

## **Shashi Tharoor versus R.K. Narayan: an ABC consistency issue**

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*Abstract.* Shashi Tharoor criticizes R.K. Narayan for using expressions that seemed to have been learnt from a school textbook and have been hollowed by repetition. But he does so using an expression that sounds as if from school. What are we to make of this? I propose that it undermines one of his other criticisms, which is that Narayan's style reflects his narrow experience and cannot be used beyond that range.

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Regarding Indian writer R.K. Narayan, much loved by some and seemingly regarded as an obstacle to literary progress by others, Shashi Tharoor tells us:

...the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities, and clichés – abounded, as if the author learned them in a school textbook and was unaware that they have been hollowed by repetition. (2001)

There is a puzzle because of these two qualities:

- (i) Tharoor criticizes Narayan for using expressions that seem to have been learnt from a school textbook and have been hollowed by repetition.
- (ii) The language he uses, “the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities, and clichés” sounds like something from a school textbook or classroom.

How do we make sense of Tharoor given this combination? One response is “Tharoor does not wish to be taken too seriously. He has committed this literary crime as well.” Another response is “His expression is new and has not been hollowed by repetition, so even if it sounds as if from school, it is not open to the criticism captured by proposition (i).”

A third response is that he is suggesting that the style that Narayan uses is within range for him. Tharoor can do that as well. I am disposed to work with that response, but it leaves a problem for another criticism he makes (well, it is not so easy to separate them):

...the banality of Narayan's concerns, the narrowness of his vision, the predictability of his prose, and the shallowness of the pool of experience and vocabulary from which he drew. Narayan wrote of, and from, the mindset of the small-town South Indian Brahmin, and did not seem capable of greater range. (2001)

The total criticism I have in mind is that Narayan's range of matter covered is narrow and that is bound up with his style: extending the range requires significant change to the style. Now imagine Narayan writing a school story and Tharoor writing a story in the style of Narayan, which features this ABC phrase of his. Presumably, that phrase would not feature in the former story. Its lesson is not something Narayan appears to have learnt. In which case, Tharoor's Narayan-like story seems to go beyond Narayan's narrow world. In which case, the style is more flexible than Tharoor says!

Tharoor's suggestion that he can do this style too relies on evidence which makes us think the style does not correspond to quite so narrow a range. It can be used to capture life in the school of Tharoor as well.

## Reference

Tharoor, S. 2001. Comedies of Suffering. *The Hindu* 8 July 2001. Available at:

[http://shashitharoor.in/writings\\_essays\\_details/180](http://shashitharoor.in/writings_essays_details/180)