

THE PERSONA'S SELF AND DEATH, DISEASE AND VIOLENCE

This chapter will explore the theme of inner-outer relationship in Patel's poetry in terms of death, disease and violence. Illustrations of this theme appear in such poems as "Cord-cutting", "Post-Mortem Report", "Post-Mortem", "The Difference in the Morgue", "Catholic Mother (Your child at Hospital)"-- all included in Patel's volume, Poems - and also, "How Do You Withstand, Body", "Public Hospital", "What's In and Out", "O My Very Own cadaver", "Say Torture", "Day to Day Gauge the Distance", "Forensic Medicine", "Body-fears, Here I stand", "Audience", "Continuum" and "What Is It Between"- poems that appear in his second volume, How Do You Withstand, Body.

Patel's concern with death has helped him transcend the narrow barriers of class, colour and community and identify himself with the entire humanity. One perceives all sorts of distinctions until one is concerned with surface details. In "For Kennedy" (P) the poet-persona admits that whenever he observes tourists his sight is halted "Not just by the colour/But the smoothness or roughness/The density, of the pore,/And the grass-shoot hair,/the skin is soul-deep." However, the brutal

assassination of Kennedy, the Former President of United states of America, leads to the deeper awareness that "inside-/The always red muscle and blood", people are the same "One".

"Catholic Mother (Your Child at Hospital)" (P) is another poem in which Patel sympathetically traces the swift transitions that take place in the "Catholic" mother's attitude towards him. At first, she "smiled" and was "trustful/open" and "peaceful" since her "child was breathing in/the quiet afternoon dazzle." When the eyes of her daughter "began to paper, and drugs/were ineffective" the persona, to his distress, observed, "The room recoiled" and she became "private". The moment of approaching death of the daughter thus engenders a distance between him and the "Catholic" mother, otherwise bound by trust: "I can see that your people/Have more right to you now than I,/Aunts and uncles will be closer."

As Bruce King writes, "Patel's perception is influenced by his medical career."¹ It must be noticed at the same time that few doctors let their response to violence enter into the inward psyche. In Patel, the sensation of violence enters into his psychological realm. "It is startling", says the persona in the "Post-Mortem" (P) "to see how swiftly" a man may be dissected, "How easily" the bones may be snapped, "with what calm" his insides "that

have for a lifetime/Raged and strained to understand" may be examined and dumped back into the body which is stitched simply to announce "death/due to an obscure reason". In "Cord-cutting" (P), the moment of a delivery of a child is a moment of alertness on the part of the persona: "I watch keenly/The clamping of the cord,/Divide my eyes and try to capture/An altered feature...."

the persona's confrontation with the violence of disease in "Post-Mortem Report (Child Aged 4 : Miliary T.B.)" (P) gives way to certain painful questions. During her last days, "Bacillus" has attacked every organ of the diseased child and changed her beyond recognition. The persona wonders whether she could "deliver a sign" or "smile, sleep" and whether her people felt that she was still there as their daughter or sensed "the swarming, the daughter withdrawing". Her experience of death-in-life makes him raise this question: "Already instructed, did she find/The new world/A redundance?"

The persona's confrontation with peasants, servants, lepers and urchins ("Servants", "Nargol" and "Naryal Purnima") often leads to a crisis of identity. He even feels less certain about his identity in the company of his grandfather ("Grandfather"). He finds himself a natural outsider among majority Hindus and Muslims ("The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He Being Neither Muslim Nor Hindu in

India"). He, however, overcomes his sense of alienation in India when he meets people as his patients,

Almost,
 I tell myself,
 I embrace the people:
 Revel in variety of eye, colour, cheek, bone,
 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.

"Public Hospital" (B)

Here, Patel ceases to be an adolescent explorer of his self and affirms his meaningful relationship to the outer world which is fraught with death, disease and violence.

In Patel, images of violence recur with insistent frequency. The very first poem in his very first volume, "On Killing a Tree" abounds in images of violence: "It takes much time to kill a tree,/Not a simple jab of the knife/will do it". In order to "kill" a tree,

The root is to be pulled out-
 Out of the anchoring earth;
 It is to be roped, tied,
 And pulled out - snapped out
 Or pulled out entirely....

Even after pulling out, the act of killing is not complete: it must go through "scorching and choking/In sun and air,/Browning, hardening,/Twisting, withering". Images of violence appear again in the title poem in Patel's second book. However, the focus, this time, is not on violence perpetrated on a tree or any object in nature, but on the human body itself. The many cruelties committed on the human body are captured by making a vivid use of images of violence.

... Minutes,
 Seconds, like gun reports,
 Tatoo you with holes.
 Your area of five
 By one is not
 Room enough for
 The fists, the blows;
 All instruments itch
 To make a hedgehog
 Of your hide.

The body functions as a symbol of self in many of Patel's poems. It stands for the inner being of the poet-persona and relates to the outer that appears in the numerous forms of violence. Willam Walsh rightly points out that, in Patel's poetry, "the body is not simply the casing, it is also the symbol and the expression of the self."² In "continuum" (B), Patel says,

I am continuum with the century's skin
I am horribly bruised each time it is struck.

and his "Bodyfears, Here I stand" makes a dramatic appeal:

Bodyfears, here I stand:
A latitude of arms outstretched
Tip to tip, longitudinally
Scalp to toe.

The violence committed on any human body causes inner suffering to the poet. Instead of resigning himself pessimistically to the savage onslaughts of violence, however, the poet's recurrent preoccupation with violence enhances his faith in humanity³.

"How Do You Withstand, Body" personifies the human body as "Poor slut" who offers even in her demolition "a

besotted kind of love" and also offers her "dumb, discoloured,/Battered patches; meat-mouths/for monsters' kisses." Here, The body as a poor slut withstands, not withdraws from, violence. In view of this, Willam Walsh's following comment on Patel's poetry falls wide of the mark, "In Patel's universe..." he states, "the discipline of living is a tense resistance of the body and of the self to the encroachment of otherness."³ In Patel, the body representing the self of the poet-persona does not resist violence, but rather withstands "destruction repeatedly aimed at" it. In the person of "Poor slut" it offers love even to monsters.

The poem, "On killing a Tree", in spite of its crude images of violence, clearly expresses Patel's sense of affirmation. If hacked and chopped, Patel says,

The bleeding bark will heal
 And from close to the ground
 Will rise curled green twigs,
 Miniature boughs.
 Which if unchecked will expand again
 To former size.

Similarly, the human body asserts itself while confronting all types of violence. The only critic who notices this

positive aspect of Patel's poetry is Bruce King. According to him, both "On Killing a Tree" and "How Do you Withstand, Body" affirm "the desire to live, expand, reproduce... despite the pains suffered in living."⁴

About his poems, Patel says, "Say Torture", "Body fears, Here I stand", and "How Do You Withstand, Body" are part of a group of poems in which I have attempted to "understand" through the medium of poetry a commonplace of our times: the periodic and continuous assault on the human body."⁵ A careful study of these poems not only helps to understand the nature of violence but also provides us with an authentic record of painful struggles of a sensitive mind keenly observing violence, human and natural. In "Audience" (B) the poet-persona sees

Each moment, and moment after moment
Somewhere, a private act of menace
Is performed. A thin continuous cry
Hounds the universe,...

Sometimes, "the body of/one man {is} subjected/To varieties of pain"; sometimes somebody's "sounds{are} smothered in/A shut room." Another poem, "what Is it Between" (B) records the violence that men and women commit on the "target spot" between a woman's legs.

Each war sees bayonets
Struck like flags in
A flash of groin blood.
The vicious in-law
Places spice or glowing cinder
On that spot.

The persona's obsession with violence forces him to provide us with a complete guide of various means of committing violence on the human body. His "forensic Medicine" (B) is an ironical "Text Book" detailing almost all the ways of perpetrating violence on the human body.

Hold, the foetus tumbling through,
And before it may express
Surprise at a clean new blast of air,
Lay subtle finger over mouth and nose.
Watch it blue.
If rather you would be coarse, go ahead,
Use rope and hatchet, knife, stone, bullet,
All you would on the more aged;

Now, the violent gives way to the grotesque.

... Lop off limbs,
 smash teeth. Push splinters
 Underneath nails and lever them
 Off fingers; offer acid in a drink of wine,

... chop off tongue,
 Gouge eyeballs out, hammer nails into the ear.
 When you have ravished all, missing
 No entrail, do not forget
 To return where you started:with a penknife
 strike at the rising sparrow's neck;
 With ends of twine strangle the orbs
 that feed him seed;
 And outrage the sparrow's nest.

Patel's another poem "Soot Crowns the Stubble" (B), in a very powerful symbol, captures the grotesque cruelty shown in destroying the human body: "each vulture/Sheltering in its gizzard/The eye or the limb of what/was one corpse?"

His "Say Torture" (B) enumerates, the "stake", the "fire" and the "instrument" as the other tools of suppression. A man tortured will start thinking of perpetual torment and what is a fancy- "Flesh endlessly replicated,/And divided as often."-- will become a fact for him.

What leads the poet-persona to preoccupy himself with numerous varieties of violence committed on the human body is his painful awareness:

A chorale daily rises
 From the world's forsaken cellars
 where tormentor coaxes
 A song from an object:
 A song of ravaged pitch,
 The century's folk song,
 "Continuum" (B)

and, therefore, the essential question,

... would you have me ignore it?

"Continuum" (B)

The poet-persona wishes to be honest to himself and to the world of human beings around him. By recording the inner and the outer violence faithfully, he aims at bringing about a change in himself and his readers. In "University" (B) Patel calls the world of men and women "the beastly roaring outside" and while condemning the brutal shooting of the students and the professors of Dacca University, expresses need "to change our thought". He again expresses

his disgust at human insensitivity to cruelties committed on the human body in "Audience" : "A multitude watches the body of/One man subjected/To varieties of pain" with a "shared full-throated applause". The poem, "Bodyfears, Here I stand" concludes with a note of frustration.

... To let out pain

Beyond each sensory prison,

Tape record our screams.

The insensitivity of others to violence never prevents the persona from identifying himself with "the century's skin". He keenly observes the immediate outer reality which is full of violence and never hesitates to pose himself vis-a-vis this reality. "Day to Day Gauge the Distance" brings out this relationship in geographical terms. This poem, an excellent exercise in a metaphysical wit, achieves lyrical intensity which is a rare phenomenon in modern Indian poetry in English. Let us quote the entire poem.

Day to day gauge the distance.

I'm held from slaughter. Unfold

The ball of the world onto

Paper, place pins

To mark me
 And mark slaughter. Move us
 •Among latitudes, longitudes :
 Freeze the victim's blood
 At polar limits, let equator
 Get the body's flesh wax.
 Inviolable, I stand pin-pointed,
 While slaughter moves
 A jagged, well-aimed
 Line, never intentionally
 Missing me.

The persona confronts slaughter not out of morbid preoccupation. As he makes it clear in his another poem "What's In and out (Round and About)" he, in fact, prefers "immediate, unsubtle sensation". By nature, he says, "I am held by unwillingness to go beyond a lick, at most a skinwound." His awareness of untouched organs, "of liver or spleen", he likes to keep, "mute, blanketed". What compels him to relate himself to the violent reality is his extreme sensitivity to human suffering. His sympathy for the tortured helps him confront violence affirmatively.

... 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.

The persona achieves the balance between inner and outer as
 he realises,

... I walk today
 An integral man.
 yet suspect I am
 battered and ground. Atoms
 Follow me in bundles
 Like trailing flies.

As M.N. Sarma observes, here, "the poet is able to see the
 entire earth and all its processes of decay inside himself,
 contained by the arena of his own body."⁶

Gieve Patel's contemporary, Keki Daruwalla, also
 deals with violence, but as Bibhu Prasad Padhi points out,
 his treatment of violence "looks a bit journalistic at
 times".⁷ For instance, these lines describing a river in
 spate,

... through the village
 the Ghagra steers her course:

thatch and dung-cakes turn to river-scum,
 a buffalo floats over to the rooftop
 where the men are stranded.

Three days of hunger, and her udders
 turn red-rimmed and swollen
 with milk-extortion.

"The Ghagra in Spate"⁸

or these describing the shooting of a bird,

Under the overhang of crags
 fierce bird-love:
 the monals mated, clawed and screamed;
 the female brown and nondescript
 the male was king, a fire-dream!
 My barrel spoke one word of lead:
 the bird came down, the king was dead,

or almost dying:
 his eyes were glazed, the breast still throbbed.

* "Death of A Bird"⁹

Patel differs from Daruwalla in his approach to violence;
 his is an attempt to reconcile his self with the outer
 reality and affirm human existance defying death, disease
 and violence.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Modern Indian Poetry in English, p. 118.
2. Indian Literature in English, p. 152.
3. Ibid., p. 152.
4. Modern Indian Poetry in English, pp. 118-119.
5. Two Decades of Indian Poetry, p. 118.
6. Indian Poetry in English, p. 149.
7. Bibhu Prasad Padhi, "The Parallel Voice: A Study of the New English Poetry in India," Quest, 98 (November/December 1975), p. 45.
8. Two Decades of Indian Poetry, p. 15.
9. Ibid., p. 19.