

Treatment of slavery in Lloyd C Douglas' *the robe*

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Abstract

Lloyd C. Douglas', *The Robe* is an American historical novel published in the year 1942. It unfolds the story of a Roman military tribune who commanded the unit that crucified Jesus. The novel is portrayed as an answer in the form of fiction to the question of what had happened to the Roman soldier who won the robe of Jesus through the dice. The novel depicts slave trade that was practiced in the Roman regime. The slaves were treated mercilessly and were regarded as objects. In the novel, Demetrius is the slave of Marcellus and he plays a vital role in helping his master. He is pictured as a faithful servant to his Master who toiled for his master without anticipating any gain for himself. The paper is an attempt to bring to light how the slave in the novel reduces himself to the extent of being called as an ass and camel. He was a lonely slave but he considered himself as fortunate because his companion was the robe which he held very close as if it contained some inexplicable remedy for heartache.

Keywords: slave, objects, ill-treated, faithful, remedy

1. Introduction

Lloyd Cassel Douglas, the American minister and author was born in Columbia and spent part of his boyhood in Monroeville, Willmot, and Kentucky. His father Rev. Alexander Jackson Douglas and his mother Sarah Jane Douglas were pastoring the Hopeful Lutheran church. He graduated from Wittenberg College and Hamma Divinity School. He was ordained as a Lutheran priest and he ministered in different churches for nearly 30 years in limited states of America and Canada. Douglas retired from the divine service in 1933 and became a full time writer.

Douglas was a talented equally as a preacher and writer. His first publication 'Magnificent Obsession' was solely spiritual in nature. In 1929, he completed his first novel 'Magnificent Obsession' which became an immense best-seller. With the success of this volume and his second novel 'Forgive Us Our Trespasses', Douglas eventually earned enough that he could quit the ministry to become a full-time writer. Douglas intended his novels to be spiritually uplifting and his popularity continued with such titles as 'Green Light', 'White Banners', 'Disputed Passage', 'Invitation to live' and 'Doctor Hudson's Secret Journal'. His last two novels – 'The Robe' and 'The Big Fisherman' - were based upon characters and situations from the New Testament. Among all the novels, 'The Robe' sold more than 2 million copies, without any reprint edition and Douglas sold the motion picture rights to this story and it was screened, after the demise of Douglas.

A slave is a person who is the property of another and is under the control of his master who is overly influenced by something or someone. The state or condition of being a slave is a civil relationship where the master has absolute power over him and controls his life, liberty, and fortune, The slave is subjected to execute hard and odd jobs to his master. He is in fact forced to slog for menial wages.

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The derivation of the word *slave* encapsulates a bit of European history and explains that the two words *slave* and *Slav* are so similar and they are, in fact, historically identical. The word *slave* first appears in English in around 1290. "Slav, slave," was first recorded in around 800. A.D. The spelling of English *slave* is closer to its original Slavic form which first appears in English in the 1500s. Slavs became slaves around the beginning of the ninth century when the Holy Roman Empire tried to stabilize a German-Slav frontier. By the 1100s, stabilization had given way to wars of expansion and extermination that did not end until 1410, when the Poles crushed the knights of the Teutonic Order at Grunwald in north-central Poland. It comes from the Indo-European root, whose basic meaning is "to hear" and occurs in many derivatives meaning "renown, fame." (Your dictionary.com /slave)

A chattel slave is an enslaved person who is owned forever and whose children and children's children are automatically enslaved. Chattel slaves are individuals treated as complete property, to be bought and sold. Chattel slavery was supported and made legal by European governments and monarchs. This type of enslavement was practiced in European colonies, from the sixteenth century onwards. (The Abolition project, slavery).

The terms *subaltern* and *Subaltern Studies* entered postcolonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of south Asian historians who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who comprise the mass population—rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites—in the history of south Asia. Marxist historians had already been investigating colonial

history as told from the perspective of the proletariat, using the concept of social classes as being determined by economic relations. In the 1970s, *subaltern* began to denote the colonized peoples of the Indian subcontinent and described a new perspective of the history of an imperial colony as told from the point of view of the colonized rather than that of the colonizers. In the 1980s, the scope of enquiry of Subaltern Studies was applied as an intervention in South Asian historiography. (wiki Subaltern Studies).

As a method of intellectual discourse, the concept of the *subaltern* is problematic because it originated as a Eurocentric of historical enquiry for studying the non-Western people of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. From its inception as an historical-research model for studying the colonial experience of South Asian peoples, subaltern studies transformed from a model of intellectual discourse into a method of "vigorous post-colonial critique". The term "subaltern" is used in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, and literary criticism.

The novel presents Demetrius as the loyal and faithful servant of Marcellus. Demetrius had come from Corinth, where his father a wealthy ship-owner had taken a too conspicuous part in defensive politics. Everything had happened once in Demetrius' family. His father had been executed, his two elder brothers had been given to the new Legate of Achaea, his patrician mother had committed suicide; and Demetrius a tall, handsome and athletic had been brought to Rome under heavy guard, for he was not only valuable but violent.

Demetrius as a slave suffered all the pain and mocking from the Roman soldiers. Melas, a Roman officer says that "Take your slave now he can't get anywhere that way. Camels and asses and slaves are better off minding their master". (The Robe p.60). Melas compares slaves with camels that carry a person in the desert. Demetrius supports his point of view by saying that "of course, slavery is a bit different from the employment of freedman. If a freedman finds his work distasteful he can leave it, which is ever so much better than keeping on at it-and shirking it. The slave does not have this choice". (The Robe p.60). Melas commented that some slaves are like asses and as that they snap at their masters, and get slapped for it. They sit down and balk, and get themselves whipped and kicked. And there are some slaves who behave like camels; just keep going on, and taking it, no matter how they are used.

Demetrius was sent ahead by foot to Palestine and he travelled for long miles. Indeed he was a slave who never had bondage of slavery in him because he took his work very serious and he considered his masters interest first. Demetrius never had a good sleep because he was very vigilant and saw that his master got good rest. "It was the first night, since he had been the slave of Marcellus that he had slept beyond the sound of his master's call". (The Robe p.70).

He was a slave nothing could be done about it. Comparing himself to a freeman, his lot was wretched indeed; but when he contrasted the terms of his slavery with cruel conditions imposed upon most of the people in bondage, he is fortunate. Demetrius considered always himself to be lonely person but now he got a companion that is 'The Robe' He hugged the Robe close to his side as if it contained some inexplicable remedy for heartache.

Demetrius Greek slave of Lucan was imprisoned in jail he was pushed into an open cell at the far end of the narrow corridor.

The guard ignored the chains of Demetrius and retreated into the corridor, banged the heavy door shut and pushed the bolt. He was thirsty for water and he fought for one cup of water in the prison. "I can't wait until sunset for water," muttered Demetrius". (The Robe p.304).

The novel also brings out the suffering and persecution of Christian during the early centuries. Another character in the novel is Stephanos who died as a martyr for Jesus. Stephanos stood boldly in the open circle to preach about the gospel of Jesus the crowd became furious and they started throwing stone on Stephanos. The stone started falling on Stephanos but he continued his speech with boldness, though he was in pain he never gave up on his faith and finally he said "I see him" he shouted, triumphantly. 'I see him! My Lord Jesus--take me!' The eyes closed, the head dropped, and Stephanos crumpled down among the stones". (The Robe p.365).

To conclude, the theme slavery is seen right through the novel. In the market place slaves were sold as a commodity because they were born in the lower rung of the society. The suffering and pain of slaves were endless and it is portrayed lucidly in the course of the text. They are forced to do heavy labour but are paid very low. They even go without food and water to drink and this is evident through the character Demetrius. There is neither identity nor rest for a slave. Demetrius proves to be a good slave to his master and does his job beyond expectation and becomes a part and parcel of Marcellus.

The Christian minority of first century A.D were given harsh punishment of stoning like death. Even the main Character of the novel Marcellus was a Roman soldier but he was sentenced to death because he became a Christian and accepted Jesus as his saviour. Punishment was equal to men and women. Diana is a character who became a Christian by faith and she was sentenced to death. The believers were whipped with chains and were thrown in prison. This proves how the slaves and minorities were cruelly treated by the society. Thus the vivid description of the treatment of slaves and slavery is a true indication that the novel falls under the category of Subaltern literature.

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