

Mumbai: Cityscape presentation in Gregory David Roberts' Shantaram

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Abstract

“...but Bombay isn't India. Bombay is an Own –World, a world in itself. The real India is out there”

Gregory David Roberts

It is not for the first time that India is targeted piece for praise and criticism. As Iqbal says, “Kuch baat hai ki hasti mit ti nahin hamari, sadiyon raha hai dushman daure jahan hamara”- This goes quite well with the presentation of India and specifically Mumbai or Bombay. Mumbai is known as the land of dreams on one hand on the other hand it is even quoted as “Hadso ka shehar”. If the saying of Iqbal is made limited to Mumbai it would be justice to the city. There are multitudes holding manifold imaginings for the city of dreams. Mumbai or Bombay is God to many of the poor. Dharavi – a place who gives shelter to many thousands of people. Mumbai is a witness of so many successes and so many failures. Bollywood, the glory and glare of India has its set foot in Mumbai making it the land of dreams. Mumbai in proper sense is termed by many as post-colonial city, a postmodern city-strictly following the notions spread by Postmodern theorists- discarding the center, deconstructing the ideas, the set pattern of society. Bollywood cinema undoubtedly played a constructive part in making deconstructionism exist. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Jeet Thayil, Rohinton Mistry, Murzban F Shroff, Suketu Mehta, Naresh Fernandez and so on. The paper attempts to analyze the portrayal of Mumbai by an Australian writer Mr. Gregory David Roberts, who has depicted Mumbai as a mixture of dreams and deaths.

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Gregory David Roberts is an Australia born English writer, a heroin addict and an armed robber. Roberts started writing Shantaram when he was in Australian prison. Many a times the manuscript was destroyed by the prison attendants but Roberts did not lose hope and determined to rewrite the story which was already woven in his mind-his own experiences, his travel to India, Heroin addiction and everything. The striking feature of the novel is the presentation of city which reminds of Hardy's description of Wessex or R K Narayan's Malgudi. Gregory has used common Indian terms to articulate the essence of beauty in India through Bombay. Written in 2003 the novel brought success and fame to a notorious drug addict and a bank robber of Australia. The analysis of his biography gives the clue of his innocence and his Robin hood attitude. Writing Shantaram in prison puts a stamp on his innocent mind- innocence towards his own life. The story of his life declares that his separation from his child and family lead him to spoil his life, and to an extent he did so. But as mentioned above India- Mumbai is a land of Dreams.

Shantaram is a story having all the traits of Postmodern writing- a big and a big hearted book as Cameroon Woodhead says, the vast tapestry of tales sown together with the skill, of a perfect story teller. Shantaram is the name which the protagonist receives from the mother of his friend Prabaker. The story starts with the narration of the central figure Shantaram who disclose that he was chained and kept behind the walls still he was free-free to hate people. He elaborated how he fled to India taking his luck along. He shares with the readers when he escapes from the Australian prison he came to India and joined Mafia. He worked as a gunrunner, a smuggler and a counterfeiter. He was the only survivor of the war held at the time, when all his friends died. But this was not the end or beginning of his life. His life started when he entered Bombay. Fate put him to Bombay den and luck took him to Karla Saaranen, the heroin of the story. From here starts the eye of Gregory David Roberts on Beautiful Bombay. The first thing which he noticed and wrote about of then city was the smell of the air, quite variant from Australian air. He could sense the kind of connection of India and a peculiar smell which he experienced when he entered the umbilical corridor connecting to the plane (Shantaram 2). He could smell that before he entered, what we call proper people and proper India. The description shows that the writer was already aware of the Indian incense. The writer compared the sweat smell to the smell of sweet because now the place was the only hope for the wide open world. It was the smell of Gods, demons, empires, and civilizations in resurrection and decay; it's the blue skin smell of the sea, no matter where you are in the island city, and the

blood metal smell of machines; smell of temples, smell of shrines, smell of churches, mosques and hundreds of bazaars packed with smell of flowers and spices. Roberts says that it was the smell of restaurants, flowers, sea, and spices which acclaimed that he is back home.

The next thing which he was happy or haughty at was heat. Heat of Bombay and with humid too was quite unforgettable for the hero- five minutes, the hero explains were enough to wet him with sweat and smell. Each breath was a victory in itself, it was so hard to breathe he says. It is imaginable how a foreigner can feel about the torturing heat of India, when you are from a pleasant cool region. In spite of all these climatic atrocities Shantaram was bouncing with hope. He was at the outset of his journey to the city where dreams come true, although this was not his aim; his aim was to hide himself with the legal authorities because of his elopement from the Australian prison.

The journey begins, the narrator is endeavoring to know the city and its people more profoundly. The description he lay out depicts that it was his first visit to India- Mumbai. His detailing of the drive in a motor bus where he explains the first move of the bus, when it was full with mixed Indian and foreign travelers. The driver chewing the beetle and spitting the beetle juice out through the open doorway announced the start of the journey, "theek hain, Challo! (7). The author compares the neatness of the Indian airport to the sanity of Melbourne, the home town of the writer. We all know that airports are much cleaner, disciplined and organized like cantonments, in India. The infinitesimal observations of the city by the narrator exhibits his consciousness for the cityscape. Each line of Shantaram has superfluous description of the city habits and its routine. It seemed as if the aim of Mr. narrator was to write in praise of Mumbai. He has described the slums of Mumbai-which covers good acres of the city. The narrow roads of the city pulled him back from the complacent attitude which he developed seeing the airport area. For the first sight of the slums made him feel the hands of disgrace. The miserable shelters were patched together from rags, scraps of plastic paper, reed mats and bamboo sticks (7). The details raise a question, what the author was trying to raise or he was indeed baffled by the dirt and beauty which he viewed at the airport area. This must have definitely confused him about the meaning of beauty and the land owing 5000-year-old civilization. He says, it was impossible to believe that just one kilometers away was a prosperous gorgeous airport, it was difficult to digest the scene of crushed and cindered dreams (8), above all they were no less than a town in quantity, every week around 5000 people arrive to these slums driven out of poverty, famine etc. In just eight pages of the novel which covers 1,200 pages, the narrator felt so guilty about what he was doing thinking himself to be the most troubled. The factors which he picked up are so disappointing for Indians and Mumbai indeed- but they are the crystal clear fact of the city. The narrator says that he had been beaten so badly by the wardens and policemen, he had been stabbed he stabbed people back but the actual wound he is feeling now, after watching the plight of the slum dwellers-he felt as if he was running on sharp knives. He even wondered the plans of government and exclaimed, "what kind of system allows such kind of suffering (7). Further in the novel the narrator details the traffic which churned like dances on road- motor buses, cars, wooden carts with wooden wheels, driven by pair of ox.

The narrator not only observed the roads and slums his eyes even counted the colors they wore-the supernatural colors he called them. The posters of movies at the bus stops and areas near temples. The man shouting his low price for hotel, in broken English. The writer explains the color and the cloth material he was wearing- blue denim shirt and cotton pants. The narrator has not left single description unnoticed of the city- Mumbai. Starting from living to non-living things- the men, the monuments, the walls, the ceilings, the animals, the traffics and what not. Somewhere it can be added that he even knew the faces, the expressions, the gestures. He understood the willingness of Prabaker whom he meets at the bus stop and declares it as the wisest decision of his life time. Mr. Lindsay was feeling comfortable with the two Canadians and Prabaker.

The next observation of Mr. Lindsay was the beggars of Bombay. Every kind of illness, hardship paraded there, as if it was an exhibition for the people passing by. Like the first sight of the slums these beggars and their plight took Mr. Lindsay to the world of his own, where he thought himself to be the most suffered, but when e moves forward with Prabaker he finds some of the beggars playing cards and some blind men relishing fish and rice. Prabaker was giving him stealthy glances thinking what image Mr. Lindsay is creating in his minds. Mr. Lindsay understanding the queries going on in mind of Prabaker exclaims plainly that he like the way these poor people are enjoying their lives; India is actually beautiful. He found it more wildly exciting- the music coming from every shop, the vibrant colors, the business of the streets. They were happier than any other people he had known or travelled to any other city. He concluded saying that Bombay is free – free from all strain and stress. They appear what they are. The shame which he felt watching the slums was vanished when he saw the beggars on streets lined up as if representing discipline. Above all Mr. Lindsay noticed that no one drove the beggars, no one banished the slum dwellers. No doubt they had painful lives, but this pain was not found in their action and

activities, perhaps they were free and liberated. Mr. Lindsay utters- “They were free, the city was free, I loved it” (22).

Mumbai as explained by Mr. Lindsay in the novel is like the New York was for O’Henry. The only difference which could be observed is that O’Henry was the native of the land and Mr. Lindsay new nothing of Mumbai; still the description and definition managed by him is noteworthy in praise of Mumbai and its people. Sometimes the city appeared to him very strange. For instance, when he sees people in stark colored attires and the number of languages they spoke. The writer was k own to none. He could not understand the language but could easily make out through their gestures what they are trying to convey. It seemed to him, sometimes that he is an actor of a drama whose script he does not know. The whole novel moves around the deep description of stalls, animals, buildings and at the end of the novel the narrator again narrates the beautiful full moon night which draws Shantaram towards those writhing alleys of struggle and dream which seemed to him so familiar and sage that he wondered why he was afraid of the place at the beginning of his Bombay days. He moved in mists of cooking scent and shower soap, of animals stalls of kerosene lamps, of frankincense and sandalwood streaming upward from a thousand tiny temples in a thousand tiny homes (934). The description of Bombay is by Gregory David Roberts is quite different the way the writers of his time have written. For Instance, Narcopolis by Jeet Thayil has expressed his own days spent in Bombay. The novel is set in 1970s Bombay and Thayil unlike Gregory David Roberts has left no stone unturned to put India and Indianness down-specially the postcolonial city Bombay or Mumbai. Thayil goes on to say that people of India have overrated India also, and he came to this declarative view while he was Mumbai, using Rashid’s Opium den and Dimple’s company. On the contrary of his contemporary Jeet Thayil, Gregory David Roberts has put out his heart in exploring and explaining the beauty of Bombay. It sounds something odd that an Indian writer talking of ugliness of the city in the same time when the other is praising the same city and the folklore. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Suketu Mehta all have praised the postcolonial city in their own possible applauses.

The summing up of the ideas shared through this paper concludes that Bombay is a beautiful city, a mini India in itself. People from Up, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana and many other places like Goa and many of the posh southern cities of India come to the dream land to fulfill their dreams. The cityscape presented by Gregory David Roberts not only encloses the description of historical buildings, temples etc., it also encompasses the folks of Bombay the folklore of Bombay. The description of the way they wear their traditional dresses like turban, saree, the selection of stark colors, devotion of people to their families living in slums. All these attracted the Australian heart of Gregory David Roberts and he fell in love with the city and the people. The example of this can be seen by the video film which Mr. Roberts has directed and shared all his experiences along with the same places. This shows how much he got attached with them and those whom we avoid and abandon- The slums, the dens, the poverty and the poor but compassionate poor. It sounds weird to call poor as compassionate, but it is fact indeed that the poor folks Mr. Gregory David Roberts met like Prabaker whom he named Linbaba and later as Shantaram by his mother. Mr Roberts claimed in the very beginning of the novel that meting Prabaker was the wisest decision of his life. Prabaker who took him to India guest house, became his Bombay tour guide. Tried to tell him the reality of balack and white market of Bombay, its people and places. Each and every page of the novel has a glimpse of the city and the folklore. The richness of culture, the naïve people of slum who are so adjustive that the narrator never thought that poverty can suggest a kind of quietness also. No other writer of the present era has portrayed Bombay or Mumbai’s slums in a manner which Mr. Gregory David Roberts has applied. The profound presentation of the city, its folks and the folklore is so much visible in the novel that it seems Mr. Roberts was a native of India.

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