

Anarchy and Atonement: Tracing the Evolution of the Self in Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*

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ABSTRACT

Man is a composite of good and evil; occasionally, both aspects of his personality dominate one after the other. The man keeps on oscillating between these two, and for this, sometimes he falls into the abyss of failure and remorse due to his wrongdoings and sometimes reaches to the apex of goodness and reaps the benefits of his positive deeds. These dualities or binary oppositions have existed in man since the advent of human civilization. Human beings gyrate in these two oppositions as per the call of their instincts. In this paper, we shall analyse a fictional work, *Shantaram*, by an Australian author, Gregory David Roberts. We will trace the theme of how human goodness can be awakened through love and understanding in the novel through the character Lin Shantaram. Lindsay or Lin undergoes the trials and travails of life due to his lawlessness in the initial phase of his life and later strives hard for the path of goodness. In this course, the repercussions of his evil deeds take a toll on him, but he is not disheartened and keeps striving for a better version of himself. In this paper, I will present the life saga of the protagonist, Lin Shantaram, through the trials and tribulations of his wrongdoings and his evolution as a better man, designating peace and calmness in society.

Keywords: *Lindsay, Shantaram, Australia, Pentridge, prison, crime, slum, bank robber, India, Gregory David Roberts, Karla, Mumbai.*

Gregory David Roberts is an Australian author known for his acclaimed novel *Shantaram*. Born in 1952, he led an extraordinary life of hardship and resilience. After becoming addicted to heroin and turning to bank robbery, he was eventually caught and imprisoned. However, in 1980, Roberts made a dramatic escape from Pentridge Prison in Melbourne and fled to India. There, he spent about a decade, during which his experiences in the country had a deep impact

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on his writing and eventually inspired Shantaram. The novel draws from his life, blending fictional and autobiographical elements, providing readers with a vivid narrative of crime, survival, and redemption. After his release from prison, Gregory David Roberts completed and published *Shantaram*, a novel that became known for its intense narrative and complex characters. The title *Shantaram* originates from a name given to him by his best friend's mother, which translates to "Man of Peace" or "Man of God's Peace."

While the novel captures vivid adventures and deep reflections, there is some debate about how closely it mirrors Roberts' actual life. Roberts clarified that *Shantaram* and its sequel, *The Mountain Shadow*, blend reality and fiction. He describes certain experiences as being close to his real-life encounters, while others are well-designed narratives inspired by his life. Roberts has shared that he planned to write novels—not autobiographies—anchoring his stories in real experiences but using fictionalized characters and dialogue to explore broader themes. For Roberts, the "truth" of the stories lies not in their factual accuracy but in their emotional and universal resonance, which speaks to shared human experiences and our "common humanity." In the words of Ayelet Waldman, the author of *Crossing the Park*, "Shantaram is dazzling. More importantly, it offers a lesson..... that those we incarcerate are human beings. They deserve to be treated with dignity. Some of them, after all, may be exceptional. Some may even possess genius".

Shantaram is a fictional writing by Gregory David Roberts, where he uses elaborative narration to craft a character named Shanaram. His 2003 novel brought him great fame and he received several prizes. The story is set in Bombay in the 1980s, where one Australian convicted prisoner comes to the city after fleeing from Pentridge Prison to hide. He escaped from the prison in the mid of the day around one o' clock by crossing the front wall and two gun points. There were two prisoners first one was the protagonist Lindsay and the second one was his friend, a twenty-five year old criminal serving his sentence for a murder, they convinced eight prisoners of good physical specimen but all of them denied so they decided to execute the plan. Taking the advantage of ongoing renovations, they prepared their plan. They went to work as maintenance gardeners and when the workers went for lunch they took the chance and sneak away from the place inconspicuously. Lindsay, the protagonist came to Bombay through his fake passport to hide and with his fake name as his name Lindsay is also not his actual name he took this name from the fake passport. However, ironically, he discovers his inherent goodness, which lies deep within his heart, thus devoting his entire life to serving the slum dwellers he stays in Bombay. In Bombay he met a friendly guide named Prabaker,

who found Lin, a promising customer for himself and he takes Lin to several mysterious and exotic places in Bombay, which gives him a startling experience in life and ultimately leads to the discovery of his new self. Prabaker quickly becomes Lindsay's perfect friend due to his genuine and friendly nature. Parbaker called him Lin and Lindsay also liked this new name among all the fake names what he has invented in the recent months to hide his identity and this name he felt naturally belonged to him just like his actual name by which he served his imprisonment in Australia. With this new name began his new journey and he says, "I know that the naming moment, which seemed so insignificant then, which seemed to demand no more than an arbitrary and superstitious yes or no, was in fact a pivotal moment in my life." (Shantaram 28) That time onwards he was called as Linbaba by Prabaker and the role he did with this name quite real, natural and near to his heart than any other name taken by him in past. During his visit to the city, Lin meets Karla, a Swiss girl with whom he falls in love in the first meeting. Although Karla, being a practical girl, never clearly admits any unique feelings for Lindsay, he keeps praising her and nourishing his feelings for her. He meets a few of his newly found expatriate friends from different countries in Leopold's Cafe, where he finds the crime mafia named Abdel Khader Khan and his men, who were influential people in the city and used to regulate the business of fake passports. Leopold was also visited by drug dealers and those who wanted to enjoy with bar dancers. It was also a place where deals used to be finalized in sign languages. Drug dealers have their code of getting their customers and finalizing their deals, and so is the case with bar girls.

In due course of time, Prabaker discovers the underbelly of Bombay in the form of slums and crime, but he is awestruck when he visits the dark trade centre of human trafficking, what Prabaker called the 'people market', where children are bought and sold like cattle. The slave market was near to Dongri, a kind of suburb surrounded with mosques, markets and restaurants which are famous for Mughlai cuisines. As they move further for the slave market main roads reduced to streets and streets got reduced to narrowly packed lanes which denied the passing of the taxi then they left the taxi and marched ahead in the hideous busy lane and at some extent the lane got narrowed for scooters even. Most of the buildings were three to four storeys but almost entangled upwards and reducing the view of the blue sky. With the narrowing of the lane changed the view of the market area; it was a typical bazaar of spices and perfumes. Now people were dressed in colourful traditional dresses. The lane got reduced to one person and if from the two sides the lane is to be crossed, one has to wait squeezing himself and allow other person to pass and this maze lead to a sharp turn and finally to the gate which opened to a

courtyard where he found people sitting on roughly made benches and most of them were Arabs thus they finally reached to the 'people market'. There they found slave children sitting under withered canopies; those children were the victims and survivors of many natural disasters like the West Bengal cyclone, the Orissa drought, the cholera epidemic of Haryana, and the communal fight in Punjab. Children who underwent these calamities travelled to Bombay mostly alone, and they were in a pitiable condition. "The children were thin, vulnerable, and small. Two sat with their four hands bunched together in a beehive ball. One child embraced another within the huddle of a protective arm. They all stared out at the well-fed, well-clothed purchasers and agents, following every change of expression or emphatic gesture of their bejewelled hands." (Shantaram 80-81) Lindsay, after witnessing this heinous crime and its entangled roots in the city, was deeply moved and wanted to fight against it but was helpless as he was a convicted bank robber and hiding his real identity; he himself had to flee from police, and he barely knows the language and the working of the city. He realized if he, by the force of weapons, stops this slave market, then it would rise again at some other place, In this scene, Lindsay felt the feeling of compassion, which was somewhere suppressed due to his wrongdoings in Australia. With this heart-wrenching scene, Prabaker got a better and deeper understanding of life and the world, more than that of his self. He recalled his experience of Pentridge Prison and the other prisoners whom he met there among them some were experiencing their fourth or fifth prison sentences and some of them have got acquainted with prison life from their age of schooling and they started with reform schools or 'Boys' Homes' and those boys were almost in the age of these slave children in the reform schools some of them were thrashed, starved and kept in solitary confinement and some of them were the victims of sexual abuse as well and Lindsay got the same portrayal of the slave children.

Apart from the seamy side of the city, Lin also noticed Bombay's vibrant cultural aspects, making it a centre of attraction to nourish and cherish the aspirations of people living there. His first experience in Bombay was of homecoming; he felt. "the sweet, sweating smell of hope, which is the opposite of hope, and it's the sour, stifled smell of greed, which is the opposite of love. It smells of gods, demons, empires, and civilizations in resurrection and decay." (Shantaram4) With this binary opposition, he grabbed the city's absolute quintessence. To discover the real spirit of Bombay, he was invited by his guide cum friend to visit his village Sunder, and on the way to the village, he experienced something exotic about the transport culture of India again. He narrates that at Victoria Terminus to board the train, he was carried by a giant porter along with the luggage, and the porter rushed to the compartment, crushing

and trampling everyone until he ported the author and the luggage into the carriage. There, he noticed that the people who were hostile to everyone coming in their way to board the train suddenly became humble and started sharing their feelings for one another. Lindsay seemed hypocritical, but later, he got the sense out of it that the scimmages over boarding the train, getting seats, and then showing courtesy were the two facets of the same coins that were a necessity. As the crowd necessitates the fight to board the train in the same manner, making the journey pleasant necessitates the polite behaviour of the passengers with one another. With this gradual increase in the comprehension of public life, he unravelled many mysterious aspects of the city. The city has a broad spectrum of understanding and acceptance, which gives space to all the oddities of everyday life and the sophistication of modern life. Lindsay also realized that those from the land brimmed with facilities show their hypocrisy. If all Frenchmen, Australians or Americans had to live in such a crowded space, they would have shown their hostility savagely by zeroing their courteous behaviour. Lin also noticed the culture of a head nod or 'head-wiggle' among Indians, which meant a formal greeting gesture and an appearance of fellow feeling for everyone. He was convinced by this lovely gesture and learned it for himself and declares that "It was the first truly Indian expression my body learned, and it was the beginning of a transformation that has ruled my life, in all the long years since that journey of crowded hearts." (Shantaram107)

Lindsay reached after the local bus and train journey filled with scimmages and greetings and first met Prabaker's father, Kisan Mango Kharre, a typical Indian farmer with amiable and graceful gestures. Kisan Kharre also had the opposite feelings on his face, which was a sense of pride and, at the same time, a sense of sadness and worry due to the adversaries of life. Kisan's simple and genuine appearance made Lin surrender his sense of superiority and his cultural notions. Lin believes that surrender is the best way to get a better comprehensive look at people and space in Indian society. Later in the village, Lin met the other family members of Prabaker and the villagers; all were innocent and harmless people with low self-esteem. Lindsay was no less than a wonder for the villagers who had not seen a foreigner for the last twenty-one years. Kisan Kharre, to make his guest comfortable, gave him his bed and said he preferred to sleep down as preparing a new cot would take some time.

Lindsay tried to resist but had to yield in front of the hospitality of Prabaker's father. The family and village people were concerned that Lin would be missing his family and country as he is away from them, and due to this, Prabaker's family and the village folk gathered near Lin's bed and Kisan Kharre after a while, gave a caressing touch to Lin when he was about to sleep;

that touch was filled with compassion and relaxation for Lindsay, and its effect was quite strong yet startling for him. He started reminiscing about his olden days of family life, his daughter, his parents, his brother, his criminal life, and the trust he had broken in his wrongdoings; everything suddenly started flashing in his mind. He felt that until that moment in his life, he did not understand the depth of his wrongdoings and his loss of values as he had committed armed robbery and was also an opium addict. Then, he was sentenced to three years imprisonment; this punishment could not invoke a feeling of repentance. Now, with Kisan's touch, he got to know the depth of his loss and lawlessness and the pain he has inflicted on others, and his heart was grieved with heavy reproaching, lonely and guilty existence of himself. He realized that his culture had given him wrong implications, so he could not give any reaction to the soft touch of Kisan Kharre. "But the soul has no culture. The soul has no nations. The soul has no colour accent or way of life. The soul is forever. The soul is one. Moreover, the soul cannot be stilled when the heart has its moment of truth and sorrow." (Shantaram124) With this consciousness of soul, he actualized the reasoning of love, which caters the heart out of loneliness, pain and suffering.

Lin met Prabaker's mother, Rukhmabai, a simple, courageous lady. She bore the pain of her three miscarriages, which made her silent for the movement of life, but she got stirred when there was an impending danger of dacoits in her village. She mobilized the entire village folk to fight against the tyranny of dacoits. She prepared the strategy of battle where every villager was well-equipped with the training of weapons and skills along with firm determination. As a result, they defeated the dacoits' troops and freed themselves from the treacherous situation. Lindsay noticed that the people of Sunder village had been well and brought with them an instinctive sense of affinity with nature and their people. He lived almost three months in the village and he realised that there was some sort of certainty in village life and the people of the village were quite relaxed and assured towards the happenings around them because they lead a regular life away from machinery and money-mindedness. They have developed such affinity with their culture and nature that they can even predict the level of natural disaster. He realised this natural intimacy on the day when monsoon arrived in Sunder Village; he saw people dancing in rain and playing jokes or pranks on each other and they were celebrating the arrival of monsoon in different fragrance and flavour like some were bathing in the heavenly shower, some of them prayed in temples and thanked God and some of them covered their leaking roofs and improved their drainage system. Once the rain started, it rained incessantly for seven days and Lin was at the bank of the river washing his clothes and he noticed the rock on which he

kept his soap got merged under water and water level has also aroused from his feet to his knees in few seconds. He saw the water level was rising alarmingly and covering the plain banks of the river and it was advancing to the village and that made Lin run and shout in the village as he reached to Prabaker he informed him about the concern but to his utmost surprise Prabaker explained him that there is nothing worrying in this scene and he told him about the bet made by the villagers by using the ‘flood-game sticks’. It was a lottery of a special kind in which according to the number of men in the village the same number of small chits were kept, were kept and mixed in an earthen vessel and men were lined to take one chit randomly and a second set of chits of the same numbers were placed in another pot and a little girl was supposed to pick six winning numbers of the chit and then the entire village used to praise the winners. Those six winners along with three elderly experienced men of the village would place a wooden stakes along with a little flag of their names and it would mark the level of the flood according to them and with this simple game of flood sticks all the villagers would go back to their place with a sense of certainty of no danger would take place. That affinity was so involved to the extreme level that, instead of getting afraid during flood danger, they used to put bets for the water level that flood would not reach their village. This natural comprehension and sense of natural connection with nature and people were quite startling for Lin. Lin always fought and snatched what he liked in his life, and now suddenly, it dawned upon him that behind this threatening expression and sordid face, he has masked the emotional self which wants to love and to be loved, and this crucial learning he got from Sunder village. His inner self was stirred, and he got to recreate himself as the man he wanted to be. Prabaker’s mother, along with the neighbouring women of the village, gave him a new name as they found his nature was full of ‘peacefulness and happiness’. Thus, he got Shantaram's new name and identity, meaning ‘man of peace’ or ‘man of God’s peace’. With this name, Lindsay thought that either they had seen a peaceful man within him or they nurtured a hope of a peaceful man to flourish in his heart. He says, “that they discovered that peace or created it, the truth is that the man I am was born in those moments, as I stood near the flood sticks with my face lifted to the chrismal rain. Shantaram. The better man that, slowly, and much too late, I began to be.” (Shantaram137)

With this new invoked self and identity, Lin Shantaram left Sunder village, and on the way, he and Prabaker were plundered by the robbers; thus, Lin lost his money and his fake passport. Due to this, he could not stay in any hotel in Bombay as he had previously stayed. The only remaining option is to live in a slum with Prabaker, and Lin agrees. Before going, he meets

Karla and realizes his slum dwelling would reduce the chances of meeting her, but he requires a safe place to live, and he has to make money, so he moves on. As he reached the slum, he was welcomed by the filthy and awful living style of slum dwellers; he was about to settle; meanwhile, there was a fire eruption in the slum, which killed many people. He saw slum dwellers living in scarcity and extreme poverty, risking their lives and saving their fellow mates. On the other hand, he was hesitant to enter the risk that showed him the difference between himself and those simple people. Moved by the scene, he used his medical kit; thus, poor slum dwellers found him as their doctor. He started serving them as a slum doctor and recognized new feelings like compassion, selfless service and humanity in his heart. As Shantaram joined slum area he ventured into his new sphere of life where he got chance to purify him by serving as a slum doctor. It was chance given to him to clean himself of his wrongdoings or his guilty self. Later, he joined the underworld of Abdel Khader Khan, where he saw a lot of cruelty and bloodshed and lost his friend Prabaker in an accident, which gave him a shocking experience in life. He became a trusted member of Khan's gang, but after Khader Khan was killed, the structure of the criminal world wavered. He was invited by Nazeer, one of the members of Khan's group, to go to Sri Lanka to settle the conflict. Lin agreed to go, but before going, he met Karla once and clarified that she was not in love with him; thus, there was no reason left to be in Bombay. Before living in the slum, he met Prabaker's family and saw his parents, his wife and son, who looked like Prabaker. The story ends with a note of Lindsay's comprehension that there is always a change possible in life. Only one needs to rediscover himself and his surroundings with a sense of love and understanding. He says, "The truth is that no matter what kind of game you find yourself in, no matter how good or bad the luck, you can change your life completely with a single thought or a single act of love." (Shantaram 932-933) Thus, the story ends with the evolution of Lindsay Shantaram, who took a voyage from a convicted prisoner to a man of peace exhibiting compassion and humanity. In the entire novel the real name of Lin is not discussed which means that with his new diminutive name Lin to his meaningful name Shantaram he has to take a voyage which was a voyage of a guilty man Lin to the man of peace Shantaram. With his evolved self, Lin eventually stopped the sense of hatred and discovered the virtue of forgiveness and love, which embodied his new story of life.

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