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# Apprehending the striking elements of Psychological Realism in Shashi Tharoor's short story '*The Boutique*'

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## ABSTRACT

Literature and psychology have originated from the same womb: the human psyche. Psychological realism is a literary genre that gained its tempo in the second half of the 19th century. It is a character-driven methodology that dives into the characters' psyche, focusing on what motivates them to make certain decisions and uses character's thoughts to express commentary on social or political issues rather than the plot. 'The Boutique' is a reflection of class discrimination embedded in Indian society. It is a story about the mother-son duo who feels insulted and succumbs to alienation in a posh boutique in Calcutta city. This paper attempts to critically examine the elements of psychological realism in 'The Boutique.' Through a close reading of the short story, relevant sentences and passages have been cited for providing textual evidence.

**Keywords:** Psychological Realism, Indian English Literature, Shashi Tharoor, The Boutique, Short Story.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is a mirror to society that reflects its virtues and, in its corrective function, also reflects society's ills to make people realize their mistakes and form suitable amendments. In the words of Walter Allen, "... contemporary novels are mirrors of the age, a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, the coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it." (Allen 16) Each generation has its own set of aspirations, logic, fears, and tensions that inspire the writers to respond

to those societal changes. Indian English Literature, right from its beginning, has been responsive to the changes in society. Indian English writers have written about the social realities like the reflection of India's tradition, culture, and ethos, partition effects and their impact on people, Indian middle-class life, nation-building, etc. Their solid fascination towards the changing scenes of the country and country life motivated them to depict the Indian people and the rustic background. Therefore, it can be said that the emergence of the Indian English Novel was not purely a literary phenomenon; instead, it began as a novel of realism.

## REALISM

Henry James describes realism as "... the drama of a broken teacup" that strives to present life as it is, omitting nothing ugly or painful and without idealization or romantic subjectivity. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes, "... literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the ideological struggles in society" (Thiong'o 6). Realism is a slice of the Realist Art Movement that emerged in 19th century France as a reaction to 18th century Romanticism. Works of romanticism were considered way too exotic- that had lost touch with the actuality. Honoré de Balzac is one of the earliest realist writers, who infused his works with complex characters and detailed observations about the world at large. The realist writers applied journalistic techniques such as objectivity and fidelity to the facts of the matter and published their works either in serial form in periodicals or novels. The novel is fiction. Fiction and realism are strikingly opposite

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concepts that cease to exist together, and if they do, it is not easy to separate them. However, there are specific characteristics to identify Literary Realism- First, it tells the stories of ordinary folks and not heroes or villains, kings or queens. Second, it reflects the everyday lives of ordinary people generally belonging to the lower or middle class. Third, the character is more important than the action or story. Difficult ethical choices made by the character are often the subject of the plot. Fourth, it focuses on the sharp contrasts in society, for instance, the upper-class v/s the lower class. Fifth, language is simple or vernacular, not heightened or poetic. The tone could be a matter of fact, satiric, or comic. And lastly, interior or psychological realism is present in a variant form. Psychological realism is an offshoot of literary realism that dives into the characters' psyche, focusing on what motivates them to make certain decisions and why. Rather than the plot, it uses the character's thoughts to express commentary on social or political issues. Psychological realism strives to explain that an individual is rather a composition of a network of motivations, interests, desires, and fears. These forces interact and battle with each other and build an individual personality. Thus, the novelists create complex and layered characters and lay their internal struggles bare for the readers through soliloquies or internal monologues. The actions in a psychological realist novel are internalized, and the changes in mood, perception, opinions, and ideas constitute the climax.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM IN SHASHI THAROOR'S 'THE BOUTIQUE'**

The portrayal of different shades of modern Indian life appears to be one of the principal sources of appeal in Shashi Tharoor's writing, both fiction and non-fiction. His writings predominantly deal with India's social, historical, or political aspects, and character is the central focus of most of his narratives. Tharoor's 'The Boutique' was first published in *Junior Statesman* in 1971 and later included in 'The Five Dollar Smile' a collection of his early short stories in 1990. The story is about an

Indian boy and his mother's visit to an inaugural ceremony of a posh boutique at the Plaza Lounge in Calcutta city. The aura of this magnificent five-star building is meant only for the rich, the famous, and the glamorous. As a result, the mother-son duo feels like alienated outsiders. At the very outset, they were humiliated while entering the Plaza Lounge when the liftman looked at them disrespectfully, "The liftman swung open the door of the elevator and looked at Amma and me with an appraisingly critical eye." (Tharoor 27) because their dressing displayed their middle-class status compared to the other guests, who wore branded clothes and made a fashion statement. Even after they get into the lift, the liftman refuses to acknowledge their presence. "The liftman didn't move; he waited for further passengers-there was no one in sight-while we fidgeted uneasily... but he waited, and so did we. I suddenly felt like rushing out of the lift, the hotel, the area." (Tharoor 28). This is the first instance that makes the narrator realize that "This wasn't our place. We didn't belong here." (Tharoor 28) When a rich fat lady enters the lift, it makes Amma step back "uncomfortably into the darkest recesses of the elevator" (Tharoor 28), shows how she thinks that she is diminutive in the presence of that rich woman. Seeing his mother uncomfortably resigning to the corner of the lift, the narrator instinctively puts his hand on his mother's arm, "Don't worry Amma, I thought, I'll protect you. 'Protect you?' the words mocked me in my mind. 'From what? I hastily dropped my hand from her arm" (Tharoor 28-29) as he later realizes that their presence didn't even matter to the people around. There is yet another instance of insult when a waiter who serves coffee passes them without a look. At first, the narrator thinks that coffee had to be paid for but "then saw him offering steaming hot cups of it to all the visitors. Anyone who chose to could take a cup of coffee... We had been insulted." (Tharoor 29). Even when Amma begins to fondle a jacket she likes, the salesgirl curtly reminds her of the 'Please don't touch' sign- "she pointed to a PLEASE DON'T TOUCH card... Amma flushed a deep red. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled in confusion, hastily trying to

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put it back." (Tharoor 30) However, when a celebrity guest arrives, he casually flips through the ties without disapprobation from the salesgirl. These repeated instances of insult soon subside into their resignation, "... a whirling, twisting question-mark, asking me 'What are you doing here?' And suddenly I realised 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."(Tharoor 31) So both the mother and the son decided to walk out. The narrator comments-"Quietly we walked to the door. No one noticed our exit; it was as if an insect had been removed from the cup of tea, something which ought not to have been there in the first place...We used the stairs." (Tharoor 32) These lines truly reflect how unwanted they felt in that boutique. On their way back, Amma suggests taking a taxi. But her son gently refuses; instead, he tells her of walking to the nearby bus stand and take a bus home, for there was no need to pretend anymore. They were going back to the world they belonged to, their home.

**CONCLUSION**

'The Boutique' is based on class discrimination embedded in Indian society and is a perfect example of social and psychological literary realism. This story is about the alienation and isolation faced by middle-class people like Amma

and her son amidst the glittering yet smothering aura created by the rich men and women who form the cream of society. It presents before us an accurate picture of the attitude and behavior of snobbish people in Indian society. And even though the liftman, the waiter, and the salesgirl belong to the lower stratum of Indian society, they do not hesitate to discriminate between the middle and the upper-class people.

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