

## THE PERSONA'S SELF AND LOVE, FAMILY AND SOCIETY

The pre-Independence verses in English suffered from lack of relationship to an environment. They expressed Indian themes, subject matter and landscape in a "romantic" manner.<sup>1</sup> The most characteristic feature of modern Indian poetry in English is its immediate, its concrete relation to society and situations.

At the outset, one comes across two major ways in which the modern Indian poets relate to the environment. On the one hand, we have Ezekiel, Patel, Jussawalla and others-- the poets who belong to minority communities in India--whose poetry reflects, social, political and intellectual awareness; and on the other hand, we have A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra and others--the poets who are Hindus--whose poetry is mainly concerned with a cultural crisis. "Whereas an Ezekiel poem is a negotiation with the modern world, Parthasarathy's concern with the present is in its relationship to the past."<sup>2</sup>

Like his contemporaries, Gieve Patel made a significant breakthrough to the use of Indian life and details in his very first volume Poems. Since, being a

Parsee, he cannot relate to the outer social reality as effortlessly as others belonging to majority communities do, his relationship to his environment, however instinctive and intuitive, significantly differs from that of the Hindus and Muslims. Bruce King makes an elaborate comment on the nature of this relationship:

There is a different relation to the scene in writers from Hindu Back-grounds (Kamala Das, Parthasarathy, Shiv Kumar, Ramanujan) and those raised in Jewish (Ezekiel) and Parsi (Patel, Jussawalla, Daruwalla) environments. Although this difference is apparent in the way those raised as Hindus refer more often to their family, rituals and temples, it is also a matter of emotional involvement. No matter how distinctively an Ezekiel, Patel or Daruwalla observes his environment, there is a space between himself and how he perceives others. Patel's excellent poems derive much of their strength from the way he is both strongly aware of local conditions of life and yet defends himself from involvement.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Patel's awareness of "local conditions of life" is distinctive and it is equally true that he maintains a critical distance from them. But what is

chiefly worthy of notice is that Patel is alive not only to his environment but also to his own situation. Indian things and events never appear only for their own sake or for the sake of creating a strong sense of Indianness. Neither do they appear only to landscape a territory of Patel's mind. In Patel's early poems on love, family and society the inner and the outer have their independent existence. Often, they are dramatically posed facing each other. The inevitable effect of their interaction is the tension which is more often resolved rather too tentatively.

Patel's early poem "Grandfather" (P) presents the relationship of contrast between the persona and his grandfather; they hold two different views towards the Indian peasantry: one, cynical, that of the old man and the other, sympathetic, that of the grandson. The poem, a dramatic monologue, that of the grandfather, expresses his exasperation at the grandson's way of "thinking". For him the peasants are: "Difficult, ungrateful, / Double-faced, unreliable..." but the grandson's experience is different. Inner and outer clash here as "the feudal mentality and cynicism of the older man is contrasted with the egalitarian aspirations of the grandson".<sup>4</sup>

"Old Man's Death" (P), another dramatic monologue, perhaps an aside, that of the poet-persona, mercilessly unfolds the death-scene of an old man. In describing the

would-be widow's faithlessness and the "life long" friend's awkwardness in this poem, he suggests "the unwantedness and helplessness that characterize old age".<sup>5</sup> Patel describes "the quick and easy changes" after the funeral ceremony in a startling manner.

A sprinkling of water,  
 The disappearance of an odour,  
 A turn of bed sheets, leaving  
 A bed, a chair,  
 Perhaps a whole room,  
 With clarity in them.

This clinical aloofness, sometimes, as here, blurs the nature of the inner-outer relationship.

The relationship between inner and outer, however, emerges crystalline in "To A Coming love, For Akhila" (P) and "Grandparents At Family Get-together"(P): in the former, one of love and in the latter, that of reverence. The former poem takes the form of a persuasive argument in which the persona makes it clear: "In meeting you.../I would like to be silent/sit by you silent,/And let the flutter, the writhing,/Go on behind us--". The questions that follow express the uncertainty that he feels about Akhila: "But will you understand? Not/Insist we repeat ourselves/In talk?

Not threaten to dissolve/If I skip the mechanics?" One observes within this relationship the persona's awareness of Akhila's potential for bringing in discord; therefore the sign "very slight and subtle" towards the end of the poem:

This silence is not  
 That we have nothing to say  
 But is an assessment  
 Of loss: Watch it unwind,  
 Thrown about by the breeze  
 But holding stream from  
 Its sources, flung into our  
 Faces, whipped into our hair,  
 Dinning into ears, drawn  
 Back into our bodies.

Be still long enough and it may  
 Trace us to a level.

The latter poem, "Grandparents At Family Get-together" expresses the reverential attitude of the persona towards his grandparents as he watches them "in their hallowed/corner.../seemingly regal/Because deaf and blind,/ Old Pharaoh and his Old wife/Rehearse mobility/for the mummying time". Feeling their loss of communication

with their children and others, he wonders whether

... one of us would reach at them,  
 To hold their hands,  
 Put questions; and listen  
 As replies emerge  
 Obscured by weight and tiredness,  
 Bodily complaint,  
 Unconvinced advice.

Return doubting we've done our bit,  
 Uncertain where we've missed.

Both his relationships, one to Akhila and the other, to his grandparents are characterized by uncertainty of an adolescent mind which struggles to cope with the objects of his love and of his reverence. Here, the poet does not allow his intensity full play, it is always held in check.

Comparatively, poems on love and family in Patel's third volume, Mirrored Mirroring, have a sureness of touch. The relationship of love receives a mature and comprehensive expression in a very short lyric, "The Place". In this poem the persona, with a remarkably greater assurance, tells his "Well-Loved" not to make fuss about their meeting places, not to prefer "a lumpy, dusty stone" to the "cool well-side" to sit upon. He confides, "the tryst is inward."

In "Rages" (M) the poet-persona traces his curious relationship with his father. The poem has a four-part structure: The first section expresses the persona's reluctance. He is unwilling to accept tales of his own goodness. The second section has only four lines in which he expresses wonder at his own odd relationship to his father.

Father, when I am seventy  
 I shall be laughed at,  
 Trying to find someone a hundred-and-ten  
 to suck up to.

The anger which he feels at his own helplessness gives way to calm in the section Three "as I see/Each father, lost/As myself, searching/His own gallery of images." However, the last section brings out the ironical condition in which the son is placed vis-a-vis his father.

The deception is complete,  
 Since my father  
 Believes the story  
 Of the good physician,  
 And drinks my physic.  
 Illness spreads  
 Through my fingers.

In "Three Cries" (M) the persona probes his painful relationship, this time, not only with his father, but also with his daughter and his brother. The three sections of the poem project three different causes that mar his relationship to his near and dear ones.

In the first section the persona gives a very lyrical account of his separation from his father. The following lines express a sense of loss:

Within the clasp of your hands,  
 In the warm grip of your fingers,  
 I might have flourished, heaving  
 Forward, a sturdy bunch of flowers  
 Rough and colourful.

He reproaches himself for making himself "a stranger to fingers that/In relinquishing me sighed, and yearn still/to instruct." The similar use of synecdoche in the concluding lines further intensifies the grief that he feels over the loss of his relationship with his father: "Ah, those fingers/withered when they discovered/Their use was done."

The inner-outer relationship in terms of family receives its most poignant expression in the next section of the poem in which the inner life of the persona is objectified by means of an image of a "battered knight".



The outer focus this time is his own thirteen year old daughter who is suffering from insomnia. His observation of her painful condition makes him dive deep into his own psyche.

Nights of search, nights of wild belief  
 Hold me afloat, as I stare Cerberus-like  
 Into dark globes, sifting  
 Imagined corpuscles of light.  
 The gift of restlessness  
 Is my valued possession.  
 I am this battered knight  
 A champion of intangibles...

His daughter, losing her sleep, has become a companion to such "a damned knight-hood".

The dramatic encounter between the persona and his brother is the subject of the last section. To the "simple people", he is "the evil brother", the "enticer", one who is going to betray his brother. The concluding lines bring a refreshingly new dimension of their relationship into focus: "Carelessly/And without fear, his brother/Turns his back upon him/But is not scorched. when/he turns around again, the flame/That leapt out from a pair of eyes/Has been quietly withdrawn." In the earlier poems on love and

family, however, the tone is less sure and less controlled.

Many critics have drawn attention to Patel's articulation of his social concerns in his poetry. Reviewing Patel's Poems in Quest, K.N. Kutty observes: "His world is peopled by peasants, servants, lepers, beggars, invalids, old men and women.... His poems reveal the pain, the boredom and the horror of the wretched existence of these people round him."<sup>6</sup> Patel's poems do more than this. They don't simply express the condition of the deprived and oppressed in India. They explore the mind of the persona whenever it confronts the deprived and oppressed.

The process of understanding both realities- inner and outer--begins with the first collection itself. In "Naryal Purnima" (P) the persona calls himself "non-conformist". His is a "search for identity". Nonetheless, he is very much aware of his Parsee background.

His religion impedes his relationship with the underdog. Its ideology prevents his continuous emotional and moral involvement with their fortunes. Like other Parsies, he prays for the rain but, at the same time, he identifies himself with the urchins who, by snatching libations, insult god, but he does so only "for the moment".

The persona critically analyses religious background of the Indian Parsies.

Our interiors never could remain  
 Quite English. The local gods hidden in  
 Cupboards from rational Parsi eyes  
 Would suddenly turn up on the walls  
 Garlanded alongside the King and the Queen.

When the British left India, the Parsies had to "look  
 instead for something else. Even accept and belong...."  
 There follows Patel's harsher version of a song about the  
 condition of the Parsies in the Post-Independent India.

The men are too greasy, their speech  
 Is too nasal, their wives either plain  
 Or overdone, they choose for their dresses  
 A shattering blue and choke their flowers  
 In tinsel; their mind is provincial,  
 Their children are dull.

The process of alienation, from his own community, is  
 complete here. The repetition of "their" in such  
 expressions as "their speech", "their wives", "their  
 dresses", "their flowers", "their mind" and "their children"  
 conveys a strong sense of the persona's estrangement. Now,  
 the persona prefers to identify himself with "the urchins" to

"these suppliants", the Parsies and others who have come to the sea in order to offer "a nut for the gods". "To recognize myself and the country by", the inner and the outer, he says, he should better turn to the condition of the urchins and consider "their meagre flesh" and "their hunger".

The process of identification is not smooth. It is fraught with risks and dangers. By identifying himself with the urchins he is actually betraying the faith of his community. Their "need" is of "the second rains" as "the rice/sprouted, transplanted, yet doomed to die/without a new month's grace of extra water." To win His "grace" they worship the god of "the rains". He is also expected to follow "the rich and the less rich", who "scrubbed and bathed", offer "a nut for the gods", but he says: "I'll be with the others, the urchins whose minds are "profanely" focused on the wave-pitched gifts.

The persona is in a dilemma. His rational self clashes with the irrational behaviour of people around him on the one hand; yet in identifying himself with the urchins he lacks conviction on the other: "Do I sympathise merely with the underdog?/Is it one more halt in the search for 'identity'?" His identification with them is tentative since his turning away from the suppliants to the urchins is a matter of "relief". It is tentative because he ceases sharing the attitude of his class towards the urchins, he says, "For a moment" only.

For a moment I forget to think:  
'Eternally ignorant stranded through ages,  
Pesky beggars unwilling to work,  
Their language a pointless gargle,  
Their skin dirty and dark.

During this moment of crisis, when the urchins are condemned for their sacrilegious act by others, they become the "present identities" of the persona who justifies their act of snatching "libations/from under god's nose." His act of betrayal leads him to make an ironical comment on the entire situation in the concluding lines.

The rains may truly fail this year.  
Our prayers may go unheard.

The poem, "Naryal Purnima" is thus symptomatic of Patel's poetry in that it records the inner-outer relationship. The moral problem that confronts him here is whether to identify himself with the suppliants or with the urchins. The problem is resolved as the urchins become his "present identities". This temporary resolution of his moral dilemma helps him to achieve the balance between inner and outer in his experience.

The moral problem which we witness in "Naryal Purnima" is also felt by the persona whenever he confronts peasants and servants. In "Grandfather", his grandfather mocks at his attempt to identify himself with peasants: "But for what, tell me, do you look in them, / They've quite exhausted my wonder". According to Bruce King, "Peasants and servants are felt by Patel as an otherness, despite his knowledge that people are similar under the skin."<sup>7</sup> The repetition of "they" in such expressions in his "Servants" (P) as "They come of peasant stock", "They sit without thought", "They sit like animals" or the experience of the persona in "Evening" (P) where the Indian guests are unable to be at ease with their English host as "the servants/were watching" confirm King's observaion. Bruce King further says, "His instinct is...towards self-preservation."<sup>8</sup> This however, cannot be accepted since, in Patel, there is no fixed sense of self which is to be preserved. Each moral problem compels the persona to define his self in a fresh manner. "The solution of Servants" (P) is perhaps a good example in which he is compelled to face the conflict as he confronts servants.

Do I rate their love at any  
 Less that somewhere within it  
 The image of a master  
 Prevails? Or is it self-protection:

The keeping me apart,  
 My bigness accepted  
 As ever-present but having  
 Little to do with their lives,  
 providing exchanges,  
 But otherwise distant  
 And rejected?

This very questioning of his own position vis-a-vis servants indicates that Patel's instinct is not towards self-preservation, but towards self-observation.

The theme of moral conflict can also be noticed in his "In the Open" (P) and "Nargol" (P) in which the persona encounters lepers. The former is a minor poem and presents the conflict in a less striking manner. Comparatively, "Nargol" is a major poem in which Patel uses a beggar woman "to probe into an area of mind within himself."<sup>9</sup> In this poem, Patel has made a use of present and past tenses in a very complex manner. Many critics have, therefore, failed to analyse the poem accurately. M.N. Sarma observes "a dramatic encounter with a leper woman" in "Nargol",<sup>10</sup> but there is no actual encounter between the persona and the leper woman in the poem.

This time you did not come  
To trouble me. I left the bus  
Wiping dust from my lashes  
And did not meet you all the way  
Home.

The use of past tense in these lines gives way to that of present tense. The very absence of the beggar woman triggers off an exploration in an area of the mind. The persona starts recalling his earlier meetings with the woman and his specific reactions to her persistent implorings.

The persona first meets the woman during his 'casual' walk along the lane. His immediate reaction is characteristic of any well-to-do person in India. On the one hand, he believes that he feels no "disgust" for the beggar woman's disease and is "friendly" to her, but on the other, he refuses to give her money though "My fingernail rasping a coin." His stance, he thinks, is "essential" and involves "discipline". Next time, he meets her "in the open street" while talking with elders. Although she does not badger him the persona "skip {s} a word". The clash between inner and outer resumes. When the woman reappears in the afternoon, "between page-turns", he cannot read. "The book is frozen, angry weapon/in my hand." He succeeds in switching her down, "Master, unquestioned", but his moral problem gets



intensified: "Cruel, you're cruel." "Is it need/or a private battle?" he asks himself. During his last meeting, she forces him to part with, at first, four annas and later, a rupee. The moral conflict is now resolved with a new awareness:

Was it not defeat after all?  
 Personal, since I did not give,  
 I gave in; wider-there was  
 No victory even had I given.

His experience with the woman changes the persona into a more mature being than he was. He frankly admits: "I have lost to a power too careless/and sprawling to admit battle,/ And meanness no defence." This probing into his own inner life leads to the crucial moment in his experience as the confrontation between inner and outer reaches a balanced state.

Walking to the sea I carry  
 A village, a city, the country,  
 For the moment  
 On my back.

The moral conflict is resolved temporarily, only "For the

moment". This is further suggested by the quick change in the use of tense. Now the present tense gives way to the past tense again.

This time you did not come  
To trouble me. In the middle  
Of a lane, I stopped.

The balanced state of mind attained by the persona cannot last long. The temporariness of his moral resolution is again suggested by his realisation:

She'll reappear  
If only to baffle.

The above analysis of "Naryal Purnima" and "Nargol" proves that Patel anatomises his moral problem clinically and resolves his problem by achieving the balance between inner and outer in his experience tentatively. Just as in "Naryal Purnima", the persona says that "for a moment I forget to think" what others belonging to his class think about the urchins and calls them his "present identities", in "Nargol" he is able to resolve his moral problem by taking his social "burden" seriously only "for the moment".

The temporariness of emotional and moral involvement

is the subject of Patel's another major poem, "Pavement" (P). After seeing a man collapse on a pavement "flat on his back/A fly squatting on his lower lip/And a child crosslegged/and quiet beside him/waiting for him to rise" the persona who is "uncertain what to do" runs to a friend and tells him that since "people see him and edge away" they will either "inform the police" or "push him into hospital".

The conflict is resolved finally when the persona comes to the rescue feeling "in charge and important". The emotional and moral involvement achieved by him, he confides to himself, will not last only for the moment but

... Should do this

More Often, not slink away;

Some day might even spend

A night on the pavements-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

Slowly...

Get to know it all;

Then follow up a day

With the dark southern people--  
 Live in cardboard huts,  
 Plough open  
 Unprofitable roads.. then.. try  
 The villages! .. and may be  
 even..

This vision of perfect balance between himself and the reality around him, however, breaks down abruptly as the man, lying unconscious on the pavement, rises and rushes off "Mocking and embarrassed".

Patel's need of "universal love" is expressed in "Seasons" (P). To attain such a state of harmony between inner and outer, the persona believes, "that reaching to another person/Must endure or overcome/The blisters of touch,/The shyness of the soul." Nevertheless, his need is sincere: "It is true I feel this at times."

Patel's early poems, thus, do not simply strain, as is pointed out by M.N. Sarma, "to suggest an attitude (or a group of them), an intellectual poise", but record the ceaseless struggle of a sensitive mind to overcome his dilemma satisfactorily. As R. Parthasarathy writes, "His poems rightly... try to make articulate, often sardonically, the pains of growing up."<sup>12</sup> They often resolve the moral

conflict in his mind on a further stage in maturity. (Patel himself believes that "If a poem is clear, well thought out, purposive, logical and true, it will have changed something... first, in the poet himself."<sup>13</sup>)

Thus, Patel is concerned with bringing about the balance between the inner and outer in his experience with the underdog. Despite a sense of uncertainty in resolving his moral conflict his goal is to become a more mature being than he is.

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13. Quoted by R. Parthasarathy in Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets p. 85 (source unstated).