

Reading the Body-text: A Study of the Culturally Inscribed Bodies in Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*

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Abstract

*Body studies form a significant branch of cultural study in the contemporary era. Cultural geography, a branch of human geography, uses geographical terms to denote body. Body is treated as a space in present geographical studies. Body is one of the important spatial scales and it stands in close union with many other spaces. Material places like home, street, roads, city, prison, etc., and the cultural places like religion, politics, and history play a crucial role in shaping the body. In a close analysis, body is defined by the material, cultural and institutional places. This paper tries to locate the entanglement of the body-text and the cultural writings in Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*, a novel published in 2003. It is influenced by real events in the author's life. The novel can be defined as a Bombay chronicle narrated from a foreigner's perspective. Lindsay's explorations into Bombay's material landscape are accompanied by his interactions with innumerable number of people who inhabit Bombay's territories. The process of recording his life in turn becomes a documentation of a thousand other identities that inhabit the cultural space of Bombay. The novel is rich with Lindsay's memories and perceptions about this multitude of people. His attempt to narrate his memories about various characters in turn reveals the multiplicity of cultural factors that define and decide bodies and identities. Body is also revealed as a site of cultural inscription. Numerous cultural factors like religion, fashion, profession, political ideologies, social interactions, personal choices and group affinities engrave its messages on body spaces.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Body studies form a significant branch of cultural study in the contemporary era. Cultural geography, a branch of human geography, uses geographical terms to denote body. Body is

treated as a space in present geographical studies. Body is almost like a conflict zone and a "contested terrain on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary societies" (Hancock et al: 1). While

the present era is marked by the struggle over geography, the large part of this struggle occurs in and over biospace. This may be one of the reasons that make the focus on 'body' a major part in the writings of Michael Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Tim Cresswell, Bryan S. Turner, Nancy Duncan, Chris Shilling and Doreen Massey. Thus body has been reconceived and redefined as a geographical scale worthy of attention. As Gillian Rose puts it there is 'a growing concern with the bodily' in geography ("Geography and Gender" 545).

There are a variety of approaches in body studies. The geographical, sociological, historical, medical, logical, psychoanalytical, phenomenological and the cultural approaches are some of them. There is also the possibility of an interdisciplinary approach where we can incorporate ideas from various fields. Only such an interdisciplinary study can afford the wide range of this subject and can shed light on the hitherto silent and unknown political spaces.

II. READING THE BODY-TEXT

Like any other spatial scale, body is marked by boundaries and borders, simultaneously nature and culture, real and imaginary, material and symbolic. To represent the body means to map it into the social/cultural geography: "Bit by bit, bodies become relational, territorialized in specific ways. Indeed, places themselves might be said to be the same: they, too, are made-up out of relationships between, within and beyond them . . ." (Nast and Pile 3). In this representational process of body, the parameters of sex, gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc. are widely used as defining boundaries.

Body is one of the important spatial scales and it stands in close union with many other spaces. Material places like home, street, roads, city, prison, etc., and the cultural places like religion, politics, and history play a crucial role in shaping the body. In a close analysis, body is defined by the material, cultural and institutional places. This paper attempts to locate the entanglement of the body-text and the cultural writings in Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*.

This study follows the concept of socially constructed body that emphasizes the network of social relations which actively engage in the production of body. For instance, critics like Bryan S. Turner points out the economic forces and systems of state control that regulate human bodies. Institutional means of patriarchy, panopticism, asceticism, commodification and the like play a significant role in the government of the body (*Regulating Bodies* 59). The body and bodily practices are controlled and decided by so many external forces. As Victoria Pitts Taylor argues in *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body*, "A cultural study of the body can consider how any part of the body is treated, represented, or transformed" (xix). The scope of the study is that focus on the body is one possible route of changing social, cultural and economic relations for the better. A clear understanding of the body becomes a resistance strategy in the era of neocolonialism.

The novel tells the adventurous Bombay experience of Roberts, narrated through a fictional character named Lindsay, who escapes from an Australian prison and reaches Bombay in his attempt to lead a hidden life. His difficulties in living with his original name Lindsay, owing to his status as a wanted criminal, leads him to live his Bombay life with an alternate name 'Shantaram' assuming an alternate identity with shifting boundaries. Lindsay's efforts to live a hidden life in Bombay necessitate his travel through the hidden material places and more elusive cultural places in the city. It provides him alternate visions about India's metropolis. Lindsay's explorations into Bombay's material landscape are accompanied by his interactions with innumerable people who inhabit its territories. This process becomes a documentation of a thousand other identities that inhabit this cultural space. The novel is rich with Lindsay's memories and perceptions about this multitude of people.

Cultural production of bodies by the ongoing process of trace formation is deeply dealt with in *Shantaram*. The constructed nature of bodies and identities is suggested in speaking about the influence of Abdul Khader Khan in shaping the character of Lindsay: "The man with the cinnamon-brown skin and the trim, white

beard had used and manipulated me and everyone else he knew as if we were his chained slaves” (673). The phrase “the cinnamon-brown skin” signals body’s racial classification along color variation and the phrase “the trim, white beard” denotes one’s way of fashioning one’s own body. Identity too is suggested as a culturally coloured one in Lindsay’s remark on Abdul Khader Khan’s influence in his life and in some other lives. Bodies are seen as shaped in accordance with the power of those who can shape it. Lindsay’s friend Didier’s recalls of his attachment to a scholar named Rinaldo that “I learned what it is to love, with all of the mind and all of the body, and I was born in his arms” (545) and comments that “my body was born in Marseilles, but my heart and my soul were born sixteen years later, in Genova” (543). The bodies of Lindsay and Didier’s are presented as objects that have been subjected to a simultaneous process of cultural interactions and human interactions. At the same time, the changes that happen in these bodies are more ideological in nature.

The perception of body, the styles, modification systems (food style, linguistic practices, clothing, fashion, adornment), symbolic practices and rituals vary from culture to culture. In unison, culturally specific coding, encoding and decoding over bodies would change over time owing to historical, political, scientific and philosophical forces and changes. According to this perspective,

the naturalness of these statuses can be questioned as our body’s features are (b)ordered in numerous ways. Similarly, the identities and meanings of the places in which are bodies live are constructed too – the geography of the body and the geographies it inhabits are far from being natural – how a body can be in place or out of place is an affect of cultural values and acts of power. (Anderson 153)

Theories of socially constructed body assert the complex of social relations that actively engage in the production of body and project it as a socio-cultural entity. Identity

categories that were once solidly attached to the boundaries of sex, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. are challenged. Body remains as the single most object of cultural investment.

With the description of a character named Rajan’s fingers as “stained with henna stencils”, and “the scrolled designs on his lower lip and chin were actually tattoos” (276), Roberts is highlighting the material space of the body as a text and a site of inscriptions. At the same time, the description of Rajan’s body as “a eunuch, a castrato” is suggestive of the alterations that happen in the body and its changing cultural meaning in the plane of sexual discourse (276). The physical remaking of the body problematizes the already assigned gender roles and gender expectations. It liberates body in to a new terrain of sexual identification.

Cultural coding on body text is heterogeneous and multiple. They may communicate the meanings of tradition, custom, gender, social grouping and private/ public life. Lindsay’s description of the people whom he comes across during his ‘dark tour’ as “caste mark tattoos on some foreheads, cheeks, hands, and wrists” and “every bare feminine foot was graced by anklets of silver bells and coiled brass toe-rings,” indicate cultural mapping of the bodies by means of cultural markings (74). The special clothing patterns make Lindsay think that these people “were costumed for home, for themselves, not for the public promenades. It was as if they were safe, there, to clothe themselves in tradition and display” (74). In addition, body is a site for the inscription of beliefs. The embodied practices of religion, gender and social grouping unravel in the space of body. Similar patterns of group conformity appear in other bodies in the culture is seen in Roberts’ description of a haji, a Muslim religious follower whose “forehead was discoloured by the dark, circular bruise some Muslims acquire through touching their foreheads to a stone in their devotions” (192). The reference to the cultural coding on a haji’s body also reminds the existence of similar bodies in the cultural landscape. Thus, material space of the body is used to display meanings of religion, caste, community and tradition. The same applies even in the matter of dead bodies. The members of his gang in Afghanistan tell Lindsay how they

convinced the Pakistani soldiers the need to give a good 'Muslim burial' for the dead ones, "we want to give good Muslim burial for these men" (788). It continues even after one's death. Bodies and its practices are intensely caught in the never ending process of ideological writing.

Many instances in the novel highlight fashion as a carrier of meaning. There are implicit rules regarding the dress habits of people to match their select professions. There are references to the professional dressing styles of people as is indicated in describing the appearance of Ulla who "was dressed for work" and "all the make-up and clothing of her professional sexuality" (86) and in detailing the Bombay train porter's uniform "of cap, shirt, and shorts, in rough red-and-khaki linen" (101). Dress in both these cases functions as identity marker that speaks without words. A similar detailing of the dress patterns can be seen in the depiction of the character of Kishan Mango Kharre, Prabaker's father, who "wore the white cap, cotton kurtah shirt, and dhoti of the farmer caste" (113). The cultural significance of wearing dhoti is indicated immediately after in the statement, "Gandhi gave the dhoti prominence on his trips to Europe, in the struggle for Indian independence from England" (114). Here, Kishan Mango Kharre's dressing style becomes culturally and historically significant in that it displays his simultaneous affinity with the farmer community on the one side and his ideological affinity with Gandhian philosophy on the other. All these instances reveal the power of various discourses on biospace.

Roberts offers similar visions of culturally powerful dress codes in mentioning the specific adornments of bodies in the jail. The convicted thieves at the infamous Arthur Road Prison are forced to wear a black hat - 'Kala topi' - with their uniforms (406); Convict Overseers are dressed in white shirts and shorts, with white caps on their heads, and wide black leather belts around their waists (414). As indicated in these occasions, body's adornment practices bear traces of history and culture. They signal the place of body in a cultural group. It also shows how the space of the body is subjected to distinct type of political writings in the disciplinary spaces like prison. Hassaan demands to strip off clothes from the dead body of Maurizio: "We got to take off all

them clothes. And any of his rings and chains. Just the man, that's all we want" (594). This unravels the reality regarding the culturally constructed nature of bodies.

The bodies that exist on the margins of the culture too may use certain fashion styles to signal their own social grouping. This is made evident in Didier's comments over the 'The Borsalino,' a special type of hat, that "was the style expression of first choice by discerning French and Italian gangsters in Milan and Marseilles for many decades, . . . if you were to live as an outlaw and steal and shoot people for a living, you had a responsibility to dress with some elegance" (83). The phrase "French and Italian gangsters in Milan and Marseilles for many decades" at once speaks about the places where this fashion prevails, the kind of people who chose this unique style and the tradition that stretch from past decades to the present times. This statement also offers an instance of subaltern appropriations in creating their own histories. While a gangster is an outcast, Didier points at the need of celebrating this state of exclusion by choosing spatial representations like Borsalino. Although 'outlaw' is a metaphor of social deterritorialisation, Didier points to the possibility of undermining this marginalized position in celebrating this cultural identity by following certain style expressions.

Spatial practices and bodily acts are shown as conveying culturally significant meanings and values. Physical body itself is projected as a cultural construction in *Shantaram*. Different body descriptions like Abdulla's body as 'well muscled' and he walked with 'an athlete's touchy grace' (186), Vikram's curly black hair as "trimmed at the front and sides" (391), Lindsay as "trained in karate and weightlifting" in Abdullah's gym (452), etc. point to the numerous possibilities of remaking material bodies. Body is shown as culturally shaped and fashioned to suit one's personal interest or collective interests. Body's way of displaying selected cultural coding speaks its meanings of cultural affinities and group conformities.

There exist established patterns of relations between bodies, places and bodily practices. Prescribed notions about body and

certain body features exist. The changes from it are accepted as deviations. The practice of bowing or touching another man's feet is a symbol of respect in Indian culture (308). Lindsay's memories about how Majid used to "bent his ancient knees, five times every day, and touched his bushy grey eyebrows to the floor," hints the ways by which bodily gestures even serve to indicate religious meanings (517). The place-body relationship that generate religiously significant narratives can be seen in the descriptions of Haji Ali Mosque, that turns bodies as "pilgrims and pious local residents" (911). It may be seen as a political terrain of religion that continues to produce bodies and discipline body behaviors to suit religious interests.

Roberts offers instances to see bodies in connection with the economic relations and production process in the society. In describing the people at the construction site as "They carried the great bulk of stone and steel and cement on their slender backs, one round dish-full at a time," the author highlights human body's status as a capital and the workforce (251). Body is hinted as a productive labor force in the novel. When it is stated in continuation that the people are "building the tallest structures in Bombay," body's power in designing the material places too is suggested (Roberts 251). Certain juxtapositions are also evoked in speaking about the economic relations operating on sexual dealings that turns the concerned bodies as 'customers', 'clients' and 'products' (590). In all these instances, body is perceived as a site of exploitation and work under the grip of Capitalism.

Place of home and the places one inhabits may act as shaping forces of one's cultural make-up. Being in Bombay for a while Lindsay finds his identity shaped by cultural forces: "I'm white on the outside, brother, but full Hindustani on the inside" (875). Lindsay's reflection on the making up of his identity owing to his lineage from a family of Fabian socialists reveals the truth about the cultural constitution of identities: "I'd inherited their. . . revulsion for social iniquity in all its forms. Imbued with their principles, and being a product, as a young man, of a revolutionary age, I'd become a revolutionary myself. . . . Moreover, I'd been living in a slum for many months with the city's poor" (409-410). As

Roberts emphasizes, Lindsay's domestic upbringing and his life in the slums has acted as shaping forces of his ideological constitution. Various places like the domestic space, the material place, the cultural space and the religious space are presented as playing a significant role in shaping body and identity.

Symbolic values of body or its parts are culture specific. Notions regarding the body size, color, beauty, medical care of the body, etc., are cultural and they play a significant role in body's social relations. The cultural norms of age, ableness, beauty, health etc. are inscriptions written on the body space. There are instances in the novel that underline the uncertainty and fluidity of cultural expectations regarding age and beauty. These notions are portrayed as relative and fluid as is indicated in the character sketch of Didier, "Didier Levy was only thirty-five years old, but those years were stitched to him in lumpy wads of flesh and deep lines that gave him the plump and careworn look of a much older man" (40). In the same way, Dr. Hamid has a "prematurely lined face" (206) and Khaled's dark hair "was streaked with premature white and grey" (290). Body's attributes vary from one to another. The cultural expectations regarding age and body conditions are often proved wrong. Cultural classification of bodies based on the diverse coding on them is evident in Lindsay's reflections: "They are all Afghans here. Doctors, wounded men, guards, everybody is Afghan. But not the camp police. They are Pakistani" (789). Identities are exposed as constituted out of cultural coding of nationality, profession, ableness etc.

Body is subject to the regulation and normalization processes in society. As a product of political/power relationships body is subjected to spatial/social processes of classification, normalization, assimilation and exclusion (Turner, *The Body and Society*; Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*). Body is a text of dominant ideologies and the ultimate site for the play of varied forces. Certain bodies are culturally colored as having supernatural powers. Thus, the girl with four fingers is seen as having mystical powers: "Superstitious slumdweller apparently deemed her to be especially blessed because she was born with the rare difference of only four fingers on each hand"

(301-302). This instance shows that the deviations from the standard notion of body are perceived differently. The universal model of an ideal body is based on a false assumption of homogeneity and that erases very real differences in culture. As the mainstream culture is unwilling to accept these deviant bodies, they manipulate the cultural space of beliefs and superstitions to accommodate these alternate body models. Body's inclusion, exclusion or appropriation thus becomes a matter to be planned and designed by dominant power groups in any society.

Body is a site for the writings of gender. Body is subject to diverse gender coding, cultural classifications and normalization processes. Power on the body space becomes very significant especially when it comes to the female body: "Immediately from birth, culturally accepted norms of masculinity and femininity are thus (b)ordered onto our bodies. . . . gender characteristics are constructed through habit, everyday actions, as well as invented ritual traditions" (Anderson 155). As gender roles and specific sexual expectations are tied to bodies in accordance with the cultural values and preferences and as the result of socialization and cultural upbringing. Khaled Ansari comments over Karla: "You know how beautiful she is-those green eyes, and that white, white skin" (770). The phrases like "green eyes" and the "white skin" suggest the racial prejudices that operate through the taken for granted fashion narratives in any culture. Khaled Ansari's words also reveal the patriarchal discourses that turn the place of a woman's body as a site for the coding of race, culture and gender. Women's body and identity is bound with many cultural expectations. The violence over female body space is indicated in Abdullah's recollection of memories – the reference to his sister who was tortured and raped by the enemies (848). The operation of gender, patriarchy and power on female body is also shown in the instance of Parvati's cutting of hair in the event of Prabakar's death (629).

Shantaram projects body as a site of sexuality. Body continues to function as a channel to replicate the culturally selected notions and ideals of sexuality. The discourse of sexuality remains the most powerful channel for writing the gender-based power relations on

body. While introducing a sex-worker to Lindsay, Prabakar advertises her body as a centre of sexual attraction, "So fat she is, and in the most serious and the important places. A big handful you can grab, anywhere you like. You will be so exciting, you will make yourself sick!" (138). This statement indicates the patriarchal sexual expectations that strive to brand and classify female body. Woman's body is here highlighted as a site of violence. The political nature of body and sex is hinted in the words of a character named Karla, who views sex as an issue of power, "Apart from the biology, sex is all about power" (39). Female fantasies to liberate body from the political nature of sex is echoed in Karla as she broods over the possibility of sex that is free from all kind of cultural markings: "What the fuck ever happened to good, old, meaningless sex, without any strings attached?" (263). What she aspires is separating sex from all the political meanings so as to see it as an organic biological activity.

III. CONCLUSION

As depicted in *Shantaram*, the body receives relative values according to the interests of various power systems. The map making of the body has become a difficult and complex process, owing to the cultural forces that regulate and control it. Body is exposed as the site where culture makes its most significant writing. Body is presented as the locale for the coding of cultural preferences and the site of repeated practices. Here the body becomes the site for the situated practices of nationality, religious ideas, gender divisions and cultural demarcations. A cultural account of the body covers analysis of all this. It has become evident that naturalized' and the 'essentialized' body patterns are only myths. A critical reading of this documentary novel reveals body's essential nature as a cultural construction, caught in the ongoing process of making, unmaking and remaking.

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