

GIEVE PATEL: POETIC PORTRAYAL OF THE LACK OF CONCERN FOR THE POOR IN OUR SOCIETY

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Abstract:

This paper is an analysis of some of Gieve Patel's poems which shed light on the apathetic attitude of the society towards the distressed destitutes. Gieve Patel's verse portrays his anxiety and resentment at the sufferings of fellow human beings, their state of neglect and destitution. Poverty and apathy for the downtrodden and illiterate strata of the society is depicted in his poetry. Some of his poems like 'Servants', 'Nargol', 'Dilwadi' have been discussed.

Keywords: Nargol, Beggar, Pavement, Dilwadi, Servants, Poor, Grandfather

Introduction:

Many of Gieve Patel's poems express his concern and sympathy for the impoverished and underprivileged masses. Beggars, Servants, Peasants, and 'Pavement Dwellers' are central idea of many of his poems. One of the best poems written on the oppressed, 'Servants' offers a realistic poetic portrayal of the weaker sections of the society and their status in today's society. Another example is the poem 'Pavement'. Here he laments the pathetic condition of people living on footpaths of metro cities. Gieve Patel has described the pain and agony of poor and deprived people like beggars in the poem "Nargol". His poem "Dilwadi" from the poetry collection--- "How Do You Withstand Body" describes the predicament of people who are dislocated when a government project is being executed. Gieve Patel describes the pathetic condition of an ugly old destitute woman living in an urban area. The woman described in the poem "Urban" is under hallucination. The loss of faith in higher values, pains Patel's heart. He has expressed his distress for the oppressed in many such poems which will be discussed in this paper.

Body:

Gieve Patel expresses his sympathy for Indian servants and their predicament in the poem 'Servants'. 'The eyes/ Globe into the dim' signify a poor man's pitiable condition, who is looking for new avenues in a changing world but is unable to find any. This poem appeared in the 'New

Commonwealth Poets', 1965. "Servants" refer to labourers who were once farmers. They have come to the city in search of livelihood because farming is no longer profitable for them. They live together in a shack, in extreme poverty, just like animals in a shed, which explains their comparison to animals in the stalls as in the verse---'They sit like animals'. The poet has used the word "without thoughts" for "Servants" because being uneducated, they don't have any understanding of political and economic problems of the society. They obey their masters quietly when they are scolded for their mistakes. That is why the poet compares them to animals. The poet has empathy for servants and wants to improve their conditions. The poem 'Pavement' describes the piteous deplorable condition of the poor living on footpath of metro cities.

A night on the pavement – no danger

Takes years to leper;

Pay rent for the plot.

Spread a sheet and lie down

Breathing in shoe dust, gaslight, cold stone and

Perhaps. (Patel 37)

'Dilwadi' depicts how Dilwadi, a village in Maharashtra blooms into a makeshift town. Initially the people oppose but finally they accept the agonizing reality. The mindset of the villagers towards industries in the village is brought out with an uncompromising emotion. The villagers resist for four months as they are not prepared to vacate their mud houses. After some hesitation and opposition for four months, the course of evacuation begins. Soon they carry their movable possessions such as goats, vessels, drums bicycles etc However they are unable to carry their loving habitat ie trees and other immobile things with them.

In the end, Patel says that the villagers will accommodate change. The government project engulfs seven villages and Dilwadi blooms into a makeshift town.

The barracks begin a hesitant dance.

Twenty architectures appear. It would seem
 From unpromising seed

Dilwadi blooms into a makeshift town. (Patel 58)

In 'Urban' Gieve Patel describes the pathetic condition of an ugly old destitute woman under hallucination living in an urban area. The poet is anguished by the sorry state of the poor, penniless impoverished woman who represents the multitude who lives on the streets of Indian cities. These poor folk face the vagaries of nature, heat, rain and extreme cold. The broken lines used by the poet are a symbol of the 'broken lives' of the poor living on the streets. In the above lines, the old woman is drinking hot water but thinks it is chicken soup, as she is in delirium.

*the old crone
 slurping up
 essence of chicken
 soup
 as though
 it were chicken soup
 itself
 While
 I know it to be
 no more
 than hot
 water's momentary
 warming (Patel 61)*

In the poem 'Just Stretch Your Neck', Gieve Patel expresses concern about the inhuman attitude of the society towards the destitute and unimportant people. The aggrieved woman portrayed in the poem has been living in isolation. Her near and dear ones have severed relations with her and abandoned her. She is shunned by the society and leads a melancholy solitary life. The poet feels sorry for this forlorn woman who is one of the many such mentally confused people who visit him in his clinic. The poet is despaired as his medical knowledge cannot offer any solution to such predominant social problems.

The tarmac outside my clinic

Flows thick and befogged spirits

*"A large city", she says, "but to me
 It offers no place to sleep."*

*Woman so impossible that one by one
 Father, friend, brother, and husband
 Have let her adrift. (Patel 70)*

"Grandfather" is a poem in the form of a dialogue between the poet and his grandfather. The poem is set in the rural, feudal background and is concerned with a Grandfather's anger and rage at his grandson's support for the poor agricultural labourers's cause. The poet tries to convince his grandfather that his opinion about Indian peasants is wrong. His grandfather's feudal mindset is a sharp contrast to his equalitarian belief of a classless society. The poem describes the callousness of the one with a feudal mindset and

the experiences of the other, both sticking to their opinion and considering themselves equally right.

But for what, tell me, do you look in them,

Difficult, ungrateful,

Double-faced, unreliable;

I have dealt with the peasantry

Over three quarters of a century

And I fail to follow your thinking. (Patel 5)

The poet finds noble virtues of hospitality, capacity for hard work, endurance to bear suffering and humility to accept life as it is in the workers as against his grandfather's negative outlook portrayed in adjectives like 'difficult', 'ungrateful', 'double faced', 'unreliable' used for the poor peasants.

Begging is commonly practiced by the poor in our country. "Nargol" explores the interaction between the 'dramatic personae' the poet, a well to do village lad who studies in a city college and a leper woman who pesters him for alms whenever the boy visits his ancestral village during college holidays. The poet says that charity is not a selfless deed of the rich. The rich feel 'powerful' while doing this act. The poet sways from the humane inclination towards 'giving' to 'giving in' and then hardens on to declining 'to give her' so that she 'gives up'. Initially the poet despises the sight and thought of the beggar; he sends her away, trotting out excuses like: 'I have no money' / "Meet me later" / "I'll give you later". Although his ego is gratified when he asks her to come later, but when he finally gives her alms, he feels kind of defeated. The leper woman is a representative of the country's poor and downtrodden. The individual experience becomes a universal, humanist concern. During his next village visit, the poet narrator at first heaves a sigh of relief when he does not see the 'pesky beggar woman'. At first he thinks that she is no longer alive, later he thinks that she might turn up. It is a kind of hide and seek game between the two. The beggar seems to haunt him and seems more powerful in her absence. The conflict and dilemma of the young affluent of our country is depicted in the poem. It is common to see beggars on bus stops in India. Patel's description of the peculiar beggar woman in the above poem attains universality because such beggars are a common sight all over the country. The poet draws the portrait of the beggarwoman with accuracy. "Your necklace pendulant as your skin,/ Your cringing smile pointing the disease. In the poem the beggar woman followed Patel for four paisas. He pretends to ignore her presence but alas! She keeps on pestering him. The poet wants to highlight the fact that Indian beggars survive on

charity and philanthropy. The beggars pester people for alms because people are reluctant to give them alms. They have to go hungry. In spite of her pestering, the poet does not give her the coin and so she is unsuccessful in her attempt. The poet does not bother for the beggar woman as she may follow him again. However the poet is not against begging and does not say that she has no right to beg anywhere. He is not against begging as he feels that human needs cannot be ignored at any cost

*Tough resistance. I have no money,
 And meanness no defence.
 Walking to the sea I carry
 A village, a city, the country,
 For the moment
 On my back. (Patel 11)*

Patel's poem, "Naryal Purnima" also talks about the neglect and the plight of the poor and the uncaring nature of the rich. Like many of his poems, the setting is his locale in Mumbai. The title suggests the Hindu festival held at full moon from August to September by the fishing folk on the coastal side. During the festival held on Naryal Purnima, the rain god Varuna and the sea god, Samudhra are pleased with the offering of the coconuts to mark the end of monsoons.

*'As you stand half-naked on the walls
 And wait for coconuts to strike the sea,
 And pose intent and ready to dive in*

Before they be borne too far out of reach, (Patel 29)

In the above lines the poet expresses his sympathy for the urchins and beggars on the sea beach who are waiting to get the coconuts. The irony of life is portrayed as the celebrants proffering coconuts for the sea to take, and the urchins just waiting for the coconut to touch the sea or wishing the sea to return it. The poet portrays the celebration of the festival on Marine Drive. He has a detached tone

and critically observes the rituals as well as the behaviour of the rich and poor who come to the sea to offer coconuts. The poet portrays the ironic contrast between the wealthy devotees and the poor urchins and is sarcastic about the rich and powerful strata of the society who have never known the pangs of hunger. In the name of religion and rituals, the well off are ready to offer coconuts to the mute sea but are apathetic towards the poor and hungry who are forced to dive after the offerings to God because of their penury.

Conclusion:

To Patel, the fast modern life with its routine chorale, gives it a 'hollow touch'. The loss of faith in higher values, pains Patel's heart. Through his poems, Patel tries to invoke sympathy and concern for the disadvantaged people living on the fringes of the society. He has tried to portray the sad reality of modern life where in spite of modernization, many people still lead a sordid life.

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