

Gieve Patel's Verse: a Physician's Voice

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of some of Gieve Patel's poems: poetry penned by a physician. 'The Body' is the main motif in many of his poems and seems to be the nucleus of many of his poetic expressions. His poems 'Post Mortem' and 'Forensic Medicine' depict pain both physical and mental; portray Patel's experiences in the medical field, his diagnostic nature. The poetic portrayal is that of a medical professional--- logical and clinical. The 'tics and itches' of the human body are vividly depicted. This is a result of his exposure to his handling of patients during the course of his medical profession.

Keywords: Gieve Patel, Doctor, Public Hospital, Post mortem, Patient, Suffering

The 'body images' in Patel's poetry are vividly expressed and this is due to his association with medicine. In an interview with Swapan K. Banerjee, Patel says 'All life's experience can become raw material for your writing. In fact, one of my poems, 'On Mountain' has description of a woman who I'm examining on table.' This statement of Patel clearly sheds light on the body centered theme in many of his poems by virtue of his medical profession. Gieve Patel's poetic world is a firmament starred with viscera vein and abounds in corporeal colour. According to Nita Pillai, "Patel heals and hammers the human body and becomes a self-contained metaphor for life within his poems".(Pillai)

Gieve Patel is not only a poet, painter, dramatist but also a doctor of medicine and he discusses the significant place accorded to the human body in his work and his "a romantic approach" to the body in poetry. In his poem "It Makes" from the volume "Mirrored Mirroring" Patel says: "I am a bead. / sorted, / thumbed, / threaded, / strung, /by / threads of all hues". Indeed, his life is woven from the threads of various vocations and practices --- poet, playwright, doctor, artist, teacher --- as he attempts to continually examine the world around him and within him (Sarma). As a doctor, Gieve Patel is amazed to find that in a short span of time, he has become acclimatized to the various aspects of human anatomy and knows the ins and outs of the human body as well as the surgical instruments used. Dr Patel's perception forms the life of

the poem, 'Public Hospital'. He expresses his dilemma in the opening lines of the poem where he expresses himself about the business of life as a practical minded professional.

How soon I have acquired it all!

It would seem an age of hesitant gestures. (Patel 45)

Quoting a line from the above poem ---"A busy man's look of harried preoccupation". When the poet watches himself, there is a creative satisfaction. The poet "embraces the people" and reveals them "in variety of eye, colour, cheek, bone." He also reeks all his bonds in them with needle, knife and tongue. He feels deeply about the tortured soul in a troubled body. While operating a wound, he feels as if he is not only cutting the skin but also stripping the soul. He constantly feels that he performs violation against the human body and the soul. A busy doctor's portrait is versified which is indeed ironic. The following lines depict his feelings.

Autocratic poise comes natural now:

Voice sharp, glance impatient,

A busy man's look of harried preoccupation---
 ot embarrassed to appear so.

My fingers deft to manoeuvre bodies,

Pull down clothing, strip the soul. (Patel 45)

Patel can see a wounded soul in a wounded body. Constant mental attacks have etched wounds on the soul which are unbearable. His inner voice warns him not to become emotional, and urges him to be rational and practical, otherwise he may make some mistakes while handling patients, as can be seen in the lines below: -

Separate essential from suspect tales.

Weed out malingers, accept

With patronage a steady stream

Of the underfed, pack flesh in them,

Then pack them away. (Patel 45)

During his professional moments, he observes that his patients feel that treatment is a kind of torture and they detest him. These feelings are expressed in the lines below:

Unwelcome guest, I may visit bodies,
 Touch close, cure, throw overboard
 Necessities of distance, plunge
 Splice, violate,
 With needle, knife, and tongue,
 Wreck all my bonds in them. (Patel 45)

Despite this scenario, he finds that he is still around the ill people who have endless sufferings and the only remedy is to consult a doctor who can liberate them from their sufferings. This is depicted in the lines below:

At the end of the day,
 From under the flagpole,
 Watch the city streaming
 By the side of my hands. (Patel 45)

This is a fitting ending to the poem on a doctor's function. A doctor is satisfied at the end of the day when the multitude recovers from his medication and treatment.

During his interactions with patients of different caste, creed and religion, Gieve Patel found that the problems faced by human beings are almost the same despite their different background. In the poem "Catholic Mother", a Catholic mother brings her daughter to the doctor's cabin. Patel knows that illness and disease are the causes of pain, whether for a mother or a doctor. Gieve Patel is perturbed because a doctor triumphs when he saves a patient's life. Common people look up to a doctor with great regard. Doctors are God like to the masses because they cure their diseases and improve their life expectancy. They feel that the doctor will make everything fine. But when the patient expires, the poet is dejected. He depicts the difference between him and the family members of the departed soul. The feelings are expressed in the lines given below:

We were all three
 Barely perturbed
 And so you were trustful,
 Open, not alien to objects
 The room recoiled
 And I saw you become
 Private, before relations
 Could come
 To join into your pain
 I can see that your people
 Have more right to you now than I,
 Do I appose for you
 Your simple original trust
 Before the present horror? (Patel 8-9)

Consider the poem, " What's In and Out (Round and

About)". Here the poet is reluctant to treat the wounds of the patients because he considers it a violation against the human body. He is not interested in knowing the anatomical details of the human body. He is kind of annoyed with his profession when he expresses his distaste for probing into the human body. This thought is clearly expressed in the lines below:-

I may have known the shore:
 Water bounded by walls or sliding
 Like linen over sand. But when I think
 Of deep sea it is as though
 I were now talking of
 Untouched organs --- my awareness
 Of liver or spleen ----- mute, blanketed.
 Immediate, unsubtle sensation
 -----That's shore like,
 And I am held by unwillingness (Patel 47)

In the above lines, "Shore" stands for external wounds and "deep sea" stands for internal organs. The mere thought of "Operating" pains his soul. He shows signs of "clinical detachment". He does not want to operate the human body because he does not want to show any kind of violence against it. The reason behind this kind of feelings cropping up in his mind is that he is basically an artistic person. He is an acclaimed poet, painter and a playwright. In fact, he pursued a medical career only to carry on the lineage as his uncle and grandfather were both doctors by profession. However it is a fact that his medical profession gives him extra material to ponder over it. His medical experiences give him the themes or ideas to write poetry. In the above poem he says that he feels an aversion to his profession sometimes, but it is momentary. During riots when widespread violence befalls on human beings, he forgets everything and gets ready to cure their wounds. The following lines express it explicitly.

-----Though at times of riot
 I watch intently the man
 who comes to hospital with a slit belly,
 Bewildered but firmly holding
 A loop of his own gut
 In his hands. (Patel 47)

Amar Singh observes: A poem like "What's In And Out" which is ostensibly about body, organs becomes a poem on wholeness and the parts there of explores regions beyond pleasure and pain, eventually turning into a looping metaphor in which the poet like his riot victims walks in " with a loop of his own gut in his hands. (Singh)

In "What's In And Out" Patel portrays the violence inflicted

on the human body. According to Vilas Sarang, "Patel is a physician by profession, has set his focus on the human body. He is obsessed by physical pain and by various kinds and means of destruction." (Vilas)

Starting with 'Post Mortem', Patel's poetic verses depict the 'grotesque' cruelty shown in a wide dimension in destroying the human body:

'each vulture/ sheltering in its gizzard/ The eye or the limb of what/ was one corpus?'

('Soot Crowns the Stubble') until the poet visualises the entire universe and all its processes of decay within himself.

A dead body is inert and non confrontational; its moment of contact with the scalpel of the forensic pathologist can be read as a metaphor of power and powerlessness that is necessarily seen to underwrite any situation of aggression and violence in lived life, a statement of victimage really. In the poem 'Post- Mortem' from the volume Poems (1966), there is a clear hint to the sheer obscenity of such invasion:

It is startling to see how swiftly
 A man can be sliced
 From chin to prick,
 How easily the bones
 He has felt whole
 Under his chest
 For a sixty, seventy years
 May be snapped
 With what calm
 Liver Lung and heart
 Be examined,--- (Patel 27)

The central idea of the above poem is that human beings are destined to suffer throughout their lives. Even after death, they cannot be rescued from the jaws of violence and suffering.

Human body often faces the surgeon's knife in the hospital. The Poem 'Forensic Medicine' from the volume 'How Do You Withstand Body' depicts how a doctor disfigures a human body while dealing with it. Limb by limb, the body is distorted. Quoting lines from the above poem:

If rather you would be coarse, go ahead,
 Use rope and hatchet, knife, stone bullet,
 All you would on the more aged;
 Bodies whose gel of blood and skin
 Have not exchanged years against sweet air
 Will not relinquish with ease.
 Weapon against it. Lop off limbs.

Smash teeth . Push splinters
 Underneath nails and lever them. (Patel 52)

In the above poem, the poet portrays how body cannot sustain the tortures of the sharp medical equipments. This can be seen in the lines below:

The house of song is blasted. Soft skin
 That clothes the gentlest dunes will retract
 Before knife and bullet. Proceed.
 Flick pages. The regal column of the neck
 Upholding the globe of sight and sound
 Is often undetermined; or straight
 Charge at speech and sight, chop off tongue,
 Gouge balls out , hammer nails into the ear. (Patel 53)

Along with his professional experience as a doctor, Gieve Patel's surroundings can be seen as a reflection in his poems. The precincts of the hospital, medical equipment, mortuary and post mortem report can be seen as an inspiration to Patel. In fact, 'Body' is the major theme around which his poems revolve. Patel's experiences at the hospital have provided him subject matter to write. He himself accepts it. "Every morning when I go to the clinic, I come back at night healed. I go there in fragments and I come back cured, temporarily. So as a human being it is important to me in my writing." K.N. Daruwalla says, "One can feel the scalpel working with quiet efficiency under the fare and prosy surface of his poem.". (Daruwalla) In the process victim and doctor become one. Patel through his poems seems to project the theory of survival of the fittest. Time is omnipotent and nothing can escape from the ravages of time.

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