Published in 1990, *The Five-Dollar Smile* is a collection of short stories. These short stories were written during the period that spans Tharoor’s adolescence and early adulthood. As Tharoor himself observes: “The stories largely reflect an adolescent sensibility: with one or two exceptions their concerns, their assumption, their language all emerge from the consciousness of an urban Indian male in his late teens” (10).

Shashi Tharoor has fourteen early short stories which “represent an enduring contribution to literature . . . . They reflect aspects of modern Indian life which are still relatively ignored in more serious writing” (*TFDS* 10).

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

*The Five-Dollar Smile* should be considered Tharoor's first book of fiction, although chronologically it is his third. In any event, the three volumes he has brought out so far suggest that he uses fictional form to express certain playfulness. *The Great Indian Novel*, for example, brims over with playful high spirits, assembling the entire cast from the *Mahabharata*, the ancient Indian epic, and having them descend upon the modern Indian scene to enact a latter-day version of the events of the *Mahabharata*. In his playfulness he crams stage techniques, screenplays, film songs, makeup-room gossip, bedroom scenes,
and moves to Show Business to create a simulacrum of the celluloid world. The stories in the present collection are no different in their form and content.

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

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

In fact, Tharoor is extremely fascinated by India’s remarkable diversity which resides in almost everything. So his writings, fictional or non-fictional, are his personal exploration of India. Tharoor is the best when he expresses his sentiment regarding Indianness and its nationalism interlinked with its pluralism.

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

The stories were written for mass-circulation magazines and, as such, were intended to be read while waiting for the train at the railway station. ‘The Five-Dollar Smile’ was written in adulthood when Tharoor was twenty-two years old. In this story he recalls the incidents of his childhood and “what it felt like to be a child” (*TFDS* 13). The main character in the story is Joseph who recalls a certain colonial ambience that surrounded the missionary school system. Post-independent India was depicted for the world as a land full of underfed children for whom money is needed to help them to live. Joseph Kumaran becomes a surprise Indian advertisement for ‘Health’. He is handpicked to go to America as part of a charity drive. He has to board a plane to the U.S. and Sister Celine’s words ring in his mind- “Let them know you’re poor but you’re smart, because we know how to bring you up” (14).

The day photograph was taken he was a seven years old kid, the photographer said, “We want a hungry child, not a feeding one” (15). What they wanted to depict was that, Joseph is a tribal child with infant malnutrition, whose mother died in child birth and his father left him with the nuns. Being a normal child his picture has to be taken: “So there’s nothing really wrong with him, right? I mean his brain’s okay and everything? I’ve gotta be sure I’m selling the American public poverty and not retardation, if you see what I mean. So he’s normal, huh” (16).

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

As Tharoor says in the introduction of this story:

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

The next story entitled ‘The Boutique” was published when he was fifteen and was greatly influenced by the style of P.G. Wodehouse. He tries to confront the Calcutta world in this story. The Calcutta, he has painted in this story is of his teenage time: “The
Calcutta of the short stories I published in urban English language magazines at the time - was not the Calcutta of politics and poverty of foetid slums and flowery songs, of Coffee House communism and vibrant culture, that later occupied my concerns. As the son of a newspaper executive growing up in the city through his early teenage years - I grew up in a Calcutta of ex-colonial clubs and Vintage Car Rallies, imbibing the brittle sophistication of ad world parties and the surreal decadence of air-conditioned salons where shirts were sold at prices that could have fed the neighborhood” (27).

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

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

This story gives a true picture of social realism. Tharoor vividly describes the main character Anima, her son and the boutique environment. They are invited to the inauguration of a new boutique at the Plaza Lounge. This five star ambience is meant
only for the rich, the famous and the glamorous. Amma and her son are total misfits in this world. Their very clothing establishes their middle class status whereas all those who moved in and out of the plaza wore branded clothes making a fashion statement: “Amma in her plain cotton sari with her slightly greying hair done up in a traditional way at the back, clutching the invitation card as if for security and looking very plain and rather proletarian; me in my loose kurta that fell awkwardly from bony shoulders, in narrow trousers that went out of fashion five years back, sporting an unshaved underchin, looking more unkempt than dashing” (27).

Right from their entry in the Plaza Lounge, the lift man eyed them suspiciously ‘He lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly’ (27). The inauguration is in informal manner, people standing in two’s or three’s chatting away even a waiter who serves coffee passes them by without a look and they feel thoroughly insulted. The boutique has articles on sale and Amma in her enthusiasm to buy a jacket for her son tries to touch it. She does not realize that the price tags in this boutique are only for the rich. When she tries to touch it the sales girl curtly reminds her of ‘Please Do Not Touch’ card around the clothes. The price of the jacket is a whooping 700 rupees. After a couple of minutes a famous radio disc jockey (DJ) enters the boutique and becomes the centre of attraction. He freely samples the clothes and the sales girl forgets all about that dreadful sign and suddenly Amma in a loud, shrill voice of complaint says, “I thought we weren’t supposed to touch the clothes” (31). Amma’s son suddenly felt sick, he wanted to go back to his world where he actually belongs to: “And suddenly I realized I didn’t know, what I was doing there, and the question mark straightened itself out in my mind to an arrow, a line, and I knew where the line led--outside, to the relief of the hot pavements and the elegiac gloom of the evening shut out by the and the brocaded, mirrored walls of the Plaza Lounge” (31).
This insult momentarily threw Amma off her feet in anger and resentment and confronted the sales girl. A little scene was created, the face of the sales girl hardened, Amma and her son decide to leave the place.

The story speaks of the stifling artificial atmosphere, the rich men and women from the elite society, their infatuation of people and things where, Anima is a total misfit. The narrator witnesses this humiliation and wants to retaliate by throwing a stone on the impeccable polished glass of the hotel door but he knows, he is a third rate citizen. Amma and her son walk out of the world they do not belong to:

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

‘How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink’ is different in style and intent. The story also imitates the world and characters of P. G. Woodhouse. The Horse Bar is the place frequently visited by Bobby Chatterjee. It is always thought that men who drink senselessly at the bar have met with failure or disappointment in love. He muses over the anecdote of the model Myra he fell in love with. But he comes to know that Myra is double crossing him with another man called Au, who belongs to the IAF. The whole drunken conversation between Bobby and Cedric is just a ploy for Bobby to overcome his frustration for having lost 1000 bucks on his favorite horse ‘Happy Boy’ who is seventh, last in the horse race. Tharoor shows how indulgence and fantasy concocting imaginary
characters and narrating a masterful incident that has never occurred, helps people to cope with disappointments in life through escapism.

‘The Village Girl’ brings into focus Tharoor’s beloved Kerala, the social life of Malayalies and his relationship with his land. He was sixteen when he wrote this story; he was slightly younger than the protagonist of the story. He speaks of the urban-rural divide both in terms of social behavior and morality as well as the unintended seduction. Sunder is a Delhi university student who travels to Kerala for holidays. He remembers the fashionable girls in the campus as he sees a Malayali girl sitting with him in the living room: “Sunder has never met a girl like her before. He knows . . . the term for its members was behenjis’ (respected sisters) . . . . it was clear that a behenji was what she was. And, horror of horrors, he was going to be introduced to her” (43-44).

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

Sunder is introduced to a shy and simple village girl, Sunita. Sunder cannot comprehend why she is so silent and shy. It shows the typical cultural behavior of young girls and women in Kerala. Modernity has hardly perpetrated these villages. Sunder is impatient with these social visits and is equally irritated. He feels that he has been dragged to Kerala but his father explains that such trips are essential for him to preserve his identity.
and “to renew our roots. I may be working in Delhi, but this is where we’re from and where we all belong; Sunder bitterly asked once why, if they wanted to renew their roots, he had to go uprooted” (44-45).

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

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

Before leaving, Sunder apologizes: ‘I am sorry’ and he is startled when the simple village girl whose face lit with a strange radiance who has changed into a woman replies ‘Thank you - Sunder’. This story is a social commentary on the marriage - institution in India.

Shashi Tharoor paints a picture of his adolescent encounter and observations of the young girls. He talks about their psychology and social realities. ‘The Professor’s Daughter’ is a story of one such young girl who is unfortunately a daughter of a sadist professor Chhatwal. The girl Jasvinder known as Jazzy becomes the imaginative elusive beauty whom the boys on the college campus express their adolescent desires to have a glimpse of her. The professor is known to be an isolated man but one day during his jogging
rounds they see a young girl with him and then the speculations on the campus begin. She is a slim young girl whom the professor hides away from prying eyes of young men on the campus. The rumor mills start working overnight and everybody dreams of Jazzy. There are wild imaginative ideas circulated about her. She becomes the much thought about female on the campus, and more boys begin visiting Prof. Chhatwal for tutorials.

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

In a short story ‘Auntie Rita’, Tharoor examines adolescence from a different point of view. In this story the main characters are Auntie Rita, a much older lady and her young nephew, who has come to spend a vacation at his uncle’s house. This story is both psychological and at the same time realistic. Currently, in Indian cinema, trend plots are concerning an aged lady falling in love with a young boy. Arjun is a nephew of Kumar uncle and Auntie Rita. This young boy Arjun does has a crush on a young girl in his class but the sexual encounter with his auntie in absence of Kumar uncle, leaves him stunned, the adolescent finds it difficult to rationalize the sensual encounter with his family
member: “The sin of self-obsession attributed to him by the well-rounded nymphet could now be washed away in the purificatory waters of the all-excusing ego. What a difference between a mature, wise woman of the world and a flighty sixteen-year-old slattern who flirted with you and never gave you a chance to find out where exactly you stood with her . . . .” (119).

During uncle Kumar’s absence Auntie Rita and Arjun indulge in libidinous pleasure. The most embarrassing instruction given by Auntie Rita is to buy a condom. The young boy hasn’t even seen one, he is red in the face when he asks the medical store owner for a box of contraceptives, and much to his surprise the store has none. It is true Arjun does have a sense of guilt but: “His initial vague stirrings of conscience were smothered in the incipience by a line of rest from Somerest Maugham’s The Bread-Winner that auntie Rita pointed out to him: You know, of course, that the Tasmanians, who never committed adultery, are now extinct . . . .” (127).

This story may also be an example of contradiction of Indian society. However, this short story is a psychological study of sensual pleasure for the older woman and the initiation rights of the young boy. Tharoor, while dealing with Rita’s psychology, shows no guilt on her part. There is only physical attraction for Rita who is well passed her prime and has no children. The aged woman in her weaker moments of life tries to substitute her barrenness. Nothing has changed for her even when her husband returns, she is very normal to him but for Arjun, his world has been totally changed. Adolescents take their first sexual experiences very seriously. In a pathetic scene the young boy Arjun weeps into his pillow when he hears affectionate sounds emanating from the other room. In his depression he eavesdrops and is shocked to see the same Rita who has had romantic interludes with him. She is most comfortably at ease in the arms of her husband but Arjun
is happy for the reawakening “Arjun smiled in anticipation. This was only the beginning (129).

Yet another story of a woman, who gets pregnant, is recounted in ‘The Other Man’. In this story an eighteen-year-old girl who attempts to deal with the unknown, is emphatically brought out in the story. This story is a commentary on social realities, which cannot be exposed due to social constraints. Arvind is in love with a girl. They have tempestuous love affair after which the man leaves for another country and never returns: “Left her for the attractions of an alien land where there was money and pride and that intangible thing you termed satisfaction. Left her with a ring and a promise that you would return to redeem the pledge it represented. And she let you go, accepting your departure as unavoidable, refusing to be tempted in to hoping for your return. Because she loved you” (115).

The lady in the story is the wife of the narrator. When he marries this beautiful woman, he knows that she is in love with Arvind but was extremely patient that one day she will love her husband as much as he loves her: “Loving her, I slowly learned not to expect anything in return, or even from myself. All along I was gentle arid loving and patient. And all broken up inside” (115).

According to Tharoor this thoughtless, senseless sacrifice on the part of adolescent boys and girls cannot be glorified as a societal idea. This story is different because the Indian male in its power and pride as a governor of his wife’s life is unable to tolerate the intrusion and encroachment of another man in their life or a competitor to the husband. In this story the ‘other’ man we come across is a rare sort of man -- husband who knows that his wife yearns for another man but still loves her. This story is also a popular theme in Bollywood. The theme is of magnanimous husband waiting for his wife to return to him.
The climax of the story startles readers from a complacency that comes from traditionality:

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

Another adolescent feature that Tharoor highlights is his campus life and college friend studying in St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, and sharing a hostel room. ‘Friends’ is a love triangle of boys, who are great friends and fall in love with the same girl. Vicky and the narrator, are bosom pals, share everything including the room. There is a perfect understanding between these two friends: “It wasn’t that just we were always together; what surprised people was the infinite delight we found in each other’s company even after all that time” (83).

Ramlal Agarwal, in his review, observes:

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

These two friends lived in an adolescent paradise of beautiful relationships until Rekha came along. Tharoor is quick in pointing out that this young intelligent girl the sultry siren is not one to break up relationships; she has a natural grace about her and is also one
of the most brilliant debaters in the university. She is studying in women’s college and in the inter-collegiate debate she floors the audience and it is the beginning of the trio’s relationship. Vicky, the friend of the narrator, is a playboy who has many ‘flings’ with young colleagues and never takes them seriously. The narrator’s name expressed in initials of P.M. refers to prize money, perfect memories and Prime Minister. Rekha spends her prize money on VV or P.M. in Ramalal’s dhaba. This trio has become famous in the campus. It was pretty clear that Rekha loved V.V but VV takes his relationship with Rekha too lightly. It doesn’t take long for VV to find more attractive diversion and he totally ignores Rekha. On the other hand, PM has a fascination for Rekha and one day things come to such a situation where VV expressed his real feelings for Rekha:

Vicky added, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone less sexy than dear Rekha. Hell, man—she’s got shoulders like a clothes-hanger, and there’s less on her bosom than in my pockets on a Monday morning.’ ‘Shut up’, I said, suddenly venomous. He didn’t seem to sense the change in my tone, ‘If I took her to our room and the Warden came in, he’d really find a skeleton in our cupboard’, added Vicky. Suddenly I hit him. (92)

After hearing this denigrated version on an intelligent friend PM looses his mental balance and hits V.V. in the face. This incident ruptured their relationship. V.V. flabbergasted at the impact of his friend’s violent assault; he inevitably packs his bag and leaves PM’S room to live with another friend. That wonderful friendship comes to an abrupt end. P.M. is sorry for having struck his friend. He wishes to apologize, he is choked with emotion and cannot speak and then he says: ‘I sat down heavily on the bed, and for the first time in many years, I wept’ (94).

‘The Solitude of the Short-Story Writer’ is a very different story and refers to the typical American Writer. Tharoor explores the world of American fiction. He dwells into the
psyche of psychiatrists and Philip Roth and Woody Allen immortalize their relationship. He is describing the creative process exploring his own connection with his craft. Jennings is one of the famous short story writers whose book is serialized in the newspapers. Jennings has become a household name and most of the papers publish his stories: “Jennings learned to measure his success by the number of calls he no longer had the courage to make. Each brilliant, honest, revelatory short-story proved apocalyptic for some friend, ruined some relationship, shattered some illusion” (131).

Jennings’ stories contain characters that are true to life. The startling lightness of his characters could be attributed to actual people whom the author interacted with. So Jennings makes many enemies, one such disaster occurs when he writes the story of ‘The Shanks of the Shrunken Shrink’. The ‘Shrink’ refers to psychologists who counsels patients. In America the shrink has become a social reality. The depiction of his characters easily identifies the characters in real life. When he starts loosing friends, Jennings consults a shrink named Dr. Clausewitz. In a candid conversation, Jennings confesses that the urge and compulsion to write is overpowering, Dr. Clausewitz questions why he has to write about people. He knows why he can’t write about fictitious people, Jennings replies: “Publication is important to me. Communication is what writing’s all about. If my fiction about real people doesn’t communicate something to other real people, if it doesn’t disseminate the message, the insight, I feel it contains, then the entire purpose of my writing is negated. I need to publish as much as I need to write (133).

The Shrink realizes that Jennings is a psycho patient and the characters about whom he writes are real ones and not the fictitious ones. He transfers real characters into a real story. These compulsive urges to write about people he knows come to be counter productive and so Dr. Clausewitz urges him to find an alternative to cure him of his
compulsion. He asks him to seek diversion in romanticizing women as friends, lovers, and companions. All Dr. Clausewitz suggestions to Jennings fall on deaf ears. During one such encounter, when Jennings says: “Every writer of short-stories is a reporter, an investigative reporter of society. Besides, it’s a question of the appropriate mode of expression”(135-36).

Dr. Clausewitz analyses Jennings’ problem as two fold: on the one hand he is compelled to write but on the other, he can only write about people whom he knows to their embarrassment. Jennings sees a girl named Cheryll and the story progresses where Cheryll becomes his live-in partner. Both of them share their intimacy but in his typical way Jennings starts writing a story about their relationship called ‘Vodka and the Virgin’ because she is a virgin in many ways. The story is ready on his table to be sent to the publishers. Everyone is curious to know about ‘vertiginous virgin’. Jennings is in great surprise when he realizes that Cheryll is eager to publish this story because she would become more famous and bag more modeling assignments.

The autobiographical element flashes in the story ‘The Death of a Schoolmaster’ based on maternal grandfather, a gentle and sensitive man known as ‘Papa’. The Schoolmaster is cast in typical Malayali village, who is gentle, compassionate, well read, learned and wears spotlessly clean clothes. The Schoolmaster Achan has a greater tendency towards academics than other aspects. His wife Amma is content to live in Achan’s shadow. Achan and Amma are portrayed as the typically contented village couple living for each other and for the family. As good fortune would have it Achan inherits Valiamamann’s assets after his sudden death. This sudden change of fortune especially vast paddy fields added to their happiness but before coming to the inheritance they too have their fair share of ups and downs.
One day the eldest daughter in the family falls sick and the narrator has to rush to the doctor, compelling him to come to attend his sister’s illness. In the village scenario only the well to do families can afford the doctor’s visit to home. Nevertheless Achan manages to pay the doctor. Since Achan is a schoolteacher his main priority is education and therefore he proves total failure in agriculture so he appoints a caretaker Balan. In the meantime, Kerala is passing through an important revolution both agricultural and social. The narrator, who later becomes a politician, fights hard for these two rights of landless laborers. It is passed in legislature but Achan lives in his own fanciful world of enjoying the zamindar status-expecting allegiance from his workers. It is only when Balan approaches to pay for the cancer treatment; Achan faces rude shock as Balan proclaims himself the owner of the fields and had all the paperwork done. The story highlights the tragedy of the older generation unable to come to terms with the change. Tharoor moans the loss of a generation of very good people who could not adjust with the changes and upheavals, which are the dynamics of any society.

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

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

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

Younger Indian English novelists feel secure of their place in the mainstream of Indian literature; this is revealed not only by their pronouncements but by their work. There is no consciousness of any foreign audience to whom India has to be explained, nor do they feel that they are writing in a ‘foreign language’. As there is no parade of erotic India, few Indian words are used, and they are explained by their context. Books like The Five-Dollar Smile, Shadows in Dream Time by Indu Mallah, Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors and Allan Sealy’s Hero do not carry notes or a glossary of Indian terms, though they present India in depth, not just traditional India but the modern India of westernized college students, woman doctors, advertisement agencies and film-stars-turned-politicians. (89)
No writer is free from criticism and Tharoor is also not an exception. He has also to bear the brunt of some harsh criticisms. Tharoor has been criticized by a few that his writing is artificial and un-Indian. He refutes these charges mildly and defends himself as he writes:

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

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