

Gregory David Roberts and His *Shantaram*: An Overview

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Abstract

In the list of Australian literary contribution, Gregory David Roberts draws a number of generic conventions to produce his noteworthy, Shantaram. The novel has acquired certain academic considerations also. Cosmopolitanism influences prominently in the novel which allows it to transcend national boundaries. The novel is anomalous in the Australian literary landscape when considered its popularity. The entrepreneurial approach of Roberts to promote his writing which is closely bounded by criminology and its persona impact the ongoing success of the novel in Australia and other countries. The present article overviews the reviews and opinions of Roberts and his Shantaram, from media.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, criminal, Roberts.

The novel, *Shantaram* of David Gregory Roberts is semi-autobiographic and has been the bestseller of Australian fiction. The novel is a fictionalized version of Robert's experience. The author's experience in the book is depicted as a criminal on the run and his criminal exposures in the underworld of Mumbai in particular. The novel bestrides Australia and India which also displays cosmopolitanism through Mumbai city.

After committing series of armed robberies in Melbourne and addicted to heroine, Roberts who was formerly known as Gregory John Peter Smith, sentenced to imprisonment for nineteen years. The story of the novel is spotted as his escape from Pentridge prison in 1980 and ten years run in Asian countries. He enters India, particularly in Mumbai. The plot can also be called as the 'labyrinthine plot' that mimics the collection of slum dwellings when he enters the gutter and stinky world of Mumbai.

The book is a narrative context that takes many twists and turns. Roberts changes himself as 'Lindsay', called as 'Lin'. His narration narrates the skirmishes, struggles and combats in the underbelly of the city, his romantic attachment to a mysterious Swiss woman, Karla and his endeavors of redemption through the services as a slum doctor.

When considered as a travel novel, *Shantaram* seems unique and distinct in the milieu of Australian scene of literature. The novel is portrayed as the considerable tradition of Australian writing about India and its features. Not only Roberts, many other Australian writers also featured Eastern countries in a larger form in their literary contexts. One among them is Mollie Skinner whose *Tucker Sees India* (1937) features him, a rough and ready Australian who is caught up in numerous adventures of India en-route the real war. In the end of the novel, Bruce Bennet as “Tucker has seen India and is ready for anything life may throw at him” (555).

From 1960s the Westerners visit Asian countries to discover enlightenment and that has turned a tradition. The novel, *Shantaram* might be seen as a continuation of such tradition. Young westerners find a peaceful mind-alteration travelling through these countries from 1960s and 1970s. Neville in his *Play Power* offers a reflection of the “new gypsies who flow across the world turning criminal pursuits to fund their travels” and the narrator of the book suggests, “young tourists might engage in begging, smuggling, gun-running and prostitution in order to sustain their freedom” (Neville, qtd. In Gerster 298-302).

Roberts is followed by the long stretch of Australian convict authors beginning with James Tucker’s *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (1839) and Henry Savery’s *Quintus Servington* (1829). The writers contributed their experiences by receiving a special indulgence during their imprisonment. The same effort is taken up to write *Shantaram* by Roberts. He says,

In the constant struggle to lift my face from the bleeding, red puddle of sweat and tears, I was choked by the fear that I would drown in my own blood. In that terror, in that clamp-jawed defiance, I heard the clear, indomitable writer’s voice in the deepest part of my mind: “Damn, this is good material! If you live through this, you’ve got to write it down!” (Roberts, qtd. in Gathman 36)

His major determination to write about the convict experience was forged during his torturing imprisonment in India. He then continued his writing when sentenced finally in Australia. He was re-incarcerated during this sentence and began writing drafts of *Shantaram* despite the drafts were destroyed by non-humanistic prison guards.

Roberts is known as the mediagenic author. The books of the big-name authors become brands in the contemporary literary markets with high preference. Clive Bloom claims, “the author need not be a real person; rather the name must designate a brand, a genre and a style” (33). It is whether with intention or not, the name, ‘Gregory David Roberts’ itself carries traces of his criminal past as criminals are generally identified by the use of Christian and second names. He was originally known as ‘Gregory John Peter Smith’ before he changed his name by deedpoll to Roberts, his mother’s family name and his literary name is itself a pseudonym. Even though invented partly, this name indicates a high brand of authorship to him. This can be amplified further to his any future literary products, he delivers. In his observation, Paul Delany, “sales of best-selling books are now driven by their author’s appearances on television and radio, and effective self-presentation is at least as important as the book itself” (184).

The promotional materials attest the novel that the heavy market of the novel is mainly due to the real-time exertions of the author. The major importance is given to Roberts, the author, himself who is said to be a ‘haunted man’. He loses everything and lives to write about his haunted life. The flamboyant real experiences of his armed robbery and imprisonment are easily entwined in the promotional material for the novel. It is because the pathetic story of a ‘wronged man’ is more appetizing for common readers.

Shantaram is a paradigm of a contemporary Australian bestseller. The novel meets the purpose of instruction to the general audience through various angles, raising questions about genre distinctions and workings of taste drawing attention to the practices of publishers, consumers

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and fans as well. The novel is yet to be seen as one of the prototypes of the Australian classical literature. The novel is polarizing and produced a complete range of extra-textual practices that will definitely assure a strong prevalence in the cultural imagination for the years to come.

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