

A Portrait of the Orient through the Occidental Gaze: Resuming the Journey of ‘Dark India’ with Gregory David Roberts

Dipanwita Pal

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Galsi Mahavidyalaya, WestBengal, India
dipanwitapal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: *Shantaram* is a book about a man who breaks out of a gaol in Australia and ends up in Bambay (now Mumbai). Eventually, he becomes engaged with Mumbai underworld. He falls in love with Karla, a beautiful and mysterious woman. The novel uses lots of Marathi and Hindi words that add up to the local essence of the novel. The novel is set up in Bambay in the 80s. It becomes all the more interesting as the narrator gets involved into a gun-running mission in Afghanistan and gives a vivid picture of the whole trade. Significantly, the novel has Bombay as a very important character; rather Bombay becomes an integral part of the novel. It has beautifully projected India and her people seen through the eyes of an Australian. Hence, this paper will try to bring out what are the facts that have gained more attention from the narrator and which aspects have been ignored. And while doing so, this paper would further try to analyze the factors behind such inclusions and exclusions and the politics, if any, involved in it.

KEYWORDS: Orient, Occidental gaze, Shantaram, Bombay, Slave market

Edward Said (1978, 473) reflected within his famous book *Orientalism*, “Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies”. But this observation of Said cannot be said to be perfectly fitting in while we discuss upon Roberts’ novel *Shantaram*. It is quite evident that any discussion on books about the soul of India, especially viewed through a foreign gaze, must include *Shantaram*. It’s a huge novel full of thrilling, philosophical, romantic and heartbreakingly tragic experiences. The Australian author of the novel, Gregory David Roberts, was a convicted bank robber as well as a drug addict in Prentridge Prison from where he escaped in 1980 and came to India to hide himself. The novel, as is claimed by the author, is part-autobiography. The protagonist here reaches Bombay airport with a false passport in the name of Lindsay Ford and is later affectionately called Lin by his friends. Prabaker, his guide cum friend, led him to some of the most unusual places that are hardly visited by the tourists, especially. They call it their ‘dark tour of the city’ under which they visited the hidden society of beggars and gangsters, the secret market where slaves are traded in, the centre for organ trafficking, the black market of medicines run by the lepers and so on. Prabaker takes him to his native village too so that his client may experience the real essence of village India. All these experiences, along with the other ones such as his association with the underworld and getting involved in criminal wars, fight with the mujaheddin guerrillas, and link with Bollywood etc have been beautifully described by the narrator within the novel. In this paper we will try to carefully revisit those ‘dark’ places with the narrator and find out the exclusiveness of such experiences.

The protagonist of the novel lands in Bombay with a false passport that carried the name Lindsay Ford. In his original plan, Bombay was thought of as just a stopover towards his journey to Germany. But he made his mind to stay in the city. Lindsay begins his story ‘with a woman, and a city, and a little bit of luck’ (3) from the day when he put his first step in Bombay (presently Mumbai). The very first things that he noticed about Bombay, even before stepping out of the airport, are the queer smell of a new city, and of course, the heat. These are the quite usual reactions of a foreigner coming to the city for the first time. But the way he describes the smell of the air of a new city is very interesting, “...it’s the sweet, sweating smell of hope;

which is the opposite of hate; and it's the sour, stifled smell of greed, which is the opposite of love" (4). In this way he could sense the real nature of the soul of the city of Bombay even before stepping into it. Throughout the novel we find him just illustrating this realization about the soul of the city. And at once he felt at home in a city which he has not even had a glance of earlier/before. This expression about the city, unique in itself, binds the keynote of the nature of the relation he is going to have with the city.

The first sight of Bombay he encounters with after leaving the airport on his way to the city by bus is that of Bombay slum. The complacency he was having at the view of the modern highway and the well-planned landscape around it just after leaving the airport was shattered the moment the bus entered into the slum area. I would like to quote from the text his first impression at the sight: "Like brown and black dunes, the acres of slums rolled away from the roadside and met the horizon with dirty-haze mirages. The miserable shelters were patched together from rags, scraps of plastic and paper, reed mats, and bamboo sticks. They slumped together, attached one to another, and with narrow lanes winding between them. Nothing in the enormous sprawl of it rose much above the height of a man" (7). The stark contrast of the two pictures of the airport and of the slum is really shocking, and at the same time symbolic too. Whereas airport is the place harbouring the dreams of flights of people becoming successful, the slum is the coffin where all the dreams of its inmates are crushed and buried.

Awestruck, the narrator begins to watch closely the lives in the slum, as much as he could endeavour from the running bus. The woman brushing her hair, another woman bathing her children in the open, a man tending his goats tied with ropes, children playing everywhere, people carrying water with buckets, someone engaged in repairing in his hut—all these activities of livelihood with the amazing smile on their faces even under such wretched condition soon arrests his attention. In the meantime the bus stops at a traffic signal and our narrator comes across a person who was a foreigner, wearing something like a lungi only, with a bare upper part. What is notable in him is the sense of at-home feeling reflected in his gestures, "There was a definitive, bovine placidity in his face and posture" (8). From the way people around greeted him, it seemed that he is quite familiar within the locality. The encounter with this man changed the narrator's attitude towards the slum. He envied the complacency reflected upon that man's face. He begins to imagine himself at his place and suddenly views changed. He could now find the labour and enthusiasm exercised by the people in the slum. The cleanliness of the interior of the huts was now visible. And most interestingly, now he could uphold the beauty within the people living there. But this fascination was perhaps that of a tourist at the sight of something he has never seen before. Possibly this was not a deep-rooted realization, otherwise he wouldn't have felt terrified at the thought of living in a slum when circumstances led him to.

It happens so that a few months after the narrator reaches Bombay, he loses all his money to a gang of hooligans in the streets. As a result it becomes very difficult for him to meet the expenses of food and boarding in a hotel. Even that he tried to manage somehow by acting as the broker for exchanging foreign currencies. But in the meantime his visa expired. He couldn't take the risk of applying for extension because the passport he was carrying was not genuine. So there was every chance that while checking the passport for the application of visa, the authority might find that out. But no hotel would allow him to stay without valid visa. So the only option left for him was to accept Prabaker's offer of staying in the slum, as nobody would bother about the issue there. But see how he reacts to the thought of living in the slum: "...and yet horrified at the thought of life in the slum. I remembered my one visit to Prabaker's slum only too well. The smell of the open latrines, the heart-breaking poverty, the cramped and mill of people—it was a kind of hell, in my memory, a new metaphor that stood for the worst, or almost the worst, that could happen" (148). He goes on brooding, "the slum was filthy and crowded beyond imagination" (149).

When he was entering the slum for the first time as a resident, the first thing that captures his attention is the dirty sanitary system and the overpowering smell of the place inciting vomits. The way he reacts to these things invites a smile tinged with cynicism in Prabaker, "See how the

people live." (158). But gradually as he proceeds into the interiors of it, the place of suffocating odour is taken by smell of spices, cooking and incense. To me, the reference to the changing smell is symbolic. It presents the actuality of the life within slums. However hostile and dreadful it may seem from outside, it is something different within. The spirit of the people living there may not be intelligible from the peripheries. But once you enter into it, you will instantly feel the warmth and liveliness with which it welcomes you. His observation while making his way into the slum is very significant: "They were all staring at me with such gravity, such a fixity of frowning intensity, that I felt sure they must bear me enormous ill-will. I was wrong, of course. I couldn't know then, on my first day, that the people were simply staring at my fear. They were trying to understand what demons haunted my mind, causing me to dread so terribly the place they know to be a sanctuary from fates far worse than slum life" (158). Thus we see our protagonist getting involved into the fire rescue operation on the very first day of his arrival into the slum. Besides taking active part into the attempt to fight against the fire to stop its spreading, we also find him taking initiative to provide the first-aid to the injured voluntarily with his limited stock of medicines and bandages. So the day that started with a hostile feeling on the part of the narrator ended with quite a different note. At the end of the day we see him feeling some strange connection, 'some meaning, some purpose' (167) which he was badly in need of in his present situation that led him to the right place, to the right job, at exactly the right time.

The narrator draws the attention of the readers to a very interesting way of life that the workers of under-construction skyscrapers live. We see Roberts and Karla being invited to a celebration on the twenty-third floor of a thirty-five storied under-construction building. There they came across the hardship of living that the workers undergo there. When they work on the top floors of such buildings, reaching up there daily becomes the largest issue. The freight elevators are not available to them, as they are meant for machines, materials and staff. And there is no question about the difficulty in climbing such a height through stairs. So while working at the top floors, a good number of workers stay up there for a long period. They eat there, work there and sleep there. And for that purpose, they have their kitchens, bed rolls, pet animals, arrangements for rations—everything they need is sent to them up there. Prabaker explains, "It's sort of like a base camp that mountaineers use when they climb Everest" (252). It is like a Village in the sky.

Prabaker invites Roberts to visit his native village, after the dark tours of the city he led him to. May be, it was offered as a cure/relief from the shock he had from those experiences. If that was the purpose, then it was more than successful. Hearing about his plan to visit Prabaker's village Karla inspires him, "You have to go. If you want to stay here, in Bombay, as you say, then you should spend some time in the village. The village is the key" (95). And he sets out with Prabaker on his journey to the soul of India. The name of the village is Sunder—meaning beautiful. A vivid and lively picture of their journey, full of different kinds of experiences that go on exploring India in bits is portrayed by the narrator. And after a whole day's exhausting journey through the tremendously overcrowded trains of buses of our country, they reached their destination. Prabaker's father was waiting for them with the bullock-cart at the bus-stop. Roberts is overwhelmed by the kind of warm reception he gets at the village from hundreds of people assembled at Prabaker's house, only to welcome him. Coming from the west, this was something that he couldn't even imagine. During his long stay there he had a great opportunity to observe quite closely the people of the Village India along with their ways of life, behavior, culture—everything. Whatever experiences he could gather from this trip, he paints them beautifully within the novel. He gives an account of the cultural shock he experienced while he was bathing for the first time in the village in the open air along with a detailed description of the kind of almost open washrooms the village people usually have within their houses, the daily ordeals of men and women there and so on.

On some days he joined the men in the fields while tending to the different kinds of crops. He kept a minute record of the daily activities there—their shifts of work in the fields, the lunch and siesta break, the nature of their usual meal and the practice of taking it into groups,

resuming work after dozing near about one hour, and finally coming home together laughing and joking all the way. Women did all the cooking, cleaning, washing, regular house-maintenance—everything needed for living except working in the fields. Here I would like to draw the attention of the readers to the observation of the narrator regarding the comparative average duty hours of men and women on the village. He says, “On average, the village women worked a four-hour day. They spent much of their free time playing with the young children. The village men worked six hours per day on an average four day per week” (131). I wonder how all the day’s cooking, cleaning, and other jobs for such large families (usually families are large in villages) could be done only within four hours? The elaborate breakfast that the narrator himself has described requires at least one hour, if not more, to prepare. Besides, looking after the children is not at par with as just playing with the child—it is as hard a duty as working in the fields. Then how could he count that within their pass time?

His first night at the village had a profound effect upon him. The serenity and the complacency of the night suddenly gave him a jerk and he began to recapitulate his past deeds. Strangely, that was the moment when for the first time he realized what wrong he has done to both, his own life and family and that to others. For the first time ever after committing the crime he repented the loves (of his daughter, his parents and his brother) he betrayed and lost for ever. The time when he robbed, he was addicted to heroin. So he was not in his senses. Later, during the period of his imprisonment for three years, when he had got ample time to brood over his past and future, even then he didn’t bother either about his own family or about the families of the people he robbed at the point of a gun. That time he was ‘too busy being punished, and feeling punished’ (123). After his escape from the prison, it was a different story all together. Then he was absorbed in the thoughts of flight, running and hiding as a wanted man with a price on his head. It took him so long a time to feel the damage he had done to his own life. And for that feeling to come up and overpower his mind, he had to wait till that magical night at a small village in Maharashtra, the Sunder village. He reflects, ‘It was only there, in the village in India, on that first night, adrift on the raft of murmuring voices and my eyes filled with stars; only then, when another man’s father reached out to comfort me, and placed a poor farmer’s rough, calloused hand on my shoulders, only there and then did I see and feel the torment of what I’d done, and what I’d become—the pain and the fear and the waste; the stupid, unforgivable waste of it all’ (123-4). This is India. This is the real magical power of mystic India that leads one towards the most meaningful task upon earth—the realization of the self.

During his three months’ stay at the village, the person who influenced him the most is Prabaker’s mother, Rukhmabai Kharre. She was forty years old. The novel provides a vivid picture of her majestic presence. The narrator observes, “She was a full head and shoulder taller than her husband, and that difference in height combined with her ample, curvaceous figure, gave the false impression that she was something of an Amazon, whenever the couple stood together. Her black hair, gleaming with coconut oil, had never been cut, and the majestic rope of it reached to her knees. Her skin was tan brown. Her eyes the colour of amber, set in rose gold. The whites of her eyes were pink, always...a wide gap between her front teeth gave an impish mischief to her smile, while the superb hook of her beaked nose endowed her with serious expressions with an imposing authority” (125). The most attractive sides of her are ready wit and the deep sympathy she felt for all. Richards goes on describing her, “she was a woman to admire and to desire, but the message in her eye and her bearing was unmistakable: offend or disesteem her at your peril” (125). It was because of her skill and management that the wealth of the family increased from moderate to the largest in the village. At the time of Roberts’ visit, they were the most affluent family with large quantity of lands to cultivate, buffaloes, oxen, goats and hens along with quite handsome amount of money in the bank account to marry off/away the daughters. But these are nothing. The real power of the lady was revealed when she inspired and led the people of the village to fight against the fearsome dacoits who settled in the area and tortured the people with their demands of tribute. Rukhmabai became fierce when these dacoits raped a woman and shot dead a man in the neighbouring village that resisted their

demands. At his funeral, she addressed the people assembled there and inspired them with her tongue to fight against these oppressors. And finally the villagers could win the unequal battle with the help of their indomitable courage. A little bit of help also came from Prabaker who sent a group of six men from the city slum. From thence on, Rukhmabai holds a special position mixed with affection, pride and admiration amongst the villagers.

After a few days of his arrival in the city of Bombay, finally Prabaker was ready, or rather he thought Lindsay to be ready to undergo the dark tour of the city, or the ‘real deal’, as he calls it. Usually he doesn’t take the tourists to such places as most of them don’t like it. Or sometimes they are too eager to visit such places that their over-interest warns him not to lead them to these places. According to him, “you must have a good heads, to like these things, and you must be having good hearts, to not like them too much” (65). Now he is sure that Lin is a perfect combination of good hearts to appreciate such things. So their journey begins. They met an accident on the way. The cab they were riding struck someone on the street. Though the injury they suffered from it was negligible, the lesson Lin learnt was profound. From the aftereffects of the accident and the reaction of the mob he realized that if he wanted to stay in Bomay, he has to change himself. As he perceives, “The city wouldn’t let me be a watcher, aloof and apart. If I wanted to stay, I had to expect that she would drag me into the river of her rapture and her rage” (73). Then he knew he must step off the pavement and join the crowd for sure, sooner or later.

They continued their journey, even after the terrible experience of the accident as both of them were keen on their visit to the slave market. It was astonishing that such things still existed, even on the face of twentieth century. The way leading to the market is also very strange. After a certain turn on the street, all the signs of civilization began to vanish, as if to prepare the visitor as well as the backdrop for the dark tour. The buildings appeared to be ancient and dilapidated. Interesting changes in the appearances of the people living there were visible, especially with their attires. Gradually as they proceeded, all the signs of western-style garments disappeared, except among the children. Colourful traditional dresses like kaftans, angrakhas, sarees along with a great variety of headgears and extravagant jewelleries were in vogue. Lin feels, “it was as if all of these hundreds of people were costumed for home, for themselves, not for the public promanades. It was as if they were safe, there, to clothe themselves in tradition and display” (74).

And finally they reach the core of the sight after bribing the watchman. It was a kind of courtyard. Some wooden benches were scattered. A number of groups of two or three people, among whom some were Arabs were engaged in conversation. Children were sitting under the tattered canopy. It was, as Prabaker describes, the ‘people-market’ and the children were the commodity put for sale. They were collected by scouts from the areas affected by cyclone, drought, epidemic, riots and such other calamities in which possibly they lost their parents and became the prey of the scouts. The boys brought there were destined to work as camel jockeys in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf States. Some would be maimed, and worse, some would be dead while running camels for providing entertainment to the rich sheikhs. The girls would work as maids in the household. Some of them would be sold in the sex-market.

Lin felt intense agony and resentment at what he experienced there. He badly wanted to protest, but couldn’t as he himself was an outlaw in the country. Moreover, he could feel the quintessential truth behind the whole business: “If I came back with a gun and stopped the slave market there, in that crooked concrete maze, it would start up again somewhere else. Stranger that I was, I knew that much. And maybe, the new slave market in a different place, would be worse” (81). And the more pathetic side of the story is that, as Prabaker puts it, these children were luckier than their fellow ones to avoid death by coming to this market. Their parents keenly requested/ begged of the scouts to take their children so that they won’t at least die. This is the stark reality which is utterly contradictory to the mere perception. And Prabaker, playing the Virgil, explains this to Lin.

The real tune of the place is finely set by the episode of the pakora-seller on the street, even before the narrator enters the sight. The spectacle of that man amidst the eerie blue flame of the kerosene stove enhanced the play of emotions that that haunted him. It was a combination of angst and blunt, indifferent anger for the tedious, ill-paid work that was reflected through his eyes. For a moment Lin could feel the intensity of the anger that compelled him to feel sorry as a human being for the unfortunate condition he has been thrust into. The same was the feeling with the slave market too.

The next place they visit under the plan is to an old house near St. George Hospital. This too was a kind of hospital; at least it claimed to be one. The house was full of sick and dying people. The difference is, what they were provided there was just a small floor-space where they are to lie and wait for death to come, without any treatment or medicine. In spite of that the owner of the place is highly respected, almost as a saint, just for providing these dying persons the space to die. And imagine what he is taking in exchange! That is the most horrible part of the story. He always keeps an watchful for on these people in search of the useful organs left within their bodies and tags the accordingly. Actually the house is a huge illegal organ-bank where living people with active organs are stocked. And these people are willingly donating their organs at the cost of having a ‘quiet, clean place to die’ (96). And surprisingly, these people feel a kind of gratitude towards the owner of this business, whereas they should have hated him the most! Just imagine the wretched condition these people were placed in that even such hell appears to them as heaven. To act as live-stock for organ trafficking is actually far better than dying helplessly upon the street out of hunger or out of cold. Unfortunately this is the real picture of the miserable condition that a great number of people undergo in this country. And here lies the greatness of the novel that it has very successfully pointed out such dark sides of the Indian society.

The next interesting place Lin visits is the mobile slum of the lepers. These are among those places which I think very few writers have a first-hand experience of. And almost none of the foreigners had ever any access to such places who could have recorded it so poignantly. This place doesn’t come as a part of their dark tour. He was taken there by Abdullah as the black market for the supply of medicines he needed to treat the slum dwellers. The slum at the time of their visit was at the outskirts of the city, at the railway sidings. These are, as I have already mentioned, the mobile slums. Being the run outs from different government and non-government colonies for lepers (as they wanted to make themselves free from the suffocating rules and regulations there), they were given shelters nowhere. The famous ‘elastic tolerance’ of the slum people was not that much tolerant as to welcome these lepers. Wherever they settled, they were not allowed for long by local leaders. So they were forced to form themselves into a group living in slums that ‘settled, within an hour, in any open space they could find, and made a traceless departure in even less time’ (208). Their huts looked like pup tents in comparison to which even the slum huts appear to be solid, comfortable structures. The materials they used for making these are scraps of cardboard and plastic hell together with thin string. But this is not enough. The most shocking experience one has is not their poor and wretched lifestyle. It is the spectacle of the disfigured appearances of the people living there. It was hard, as Lin finds it, not to look and stare at them. Some of them were without noses. Most of them had no fingers. The feet of some were bleeding. Even worst, the disease in some of them reached the ultimate stage with affecting the lips and ears.

A very significant aspect of Lin’s description of the painful appearance of the people there is that the absence of beauty, or the disfigurement seemed to be more ugly in women than in men. About men’s disfigurement, as he finds, “many of the men had a defiant and even a jaunty air about them—a kind of pugnacious ugliness that was fascinating in itself” (209). Now the question is how the same kind of disfigurement/imperfection, same kind of lack of beauty invites different attitudes within men and women? If some kind of deformities compells women to be shy and cowed, how can the same be ‘fascinating’, causing ‘jaunty air’ within men? How

can women look ‘more ugly’ when both lack the same organs? Isn’t here the narrator betraying his gender-biased attitude?

Coming to the profession of these people, they live on black-marketing, chiefly in medicines. They have mastered the art of stealing medicines since the time of the British Raj. Even then these people were at the bottom of the priority list of privileges. As a result they often missed the limited supply of medicines, bandages and medical treatments. So they learnt to manage resources for themselves by stealing them. In this way they became a bit over-skilled to gather surpluses. So they built their own black-market of medicines to sell their surplus collection. But who are their customers? As Abdullah informs, in India a large number of people died through formation of septic formed from wounds and the spreading of infection during the gang wars, violent protests, brigandage and the like. They can’t go to the registered chemists as the police always have an eye on them. So they collect their medicines from these black markets where lepers ask no question. The chief customers of this secret market are the terrorists, infiltrators, or the ambitious outlaws. Abdullah concludes, “These people are dying...and they still live for themselves, and then they sell life to others who are dying” (213). In this way Abdullah tries to add a tinge of humanity to the job of illegal dealing in medicines by these outskirt people. He tries to highlight the positive aspect to the illegitimate business of black-marketing.

There is no surprise that Abdullah would try to add some nobility to the illegal selling of medicines as being a part of the Bombay underworld, he often needs their help either for himself or for his fellow fighters. But how could the narrator miss to identify the danger hidden within this so-called social service? By providing life to some of the outlaws, are they not endangering the lives of some innocent people, the future victims of these criminals? As far as stealing medicines for themselves is concerned, that can be accepted, for they too are patients suffering severely and are badly in need of medicines for their survival. And they themselves are not potential threats to other people. But what about the terrorists, the gangsters and other dangerous outlaws whom they are helping to escape the grip of law by providing medicines secretly? Are they not endangering the lives of the innocent people in this way?

In the village he was given a new name—a Maharastrian one, Shantaram Kishan Kharre. In this way on one hand he was accepted as a member of Prabaker’s family in spite of coming from some other country. On the other hand, the first name that was chosen for him in accordance to their perseverance of his nature meant ‘man of peace’. But this mistaken identity had a tremendous effect upon him. Just at the time the villagers were busy in renaming him, Lin was absorbed in the epiphany of the existence of the river within oneself. ‘It’s the river of the heart, and the heart’s desire’ (136)—the bona fide, essential truth. And after being wrongly named as ‘man of peace’, he suddenly realized that it was the target, the floodstick, nailed by them into the river of his life. He comes to perceive the design of his life: “I was born in those moments, as a stood near the floodstick with my face lifted to the chrismal rain. Shantaram. The better man that slowly, and much too late, I began to be” (137). Finally, this was the bright effect that the ‘dark tour’ had upon the protagonist.

References

- Roberts, Gregory David. 2005. *Shantaram*. London, United Kingdom: Abacus.
 Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.