HELP. He is somewhere between a crumpled magazine clipping and a glossy brightness of a colour photograph of his foster parents. The story ends simply like this. "On the screen in the aircraft the magic images flickered, cascaded and danced on" (26). To Tharoor, Joseph Kumaran's situation is the universal state of not belonging

anywhere, the vacillation between this and that, here and there, the contemporary state of being 'in-between,' which is another expression of Faction.

Tharoor's position in the United Nations looking after the department that takes care of the problems of refugees in many parts of the world was a **reality** that influenced his life and embedded itself in his imagination. Thus, Joseph the adivasi orphan was born. The insecurity suffered by Joseph is the true experience of millions of inmates in thousands of orphanages today. The boy's **fantasy** about how America would be and how his foster parents would accept him and how they would make him feel wanted during his short stay there qualify the dream of every orphan. The incidents proceed sequentially, though we do not know what would ultimately happen to the Joseph Kumarans of this world. The photographer who would wake with Joseph's tearful and hungry face the collective conscience of the reading public on the issues of hunger and poverty, the caption that HELP had created—"Make this child smile again" is real only peripherally. It has no depth, no true value nor effect. Sister Celine says, "Your photograph is going to be used in a worldwide appeal. You are helping us to get money to help other children" (18). But it is far from the truth because poverty and hunger will remain, child abuse, insecurity and fear will also remain. As the story ends with the aircraft carrying the little lonely seven-year-old towards the

U.S., we hit the brass tacks—the monotony, despair and hopelessness of all the orphans in the world.

Tharoor tries to confront this world in two very different ways—represented here by the almost painful empathy of “The Boutique.” The story depicts with social realism the situation he had felt at first hand. Amma and her teenager son go to attend a sale at a very elite hotel. Amma is always anxious to see how the sophisticated urbans live. Amma’s curiosity has made her come to the grand sale escorted by her son. Amma is overawed by the landing leading to the suite where the boutique is. People in twos and threes stand around, sipping tea served by a uniformed waiter. Looking at the impressive array of shirts, ties and jackets before her, Amma is awed. Then the salesgirl points out to a “Please don’t touch” card among the clothes (30).

The son understands her anguish at the treatment as well as the unexpected price of the shirt and camouflages it by saying, “It is far too big for me. I would look like a scarecrow if I wear this” (31). Amma is not consoled. Just then, a famous radio disc jockey strides in, tall and ruggedly handsome and begins to play with the clothes and flirt with the salesgirls. The boy envies him with all his heart. He feels physically sick. He wants to get out of the ratified air conditioned atmosphere away from the mirrors that thrust reminders at him of what he really is. But Amma says in a loud shrill voice of complaint, “I thought we weren’t supposed

to touch the clothes” (31). An offended silence descends on the group. Faces turn to look at them. The DJ too turns from his flirtation with the ties and the women. Incredulity and hurt writ all over her face, Amma stands still for a moment. Then slowly, resignedly without a trace of bitterness or resentment walks away with him. With a break in her voice she says, “Yes, son . . . let’s go” (32). No one notices their exit. It is as if an insect is removed from a cup of tea. Evading the eyes of passing waiters, they use the stairs. The boy smiles. “We are going home Amma. The usual way, by bus” (32). He feels the pressure of her hand on his arm as they walk slowly on to join the queue waiting for the bus. This is a story that touches and pulls at our heart-strings not through its spectacular developments, but on the contrary, by the softness and mutual understanding that can be seen only in the unique mother-son relationship. That the tie of the umbilical cord never really gets broken and acts as a soothing balm in heart-breaking moments is seen here. The wavelength and mutual coordination of Amma and the boy are perfect and complete.

As the mother and son move away, the latter thinks, “I wanted to pick up a brick, a tile from the pavement, anything, and throw it at the glass front of the building. I couldn’t. I didn’t have the right to” (32). In the world of artificiality and hypocrisy, the softness the mother and son feel for each other makes them accept the realities not only of their

mediocre surroundings, but also of the fleeting unreality of the higher-up world which was fictional and to which they could never really belong.

“The Boutique” exposes certain binary oppositions that define a local culture. It reveals how the society prioritizes money, glamour, youth, popularity and success as against the “Other” it perpetually marginalizes. It takes the reader on a quick journey down the avenues of the social psyche, manipulated by equations of power and financial considerations. The story explores the lines of intersection between appearance and reality, between the private and the public, in everyday life. The cultural encounter that forms the lynchpin of the story offers multiple perceptions of the society, the indistinguishability of one from the other.

“How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink” is consciously different in style and intent. It is also, deliberately, as divorced from reality as the lives of its protagonists are from the world around them. The story has a club setting, a scenario taken after the Saturday Club in Calcutta. The story begins in the quiet premises of the Light Horse Bar where Bobby Chatterjee was sitting alone, staring at his half-full glass of scotch moodily. Bobby never touched the stuff in normal circumstances and considered liquor the cause of all the ills of our society. Now Cedric was narrating Bobby’s woeful tale of love to his bar-mates in return for a

drink. He says that now the confirmed misogynist Bobby had fallen in love with Myra, a fairly popular and beautiful model.

The culmination of the affair came in the form of a verbal invitation from Myra to spend the forthcoming weekend at her Suburban Budge Home. Flight Lt. Rahim Ali of the IAF was introduced at Budge Home. To overcome his insecurity and misery, Bobby decided to dress up in faded jeans with an awkward patch, pull on a bed ragged T-shirt and speak out of the corner of his mouth like Humphrey Bogart not forgetting to drawl like John Wayne or smile enigmatically like Marlon Brando. Bobby was thoroughly upset to know that Myra had found his usual clothes most charming. His put on slur in speech was identified as talk due to ulcers, “like a hydrophobic canine with throat cancer” (41). When requested sarcastically not to pollute her house further with his undesirable presence, Bobby gave her a strained calmpose smile and with a truly ‘majestic’ stride, he walked up the stairs to collect his things.

Once out of the house, he tried to condone her, looking at things from her point of view. Bobby shot like an arrow straight to the Light Horse Bar, there to drown his sorrows in alcohol. By the time Cedric reached thus far, he had managed to get quite a number of pegs from listeners, for his excellent narration. We now come to know that Bobby never even knew about a girl called Myra. What was his drinking session in aid of then? “I placed a thousand bucks on a hot-tip—Happy Boy in

the 2.30—and it came seventh.’ . . . He walked away through the door through which Cedric had just passed” (42). The whole story is thus built around a non-issue, taking the listeners and the reader for a ride, thus problematizing the very authenticity of narratives and truths.

This is a very humorous story, interrogating the margins of fact and fiction, narrated in a light-hearted way. Sentence after sentence is steeped in mirth and Cedric has spun an excellent and credible yarn to a credulous audience. That the binge was about losing a horse race comes as an anti-climax. The fact that a man with a ready wit and the gift of the gab can get away with anything is brought out here in the form of an imagined story. Tharoor is without doubt stretching the limits of fact and fiction here so that one spills into the other, thus debunking the separate identity of either. His narrative proves that contemporary readers have lost the capacity to distinguish between the real and the imagined, and enjoy an irreversible side of Fiction unconsciously.

The art of good and lucid narration without much fancy trimming is seen in “The Village Girl.” For many urbanized Malayalis of the narrator’s generation, Kerala was a world of private inconvenience and mosquito bites, associated with family but not friends. Yet Kerala depicted “green paddy fields and unpolluted air, endless card games, succulent idlis and dosas that never quite tasted the same elsewhere, laughing girls cheerfully picking lice out of each other’s hair, swaying

palm trees against a twilit sky” (43). Sunder had met a lot of Behanjis. But not anyone like the girl he met in his village once. The girl sitting with her hands on her lap looked closer to his real age than his mother’s estimations of it, but she was certifiably a ‘Behanji.’ As far as Sunder was concerned, the flight to the south every year was strictly for the birds. Home for him was always Delhi. So, every year he had to vegetate with his grandparents in Kerala, eat palate-numbing quantities of coconut chutney and attempt to respond in his insufficient Malayalam to predictable jibes about the length of his hair. The girl however seemed to regard him with a sort of light in her eyes.

“Susheela is Narayani Amma’s niece,” said his mother by way of introducing ‘behanji’ to him (46). She had passed S. S. L. C. in the English medium. When he looked at Susheela, she averted her own gaze. Sunder had to grant that she was pretty in a typically Malayali way. His mother asked Sunder to show the garden to Susheela. He was irritated. But there was something in the girl’s expression—part awe, part delight, part anticipation, part nervousness that changed his mind. Sunder stood on the veranda and sensed, rather than saw, the girl’s silent approach. She was standing, her mouth partly open in nervous excitement and Sunder found his perception of the girl widening to take in two more details. First, she was even shorter than he had guessed; second, her figure was as close to female perfection as he had ever seen. ‘Sunder etta’ she called

him. The 'Behanji' had gone and made an elder brother out of him. That was of course, the Kerala custom. He was nineteen but she was only seventeen.

Sunder could not believe that she had never been to a city, not even Cochin. The farthest she had ever gone was to the Guruvayoor temple with her Amma. He then described the city to her. Yet as he spoke, he realized, "the access he offered was illusory; she lacked the framework, the knowledge, the vocabulary to translate what he was saying into terms she could relate to and evaluate" (52). Her father had said that a girl had to graduate from homework to house work. She said quietly, "I am getting married next month. The week after my eighteenth star birthday" (52). 'Congratulations,' yet another formal word with no equivalent in Malayalam, came forth from him.

She told him how the thin, dark widower with the smell of arrack in his breath and a two year old daughter in his home, came to see her. Sunder felt deracinated, urban outrage welling up in him. Unthinkingly; he put a hand under her chin and lifted her face to meet his gaze: "Are you happy about this?" (53). Her eyes glistened. What else other than marriage then? Sunder struggled with anger and impotence, and anger about his impotence. One hand still holding up her chin, he raised the other to her face to wipe away the tears. She suddenly caught it and kissed his palm. Sunder's free hand started for her chin. It fell upon her breast

and after that there was nothing more he could do to prevent what happened. Neither of them spoke. He had destroyed the illusions of a simple village girl, a nervous young thing who called him 'Sunder etta.' He caught her by the arm at the doorway and spoke the only words that occurred to him. "'I am sorry,' he said" (54). Her face lit up with dreams fulfilled, her smile no longer that of a nervous girl but a woman who had touched a happiness she had not expected to be hers she said, "Thank you, Thank you—Sunder" (55). The story of the unsophisticated village girl and highly sophisticated Sunder is told in a very poignant manner. The ending, typically Tharoorish, is a surprise. It also brings a relief to the reader in the sense, that, what is expected to be averse for a girl is relished with enjoyment and gratitude by her. It is not because she is flirtatious or promiscuous. The realist in her accepts the ecstasy with wholehearted eagerness in the same way as she is ready to accept her miserable, ill-fated and frustrating future. She had been unprepared and undemanding, but when the windfall came her way, she was too much a woman not to take it. Perhaps her "Thank you Sunder" speaks volumes.

This one happy encounter may be cherished by the girl throughout her dull and monotonous wifedom, which she accepts with the stoic resignation of a well-brought up Malayali girl, trained to accept what life offers. The momentary joy that Sunder gave her will be the elixir that sustains her through the rest of her life. The Bhagavad Gita instructs that

one should do one's duty without expecting the fruits of one's action. This tradition is seen in the girl's readiness to agree unwillingly to a marriage proposed by her father. She performs the dharma of a daughter. The one and only experience with Sunder could be the best one for her whole lifetime. The Shelleyan slogan—the sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thought—is seen in the story of this simple village girl.

The narrative is rendered in a realistic style. The urban-rural divide is foregrounded in Sunder's perception. He describes Delhi: "Big buildings, lots of cars, crowds, concrete. No paddy fields! Water out of taps and not out of wells" (51). His reality is her fantasy since she has never gone beyond Guruvayoor from Palghat. The author uses the device of **self-consciousness** here and there, he writes about the boy's life in Delhi which is really a reflection of his own experiences. Though at the time of writing the story, Tharoor had outgrown the "resentment of this forced discovery" (43) of his roots, he could empathize with the likes of Sunder for whom annual visits to Kerala was an obligation rather than a pleasure. This story is a rediscovery of the virgin beauty and innocence of Kerala. **Autobiographical** slices are thus interspersed to bring about Fiction to give a fuller, truer picture of life, which is a mixture of fact and fiction.

There are a lot of **paradoxes** in the story. The physical tallness and shortness. Urban and rural backgrounds. The experienced city slicker and

the village girl, his happy future and her miserably unhappy future, his richness and her poverty etc. are in such steep contrast that these opposites themselves might have attracted them to each other. But **irony** is at its pinnacle when having completed his physical advances on her, he is too suffused with guilt and shame to find words. When he apologizes, rather than getting offended, her face lights up in the radiance of fulfilled dreams and she thanks him. All these mechanisms give us a short story in the Factional mode, showing the blend of reality and fantasy in human life.

The techniques of flashback, stream-of-consciousness narration and nostalgia are used in the story, "The Death of a Schoolmaster," which is one of the best in the whole collection of Tharoor's short stories. It is autobiographical. For a man with no Kerala upbringing, and one who had only visited the state during school holidays, Tharoor's settings are so exact and precise that it seems a straight-forward account of his own upbringing in Kerala.

Most of the incidents are retold by hearsay. The traditional addresses, 'Achan,' 'Amma' and 'Ettan' lend a very realistic touch to the story. Their twist in fortune, a positive one is described very philosophically. Describing his loving, lovable and selfless sister Thangom, he says:

Thangom who saved her next few days' busfare to buy the needle and thread we never had. Thangom who woke up early in the morning to sew the sheet we had torn the previous night before Achan (Father) saw it and beat us all. Those were days when simple sacrifices meant a great deal.

(144)

A great universal law as well as the great selfless love of a sibling is expressed in fiction. "In any case it never crossed Amma's mind to urge any change upon Achan. He was what he was and it was her duty to serve him and raise his family. Whenever Achan was around, her habitual manner was one of compliant diffidence" (145). The iron hand of a patriarchal family scheme where only men wore the pants is information for Tharoor's non-Malayali reader about Kerala.

Achan had given the tending of land to Balan Nair who in turn took the family for a ride. "The land I use here is mine. I have tilled it for the last fifteen years. Last week I registered my possession of it, quite legally under the new Land Reform Act" (155). The agricultural laws in Kerala, a fact that proved highly beneficial to people who had only possession but no ownership and which literally brought to the streets a large number of lords now without lands is effectively woven into a fictional fabric here. Reminiscential autobiographical elements are used effectively:

My father had instilled in me the view that ideas were unrelated to life. I can remember the shock when I knew Achan had cancer. I can also remember the simultaneous euphoria at the news of my victory at the polls. I am no longer sure whether one succeeded in crowding out the other. (153)

The story again ends with nostalgia. Achan died with a book in his hands. The son was there to gently close his tired eyes. He feels, "I knew that, thanks to him mine would always be open" (156). The story thus deftly interweaves social commentary with personal history and emotional states of euphoria and nostalgia.

A dramatic event, in this case an accident, opens the story "The Pyre." The very first sentence "He died in my arms that night" (95) fans the flames of the reader's interest. The two friends on a sly trip on a stolen bike meet a headlong collision with a tree at night, in an inebriated state. One of them dies on the spot. The narrator is the survivor. "My friend was now slipping sway from my life and his" (95), says he, in the style of a dramatic monologue. He keeps lamenting his folly. "God, I wish I wasn't draxed, I couldn't even think properly. And where, when, how would I go?" (97). The dead boy was the only child of Harijan parents, their only hope in an unjust world, the eldest in a family, the blessed future provider. He was dead.

The funeral is announced dramatically. Nostalgia for his past life, reminiscing another funeral that of his favourite grandfather, is related very naturally and looks too real to be fictional. Racist and casteist antipathy is seen in the prophetic sentence “. . . Ram, and you know what? At the end of the whole bloody thing when I’m finally dead and gone, bloody Brahmins are going to come to my funeral” (100). The Harijan scholars stood in a solemn circle away from the rest. The loss of an ambitious life was of no avail to anyone. Tharoor lost two friends at college to motorcycle accidents, neither of whom were on drugs. The proximity of death was not easy to come to terms with, at the age of seventeen; “The Pyre” was a reflection of his attempt to do so. He deliberately fictionalized every subtle detail, so all that remains of the experience that inspired him is the death itself. Here, Tharoor traverses the boundary of fact and fiction in order to transcend the real trauma of personal loss to reach out to larger questions of human mortality.

In the bike accident, one died and the other one survived. In the morning when they came with daybreak to the scene of the accident, they found the dead man and a spent one, both silent and unseeing. The survivor could not weep. Sorrow required a strength he did not possess any more. He signed the papers, wherever the inspector asked him to. To avoid what he thought was a black cat crossing the path; Sujeet had swerved to one side and crashed head first into a tree branch. The cat did

not exist, not outside of Sujeet's imagination, but the branch did and it should not have been there. The survivor wails, "No, the scooter did not belong to him, no, he did not have a licence, but there was nothing wrong with his driving, inspectors. No, its owner was unaware that we were using it. Sujeet's dead! He's dead inspector. . ." (96). The repeated negation is a **refrain** used to increase the dramatic as well as sonorous effect.

The sentimental dramatic monologue, the main Factional technique that is used in the story, continues in this strain. There is only a single narrator and all the conversation, incidents and the accident are understood through the responses and replies of the narrator. The narration itself is in the stream-of-consciousness style as a flashback of the Harijan Sujeet, brainy and smart but carrying the cross of inferiority complex due to his dalit blood, and who gave up his life due to intoxication. His friend and survivor considers himself unlucky for being alive to narrate the story. The easy camaraderie as well as close emotional tie the two young men had for each other and the feeling of the deadman's fiancée Mira are brought out clearly in the elegiac lament. The funeral is described, with the whole college and hostel inmates attending. As they poured vanaspathi "into the crackling fire the flames leapt higher enveloping the body in its shroud under the wood. And the smoke that was Sujeet rose towards the sky" (101).

Thus a social reality, which is the accident itself; a psychological reality which is the feeling of the survivor; a spiritual reality, which is the inevitable truth contained in the last sentence, combine with the fact that the story itself is pure fiction or imagination, to result in Fiction. The incident, though imagined by Tharoor the story-teller, also tells us many facts of life, namely the evil effects of alcohol and the ruthless oncoming of Death, the Leveller, at His own sweet will.

Demythification of a myth through parody, irony, foresight, satirical narration, and shocking and even jarring human sensibility is seen in “The Temple Thief,” a story curiously reminiscent of O. Henry’s works. Raghav is a thief who tried to rob a temple. All the movable idols were taken and put into a sack. He felt the sweat on his palm making his grip on the torch clammy. Then he walked towards a stone-engraved image of Shiva, sitting impassively in a corner. A shudder passed through him. The temple had been stripped bare already. In this profession, he could not afford to be finicky. This was his feeling as a realist. Thieving was no concept. It was a concrete and real necessity. He laid his hand on the Shiva. Do you really think you are going to get away with this—it seemed to ask. Something held him back. God would understand. God would forgive. He would not punish a sinful devotee for wanting to keep his bread buttered. The eternal conflict of good and bad, which is a reality in everyman’s mind, is seen in the story. The Lingam, strong, potent,

indestructible, stood there, a symbol of the immutability of the Saivite ethos. Raghav prostrated before God. He felt the presence near him, before he actually heard any footstep. The sound of light breathing convinced him his companion was no extra-terrestrial apparition, but an all-too-human intruder. Raghav was well and truly caught. It was a Brahmin priest. A small smile played on his ascetic face.

The priest gently asked Raghav why he had ventured into such a sinful profession. He went on that in the Hindu religion; much was tolerated by the Lord. But to do something at the expense of others; not just of one person, but the entire community which maintained in its worship, the temple and all within it; that was a cardinal sin. Raghav had chosen to prostitute his religion to the deity of wealth, to rob his own temple of an idol. The hapless thief trembled in his guilt. The priest added that Raghav was not beyond redemption. Raghav could be saved. “Abandon your sinful ways, my son. Leave now—but never again turn to this means of living. And may the Lord go with you” (60). Raghav’s eyes widened. He sank to his knees to kiss his benefactor’s feet. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he stumbled mutely past the stuffed sack he had put back, and walked out of the temple. The Brahmin smiled sagely at his retreating back. Slowly, deliberately, the Brahmin sighed, padded soundlessly to the sack, picked it up and walked to the temple doorway. His watchful eyes travelled in every direction, his ears pricked for the

slightest sound. "Then he heaved the sack over his shoulder, cast a surreptitious look around him for pursuers, and disappeared into the night" (60).

The last sentence comes up as a sudden shocking revelation. The evolution of thought in the thief's mind shows his simplicity and goodness. Man is never born a criminal, he is made one. The temple thief has his own logic for his profession. Though he steals from a temple, the religious soul within him stirs. Generations of ethnic dos and don'ts make him seek pardon to the very God, whose idol he steals for a living. The idealism of his redemption is probably predictable. He will not only give up looting temples forever, but also will give up thieving altogether in his entire future. He may beg, he may borrow but he may never steal. Such is the change brought about in him by what seems the Brahmin's piety and holiness and his compassionate advice.

But the Brahmin, high-born and priestly, is beyond the naïve expectations of the reader. The baseness of his soul is bared when he uses his religiosity, intellectual superiority and 'put on' companionship to beguile the poor fellow and makes a cakewalk with another man's effort. The Brahmin, who was rhetorical about sin, is the real sinner. Unlike the priest, the thief is not a hypocrite. But for the Brahmin, who is so called because of his proclaimed knowledge of the Brahma, i.e.; having Brahma Jnana, preaching was as remote from practice as can be. He can never be

forgiven. He can also be taken as an archetype of our modern successful yet benign society-tycoons and magnates for whom as a principle, preaching should never be practising. This is again a story that maps the collapse of appearance and reality, exposing society as Janus-faced and deceitful. The fiction of the Brahmin priest is juxtaposed with the fact of the sin of the thief. The horrendous realization that all fact is contaminated by fiction, that purity, genuineness, sincerity and reality are fictions, dawns upon the reader. Fiction, thus, serves to expose the true nature of society, where fact and fiction have spilled into one another.

“There was something ominous about the statue’s unblinking repose, as if the idol was assured of its eventual triumph over all forces of evil, from atheists to temple thieves” (56) shows the ultimate victory of virtue, symbolized by the idol and later the priest, which itself Tharoor reveals to be fiction. In the contemporary world, virtue cannot possibly win over vice because the two are inextricably intertwined, and one cannot be distinguished from another. In each of the characters virtue and vice are blended inseparably, metaphorically signifying the condition of the contemporary world. There is **satire** in the justification the thief gives to himself, since he thinks that “being a temple thief was so much better than being a pick pocket or a blind alley rapist. It was in many ways, a respectable line, stealing from the exponents of religion to sell to the connoisseurs of art” (9-12). When the thief feels that the statue of Shiva

looks at him with a “strong, unmoving countenance” (57), the religious dimension of the deity is being humanized. His belief that Shiva was all knowing, all powerful, all wise and that such a Shiva would not punish a faithful devotee for wanting to keep his bread buttered, contradicts itself when he steals the same statue.

The use of **irony** is seen throughout from the entrance of the Brahmin priest whose “eyes were kindly, almost indulgent” (58), the most unexpected climax, when “with his smile no longer on his face, he heaved the sack over his shoulder, cast a last surreptitious look around him for pursuers, and disappeared into the night” (60). The **fact** was that he was a cleverer and bigger thief than the protagonist, his sagacious and benevolent expression, his soothing advice and philosophical approach was the **fiction**.

The first line of the story “The Simple Man” suggested itself to Tharoor when letters from friends were delayed by the famous railway strike of 1947 which has inspired the story. The scene is a bar where an anonymous person asks his bar-mates, “Have you ever received a letter from someone who is dead?” (61). He had received that day, a letter from his friend Karan B. Dhillon, from Ludhiana. Dhillon, the cricketer who had played for Punjab, had been dead then for five minutes. A cricket fan in the audience seemed genuinely upset.

He wanted to know what kind of man Dhillon was. The title is introduced here: “A very simple man” he said, “a very simple man indeed” (63). The cricket fan read out the letter eagerly to the listening public and handed it back reverentially. The story now switches on to Mamta, the narrator’s Bengali wife, whom he loved to distraction.

The narrator, Southey, suddenly says that he did not know how often he had stabbed them both. “I came back from my official trip I saw them. . . they hadn’t even bothered to shut the bedroom door. . . they heard me and turned in shock. . . Karan, with my Mamta. . .! There was a ceremonial dagger. . . before I knew what I was doing it was over. I don’t know how often I stabbed them both. . .” (67). The cricket fan is wide-eyed in horror. Meanwhile, a large man who had been sitting next to him got up, put a protective arm around the narrator and asked Southey to relax and go home. The narrator sobbed. The cricket fan wanted him to be arrested. But the large man himself was Dhillon. Southey was a poor unsuccessful novelist, failed sportsman, marital dropout, who gave vent to his frustrations in cooked-up stories. This story elucidates the common statement that fact is sometimes stranger than fiction.

“The Simple Man” seems to be a simple story told at the height human imagination can rise up to. Alcoholism can create a staggering fantasy when it inebriates the drinker as seen here. The story begins suddenly, the first sentence startles the reader to immediate alertness.

While relating a fictitious story about a dear friend to the people in the bar, the protagonist seemed to relapse consciously into silence, “his mind elsewhere, at an anonymous plot in a cemetery perhaps” (62), says the author with humour. The techniques of **rhyme** as well as **refrain** are used effectively, in statements like “we grew up together, walked and played and fought together, worked and studied and holidayed together, cried and laughed together, learned to face the world together. . .” (62). Elsewhere the narration goes like this: “Shattered and desolate he sank his head into his outstretched arms, his eyes swam in tears, finally the dam burst, the rivulets of salty sorrow came cascading down his cheeks. . . his chest heaved on the bar rail. . .” (68). Lovely, exaggerated and **hyperbolic** expressions like these create an effect of **pathos**.

Karan Dhillon is described in Thackeray-style detail. His character, his nature, how he played all games, and why he specialized in cricket comes to life before us in a way similar to how Thomas Hardy described the Mayor of Casterbridge with his saturnine features, etched lines of impatience on his forehead and the very crease in his starched trousers creaking in displeasure as he walks, an utter pessimist. The description is so precise that the reader sees Karan Dhillon as a **real** person rather than as a creation of **imagination**. It is an effective presentation of Fiction. Being **spectacular** is another way of concreting story value, Fictionally. Any reader would read open-mouthed and see

the ghastly murder right in front of his eyes. **Humour** is seen here in a subtle manner. The explanation given to the unlimited fantasy of the drunkard is created out of a psychological insight.

In "The Professor's Daughter," fantasy is a distant kind of narrative, told in the mind of the narrator. The stiff professor Chhatwal academically brilliant, but sentimentally aloof from his students, is the typical academic walking encyclopedia of college days. Many a reader would find this character ringing a chord of resemblance in the memory of a similar teacher somewhere in his life. But the story unrolls into the arrival of a daughter, a heady perfume for the all-male butterflies. The protagonist happens to be the lucky one to get a chance to visit the professor and to his awe, horror and hatred finds that even his innocent behaviour as a guest triggers suspicious wrath in the girl's father to such an extent that he canes her. The youthful eulogy with which the campus had shortened her name Jaswinder Kaur to 'Jazzy' and the heroine-worshipping she was unaware that she was recipient of, pales before the truth of her suffering at the hands of her sadistic and maniacal father who never trusts her with men and as a result of the brutality, has usurped her of whatever self-confidence an eighteen year old needs to have.

The 'Jazzy' legend grew unnourished by any contact with the subject (76) while the hero casually touched her fingers by way of introduction, the father had entered the room and in a quiet, harsh edged

voice suppressed with anger, he said “go to your room” (79). Exiting after an order to get out, the hero listens and watches from a mango tree branch, the incredible sight of Jazzy “...bent over her bed, her salwaar pulled down from her hips to bare her rear.” (81). The narrator stands nowhere, bewildered between reality and fantasy. “...the veins stood up on his huge hands as he wielded the ruler in deliberate punishment and with each stroke the girl flinched, the tears streaming down her cheeks fell on her hands, the hands that I had so thoughtlessly held” (81). Such realities never exist even in the remotest and wildest imagination. “He stood transfixed watching in a blur, the regular rise and fall of the ruler, the mass of red welches and welts multiplying across the girl’s pale posterior” (81). Back in the hostel, when his waiting friends eagerly ask him whether he saw Jazzy, the protagonist finds his revelation waiting within him for release. But remembering the girl’s suffering and degradation he ends the story with “No, she wasn’t there” (82).

Psychology bringing out the abnormalities and anomalies that the human mind is capable of is the backbone of the narrative technique here. Professor Chaatwal has to be a **schizophreniac**—suave and sagacious in the college classroom but demoniacally perverse, sadistic and brutal to his own daughter in the privacy of his own home. The moment the atrocious caning is over, “his face had again been restored to its habitual expression of calm complacency” (82). He is a psychopath, a homicidal, sadistic

maniac who finds untold pleasure while inflicting acute physical pain on his one and only child. The **fiction** the college boys bore in their imagination was that of the comfortable and adored life of the eighteen year old Jasvinder, but the girl, “bared and beaten, whimpering her pain, pleading to be spared” (82) was the **fact**. In the combination, the axiomatic statement that ‘fact’ is at times stranger than ‘fiction’ is justified.

Tharoor was startled to hear the story of two friends recalled by a group of Stephanians who had been at college sixteen years earlier. The debating circuit, the girl-chasing, the fatuous puns, the café and the dhaba were all hallmarks of a certain kind of university existence, which he has very faithfully transcribed in fiction through the story ‘Friends’. Though the story revolves in a triangle love of a sort, its philosophy on friendship, the puns that come spontaneously to the characters’ lips and the ultimate sadness when even a really thick friendship breaks over a girl, shows the transience of all human ties in this world. Vicky Vohra shortened to Vicky and PM the author’s initials by which they are both addressed by friends, are thick as thieves with Vicky “physically small and slight with a perpetually serious expression on his face, a shock of hair falling over his right eye. . . a cheerful attitude to people and a lack of inhibition with his jokes that kept even newcomers in splits” (84-5). V.V. and P.M. (expanded by V.V. as Prize Money, Perfect Mammaries and the Prime

Ministry), the best of friends remained so, till Rekha the best debator in a neighbouring college came into their lives, between their lives. P.M. falls in love with her, who is “thin to the point of boniness, tall and short haired, attractive only because of a natural grace in her narrow figure and a small, remarkably lovely face that made every sentence she spoke worth watching in rapt attention” (85). For Vicky it is part of ordinary flirtation. He grows out of it with the usual ease and talks disparagingly of her “she has got shoulders like a clothes hanger; if I took her to our room and the warden came in he’d really find a skeleton in the cupboard” (92). P.M. hits him and they split. He packs up after a few days and leaves P.M.’s room. Their amity and enmity are real while in college, but the **reality** fades into **oblivion** years later.

The story, “The Political Murder” is narrated in the first person. The narrator is a policeman. Gobinda Sen, an MLA, got himself murdered. He was widely respected. When fired by the boss for being late in reporting, the narrator ironically salutes, smiles an off-duty grin and leaves, ignoring the caustic humour and vulgarity in the reprimand of the senior officer. The murder is investigated. The servants are questioned. He finds that there was not enough security for the M.L.A. at night. He sardonically muses, “out there, he was about as safe as the swimmers in ‘Jaws’ ” (105). The houseboy, more than the other servants, is more visibly affected. The maid, having a giving-away look, is questioned.

Sub-inspector Jacob and the narrator do not appear to see eye to eye in the modus operandi. It is proved very cleverly that the odd job man in a cuckold's fury killed the politician who was having an affair with his wife, the maid. The case is closed. All the credit for unravelling the murder goes to Inspector Jacob and not to the narrator. Years later, Jacob a highly placed officer, now due to the promotion he received because of the famous murder case meets the narrator. The suspense of the story lies in the fact that Inspector Jacob was either the murderer or the chief accomplice and the narrator Nayar had falsely imagined that he had caught the real culprit. The story ends there with the deeply sarcastic words of the real villain. The fact that villains run rampant in our society undetected and unpunished, whereas, the really good people go to the grave unsung and unwept for, is seen in this story where politics as well as the law-enforcing agencies are no more the real protectors of the people. The values preached by them comprise a myth. The atrocities practised by them are the reality.

Stream-of-consciousness and poetic expressions are used as Factional methods in "The Other Man". The perennial psychological fear of man to go from the known to the unknown is seen in the narrators' apprehension of his wife ever getting attached once again to her former lover. The narration goes on as smooth as a calm river flowing to its destination. The style is modern. The narrator's anxiety, insecurity and

futile one-sided love are stated clearly. He accepts with stoic resignation that his love and its demonstration are one-sided and therefore a real waste and would roll away like water drops from lotus leaves. The pinnacle of “The Other Man” is its sheer poetry. Tharoor is on a par with William Shakespeare who steals our hearts with the tender love story of “Romeo and Juliet” and its balcony scene where ‘the moon touched with silver, the fruit tree tops.’ “I see you in her eyes, I know how you smile. . . how your eyes twinkle as you toss your hair back from your forehead. . .” (114) has a romantic resonance.

The narrator fears Aravind, his wife’s lover of yester years, as he has seen him and his wife with lasting memories in her inner eyes and sowing insecurity in his. Aravind goes away to make more money and she takes it as unavoidable providence. “But that was the tragedy of it all. She waited. She waited for years. In her waiting she was yours” (114). The husband is all broken up inside: still, all along, he is “gentle and loving and patient” (114). The lyrical beauty reminiscent of Keats’ lines are breathtakingly poetic “I see you in her eyes when she speaks of you” (113). He goes on to describe her: “She looks incredibly beautiful, head partially bowed, eyes away like moving stars. She sits wrapped in a tender impenetrable cocoon of remembered love” (113). Such words take the reader to the world of Keats’ medieval quality, the very emotion of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” or yet another sensuous damsel Magdalene

in "The Eve of St. Agnes." The mystery of Mona Lisa's smile, the unpredictability and even disloyalty of Lucrezia in Robert Browning's "Andrea del Sarto," are seen in the ethereal and sylvan look the girl takes on when she speaks about Aravind to her own husband; she is as sensuous, as lyrical, and as warm as any of Keats' heroines. The author shows us that even in beautiful lyrical fiction, these facts of beauty can be enjoyed.

The narrator has no control over his thoughts. He exposes his inner conflicts, his pain, love, disappointment and concealed frustration. In the streamlike flow of his conscience, the thoughts form a chain from his inner world to the world outside. With all said and done, Tharoor in the end, tilts the balance of justice to the narrator's side because after all, he loves the girl with all his heart. He eats, breathes and lives her. There is no secret between the two, as to where her fancies and fantasies are. That is paradoxical because, there is no such tolerance seen in husbands many of whom belong to the male chauvinistic world.

Finally, a Shelleyan optimism takes over. The same P.B. Shelley who lamented "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed", says in a later context, the greatest optimistic statement in all poetry: "O wind! If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" In the same way, the narrator, heartbroken over his wife's unchangeable attitude towards her earlier lover, though she deals with him with loveless affection and gratitude,

ends in a weirdly optimistic way. Beautiful expressions and sentences like “I loved her as one loves a finely turned sentence in a book that one wishes one could write but knows one can’t” (116), “. . . as long as you remain away and tell her that you love her from the other end of a postage stamp” and “. . . one day you will step out of the murky half-light of remembered importance. . .” (116), team in the poetically sentimental diction. His triumph over the other man, his rival, saying, “there is one thing in her you will never understand. That ring she wears is not yours but mine” (116). Her surname is not her lover’s but her husband’s. His final triumph comes with the climax, “There is one thing I know you will never learn and that the world will never learn. That six months after she became my wife, she bore me your son” (117). The pseudo-paternity he assumes for a child not his, is the jewel in his crown of achievement. The lover pales into insignificance before the stoicism and endurance of the husband. “The Other Man” a dramatic monologue, shows the best craftsmanship from Tharoor’s pen as a writer of Fiction, because the girl is knotted-up **fantasy** in a physical self; the narrator is all **fact**, enduring her fantasy like Patience sitting on a Monument. The “other man” is a whimsical aery creature, his corpus never present except as a representation in the form of an embryonic foetus. Fact and fiction throughout the story are inseparable. Tharoor has used poetry as a metaphor for mental infidelity, not rare in this world. On par with Anton

Chekov, Oscar Wilde, O. Henry and Leo Tolstoy, Tharoor scores equally well because of the Faction present, ever so subtly.

This chapter also contains the analysis of the farce: “Twenty-Two months in the life of a Dog.” Though outwardly light-hearted, this play in two acts is sizzling with political criticism and protest against what Tharoor feels the ‘autocracy’ in modern India at one point of time, i.e. from 1975-1977. Today, the issues raised and crystallised by The Emergency—the meaning of democracy, the value of the right of the poor unlettered peasant to be carted off to a sterilization camp—are seen as largely irrelevant. Tharoor thinks that the only valid way of portraying The Emergency is through the medium of low comedy. “History repeats itself as tragedy, the second time as farce. And farce is the medium of the playwright, not the historian” (160).

This is the main reason for Tharoor’s work because he finds an ideal platform to bring out through fiction the startling facts of that critical and dark period in the history of modern India. The twenty-two months in the life of the Dog Kutta, Professor Subrahmoniam and Mrs. Subrahmoniam, are none other than the twenty-two months of the Emergency. Irony speaks for itself: “. . . the troublemakers were in jail, the trains ran on time, Indira Gandhi, the only man in the Cabinet, ran a democratic socialist republic under its own Rising Son” (165).

Pun, word play, verbal wars through parody and aside, metaphors with hidden meanings are all used as Factional techniques. 'Kutta' (the English sound equivalent for dog in Hindi), a stray dog, is taken into the home of the Subrahmoniams, both doctors with scientific experiments to their credit. Through transmutation, the dog is made a human named 'Kutty.' He turns out to be an alcoholic due to the genetic characteristic of the donor of the pituitary glands and is more than a handful and a menace to the public. After a lot of political, social and sentimental chaos, The Emergency ends, with the Prime Minister losing her own seat by over 55,000 votes and the opposition Janata party claims victory, Kutty with another reversible operation turns back to Kutta the dog. Peace is established and the life of the Indian returns to normal, where kutta's operation on pituitary glands and genitals stand for the enforced sterilization-**Symbolism** is seen here. The Central Cabinet Ministers, the Youth Congress with its bullying leader are **parodied** as the Minister, Inamdar, Rekha and others. The Chowkidar Bahadur who is really Hawildar Bahadur Singh of RAW namely Research and Analysis Wing, stands for the cheap internal espionage system that told stories about and pinned down innocent people. Fareed the servile servant stands for the meek, unquestioning and spineless Indian, who would take without protest, any humiliation thrown at him by the authorities.

While the “Rising Son” (166) with a twist in the spelling of sun is obviously Sanjay Gandhi, Professor and Mrs. Subrahmoniam stand for that minority of good people who balance the rest of the evil world. On the whole, parody as a device of Faction, is present in this farce, as much as it is seen in Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, which is a parodic redaction of the Mahabharata.

Humour is a very significant agent in this play in bringing about Faction. At times it is straightforward and comical: “Doggy? What do these people think I am? A Congressman?” (168) protests the dog Kutta when he is addressed as one. “Yenna ide? What is going on here?” (173, 235) from Mrs. Subrahmoniam makes fun of the Tamil jargon. When Maryamma, having found that Kutty has cheated her says “Aiyō Karthavay!” (228), the Malayalam colloquialism sounds very natural in its humour.

Humour is sardonic when Kutta pleads with the Professor, “I don’t even have the strength to scare a Brahmin, please Sahib. . .” (169). About Indira Gandhi’s twenty-point programme, Professor Subrahmoniam succinctly says, “Even Moses was able to make do with ten” (190). Wry humour is seen when the professor with pain in his heart says about enforced sterilization, “How do you explain the desire of people like this to cut off bits of other people’s insides against their will?” (190) Humour with a tinge of **pathos** is seen when Kutta says, “who wants to have

freedom when you can have bread?. . . Give me slavery, but give me bread” (199). The selfish and self survival attitude of the Indian is seen here.

The artless art of **repartee** is also seen. When the Professor is asked whether he needs his scotch with ice in it, he retorts “On the rocks. Like my life at the moment” (191). The Prime Minister is quoted to have said that she had locked up half the decent politicians in jail to keep them free. The Professor laments the incongruity through a distanced **oxymoron** “why not ‘I must kill you to help you live?’” (191). The heartlessness of the medical profession, especially surgery, is seen in the overly matter-of-factness shown by Dr. Lakshmi Subrahmoniam before Kutta is operated upon: “. . .removal of the brain and replacement by donor brain. Transplantation of the pituitary glands. Transfusion. Rearrangements of limbs. Modification of sexual organs. Hair cut” (197). Typically as in an absurd drama, the complicated and next to impossible procedure of transforming a dog into a man is over simplified here, with a punch at the insensitivity of superspeciality in modern Medical Science, which supposedly gives to hair cut and modification of sexual organs, equal importance.

The radio jockey’s dispassionate and monotonous news-delivery through the air, simultaneously coincides with the actual operations of turning the dog Kutta into the man Kutty and later, the man Kutty back

into the now-happy dog, is the height of comedy and satire. A dog-barks-but-the-caravan goes attitude was seen during the Emergency, when the Indian masses suffered and suffocated under the so called “. . . interest of socialism and the common man” (197).

Pun is seen when Kutta, now turned to a man, while regaining consciousness on the operating table shouts “I can’t believe this! I’m a son-of-a-bitch. . . let’s celebrate!” (199). The “Vividh Bharathi” (202) being prohibited, shows how even the fundamental rights could be twisted and taken away during the Emergency. Kutta after becoming Kutty trying “to bite at a flea under the armpit” (206), chasing Billie the cat in hot passion in typical canine fashion, uttering guttural animal sounds like “Gnff bmf pmff. . . Dmff. Mff. Prgff. . . (215) barking ‘uff ruff’ at the Professor even when he is a man, singing “Rup Thera Masthana” (200) and other sexy Hindi songs like “Saamne yeh kaun aaya, dil me hui halchal?” (210) at nobody in particular as well as everybody, are hilarious to the extreme. But the humour transcends its peak, the parabolic curve descends and touches our patriotism when we hear the dog’s assumed name:

Professor: Is that your name? Bharat Kutty?

Kutta: Yes. Kutta—Kutty see. And Bharat, for India. Don’t you like it? (207)

A dog personifying our great country Bharat is a shock treatment, a hard fact Tharoor gives us amidst all the hilarity of an imagined farce.

Tharoor wields humour as a powerful weapon, at times direct and subtle, which leaves a deep imprint on the reader. Even farcical at times, humour highlights the stark reality of socio-political situations, especially the atrocities committed during the Emergency. Through the prismatic perception of humour and irony, Tharoor's narratives locate 'reality' in between the realms of fact and fiction, experience and imagination, triumphs and losses. This ultimately contributes to the plural, hybrid image of the Indian consciousness that Tharoor foregrounds in his *oeuvre*.