

## GIEVE PATEL : LIFE, WORK AND INFLUENCES

### GIEVE PATEL : LIFE AND WORK.

Gieve Patel was born in Bombay in 1940 of Parsee parents, and educated at St. Xavier's High School and Grant Medical College. "Never Did" in his Mirrored Mirroring is a vivid recollection of school life. For the poet, "Montessory/was monstrous; brightly coloured/pits and blocks were/tormenting." The second section of the poem deals with the humiliating experience in his school when he was only seven years old. The experience is dramatically presented by making use of present tense.

At age seven  
he is tried before classmates,  
in his hands the offending book  
with a whole, unwieldy coconut  
gummed to centre page.

...

Boy and book are led through the school,  
a triumphal procession.

"State and Fire", the symbol of torture in his poem "Say

Torture" (B), "are lit already/in his innards."

After securing his medical degrees, Patel started working as a General Practitioner in Bombay. His experience as a medical doctor in the public hospital, which left a lasting influence on his poetic career, is a subject of his famous poem "Public Hospital" (B). Here his personal experience transcends him; it becomes a metaphor, so that, what we find evoked, is the typical experience of any sensitive doctor who has to treat poor patients in India.

How soon I've acquired it all  
 It would seem an age of hesitant gestures  
 Awaited only this sententious month.  
 Autocratic poise comes natural now:  
 Voice sharp, glance impatient,  
 A busy man's look of harried preoccupation-  
 Not embarrassed to appear so.  
 My fingers deft to manoeuvre bodies,  
 Pull down clothing, strip the soul.  
 Give sorrow ear upto a point,  
 Then snub it shut.  
 Separate essential from suspect tales.  
 Weed out malingerers, accept  
 With patronage a steady stream  
 of the underfed, pack flesh in them,  
 Then pack them away.

Patel ~~currently~~ lives in Bombay. He began writing at the age of 18 and his first significant poem appeared in Quest.<sup>1</sup> His poems have appeared in Quest, Poetry India, Bombay, Young Commonwealth Poets' 65 (ed. P.L. Brent), P.E.N. Asian Anthology, Philippines, Writers' Workshop Miscellany, 15, Calcutta, The Times of India, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Debonair, Fulcrum, Indian Express, Chandrabhaga, The Bombay Literary Review, Indian Literature and Poetry Chronicle, and he has published three collections of verse, Poems (1966), How Do You Withstand, Body (1976) and Mirrored Mirroring (1991).

### Poems

Poems is Patel's first significant volume of verse. It was the first and only book issued by Ezekiel. Around 1966 Ezekiel was working as reviews Editor of Quest, a quarterly of inquiry, criticism and ideas edited by Abu Sayeed Ayyub. He was familiar with some of Patel's poems since they had already appeared in such magazines as Quest, Poetry India, Young Commonwealth Poets 65, P.E.N. Asian Anthology and Writers Workshop Miscellany. In order to encourage the young poet and also to offer an alternative to the Writers Workshop he took initiative and published Patel's poems in a bookform. After Ezekiel's five volumes

of modern verse, Adil Jussawalla's Land's End (1962) and Kamala Das's Summer in Calcutta (1965), the book, along with A.K. Ramanujan's The Striders (1966) was hailed as a truly novel attempt to break with conventional modes of writing poetry. As Bruce King writes, "Patel's compressed manner, distrust of sentiments, physical awareness and the way he writes from personal experience, while guarding himself against emotional involvement, was... new to Indian Poetry."<sup>2</sup>

The distinctive nature of Patel's achievement was immediately recognized by K.N. Kutty who wrote a sympathetic review to Patel's Poems in Quest. He found his poems "refreshingly different" from those of a number of other Indian poets.<sup>3</sup> According to him, his verse is "not derivative or imitative, it is not couched in cliché's and it is neither romantic nor sentimental."<sup>4</sup> Years later, K. Ayyappa Paniker, reviewing an anthology edited by R. Parthasarathy, viz., Ten Twentieth -Century Indian Poets, gave an exact description of two poetic modes practised by Patel in his Poems: "the tightlaced lyric and the slowly unfolding drama."<sup>5</sup>

Poems like "On Killing a Tree", "Servants", "Commerce" belong to the former mode ..... There is formal subtlety, refinement of language, care for

precision.....The opening lines usually contain the essential theme. The rest of the poem is a pain-staking illustration, elaboration, reconsideration or rebuttal of the opening statement..... "Nargol" and "Naryal Purnima", on the other hand, are dramatically structured poems and they seem to be more characteristic of their author than the other poems.<sup>6</sup>

Poems include in all twenty-four poems. Among them, "To A coming Love" is a love poem; "Grandfather", "For Kennedy", "Old Man's Death", "Grandparents at Family Get-together" are about ~~familial~~ life; "Servants", "Nargol", "Tourists at Grant Road", "The solution of Servants", "In the open", "Naryal Purnima", "Evening" and "Parentment" dramatise social situations. Such poems as "On Killing a Tree", "Catholic Mother", "Cord-cutting", "Post-Mortem" and "the Difference in the Morque" pave the way for Patel's second volume, How Do You Withstand, Body which deals with all sorts of violence perpetrated on the human body.

This first volume is criticised for an economy of bald words, a sparse use of imagery and a dead-pan, detached tone.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless the very absence of certain poetic devices in his verse helps the poet communicate his experience-inner and outer-quite powerfully. By cutting

himself free from the poetical habits, conventions and techniques Patel could introduce the modes of feelings, apprehension, and expression such as we can find nowhere earlier in Indian Poetry in English.

How Do You Withstand, Body

Patel's second volume of verse, How do You Withstand, Body, was published under the Clearing House imprint. There are in all thirty-two poems; some of which were published in the following newspapers and magazines: The Times of India, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Debonair and Fulcrum.

The poems in the second collection are almost invariably concerned with Patel's own clinical experiences. The poet's preoccupation with the condition of the Indian society—especially that of peasants, servants, lepers, whores, urchins and others—is mitigated here by his larger concern for human plight. His familiarity with all kinds of violence perpetrated on the human body compels the poet to record his personal struggle to come to terms with the terrors the human body faces day in and day out.

Patel's Poems, as will be shown later, record a sincere but unsuccessful attempt on the part of the poet-persona to identify himself with the deprived and oppressed; whereas his second volume reveals his insistent

and affirmative identification with the human body. The human body emerges as a symbol of his self. Here, the poet-persona is no longer as uncertain, indecisive young man who repeatedly fails to identify himself with the society to which he belongs but is a more mature being who articulates an extreme sensitivity to violence committed on the human body in the form of verse. He has achieved a difficult and tough sincerity.

The poetry of How Do You Withstand, Body is a very remarkable achievement; it is a poetry of affirmation. Its verse is in the idiom and movement of modern speech. It is spare, hard and sinewy, expressing the inner struggle of the twentieth-century mind trying to achieve the balance between inner and outer in human experience. "Patel appears to be aiming at a thickly textured, economical, rough, vigorous, colloquial style which expresses a mind thinking through its emotions and conflicts towards some logical resolution."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in How Do You Withstand, Body, Patel emerges as a mature poet of complex attitudes and outlook.

### Mirrored Mirroring

Mirrored Mirroring is Patel's latest volume of verse. It was published under the Oxford University Press in Madras. It gives a surprising jolt to the readers of

Patel's poetry as it records a clean break with his earlier preoccupations. It deals neither with his social concerns as are noticed in Poems nor with his concern for human violence as is notice in How Do You Withstand, Body.

His fresh concern for God and Nature is a clear indication of the poet's withdrawal from his social being. With the increasing age the moral conflict recedes into background and the need to achieve some kind of intimacy with God and Nature prevails. Barring a few exceptions, the poems in Mirrored Mirroring evoke either God or Nature.

The poems about God and His ways are scattered throughout the volume and evoke God almost always with irony and passion. For the poet, addressing God is as ludicrous as "lipping in public/about candy. At fifty" ("The Difficulty"). He denied God throughout his life because he didn't want to ground his nose "into the dust" ("Simple"). Even at the later stage of his life when he is turned to God he has done so only because he has been given a cleaner sense of judgement with which he can understand what is divine and what is not. The poet-persona has learned now that we can "Best enjoy Nature from a distance" ("Speeding"). What's more, to know oneself by confronting the universe is actually "God's Effort/to understand Himself..." ("Mirrored Mirroring"). Patel's God is not a transcendental being but is a force or a power that rains down "disguised... Vulgarly

to mingle with us, to become Embroiled in detail..." ("Speeding") or that, in a moment of vision, shoots "through each part of you..." and even "into your/crude meanness,/and your/fruitlessness...." ("God or"). He is also the object of unsolemn prayer ("Unsolemn Prayer") or an ironical appeal ("In Just Two Years, said the dream").

A few poems in the volume make use of images of nature and visual setting. In "Of Sea and Mountain", the poet invokes "unbroken" quality of sea and "immutable" structure of mountain in order to face human predicament. His portrayal of a vivid visual setting in "Hill Station" leads him finally to express his disillusionment at the sensual world around him. Such poems as "Aegis", "Squirrels in Washington", and "Turning Aside", express the poet's intense need to achieve intimacy with nature.

Patel's poems in Poems and How Do You Withstand, Body have appeared in all the three major Indian anthologies: Contemporary Indian Poetry in English (ed. Saleem Peeradina), Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets (ed. R. Parthasarathy) and Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980 (ed. Keki N. Daruwalla). His poems have also appeared in the following anthologies: An Anthology of Indo-English poetry (ed. Gouri Deshpande), Indian poetry in English : 1947-1972 (ed. Pritish Nandy), Indian Poetry in English Today (ed. Pritish Nandy), Strangertime (ed. Pritish Nandy), Indian Poetry in English



(ed. A.N. Dwivedi) and New Writing in India (ed. Adil Jussawalla).

Patel, along with Mehrotra, Chitre, Kolatkar and Jussawalla appeared in the Bombay annual, Pushpanjali. He published some of his poems and a few of others in the short-lived general magazine Fulcrum (1975-6) of which he was poetry editor. In Only Connect (edited by Guy Amrithanayagam and S.C. Harrex, centre for Reserch in the New Literatures in English and East-West centre, Adelaide and Honolulu, 1981), Mehrotro has selected work by ten Indian poets; one of them is Gieve Patel.<sup>9</sup>

Some of Patel's poems have stood out from his other poems and are often republished in anthologies, text book or his selected poems, or are cited by critics. The most well-known are "On Killing a Tree", "Servants", "Nargol", "Dilwadi", "University" and "The Ambigunous Fate of Gieve Patel, He Being Neither Muslim Nor Hindu In India". Patel's "On Killing a Tree" and "Nargol" are published in two of the three major anthologies; "On Killing a Tree" appears both in Ten-Twentieth Century Poets and Two Decades of Indian Poetry; "Nargol" appears both in Comtemporary Indian poetry in English and Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets.

Gieve Patel is also a painter and playwright. His paintings were displayed at the Menton Biennale. He has also been represented in exhibitions of Indian art in

England, the U.S.A., Switzerland, and France. He has written three plays. Princes was produced by Theatre Group, Bombay in 1970. His Savaksa was produced in Bombay in 1982.

He published his third play in English titled Mister Behram (Bombay: Praxis, 1988). These three plays, like some of his poems, draw on his experience of Nargol, a village in Gujarat, where his grandparents lived and Sanjan, not very far away from Nargol, where he has a medical practice for two years. Patel is an actor also.

Patel's translations from Gujarati into English were published in Poetry India, "a Poetry magazine of the highest international standards" edited by Nissim Ezekiel.<sup>10</sup>

Patel has encouraged a new generation of Bombay poets such as Melanie Silgado (b. 1956), Manohar Shetty (b. 1953), Santan Rodrigues (b. 1948), Dhiren Bhagat (b. 1957), Darius Cooper (b. 1949) and Aroop Mitra (b. 1955).

#### GIEVE PATEL : INFLUENCES

Gieve Patel belongs to the circle of Bombay poets. Nissim Ezekiel headed the circle. According to Daruwalla, "his influence on Indian poetry has been considerable."<sup>11</sup> It was Ezekiel, he firmly states, who first brought into play "a modern sensibility in confronting the confusion, bewilderment and disillusion" of the post-Independence

world, transferred "poetry from its bucolic habitat to urban one", dumped "archaisms and the monotonous, jangling rhyme schemes of the earlier poets" and adopted "a form which could adequately display the subtle modulations of pace and the strength and sinews of free verse."<sup>12</sup> Doubtless Ezekiel's first volume A Time to Change (London, The Fortune Press, 1952) marked a distinct break with the past and both in terms of subject matter and method he made a significant impact on the poetry scene.

Ezekiel has been a model for a number of Bombay-based poets such as R. Parthasarathy, Jussawalla, Patel, Saleem Peeradina (b. 1944) and Santan Rodrigues. Most of them have shared with Ezekiel "intellectualized and moral focus on the problems of living."<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel, in turn, was influenced by such European poets as Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden and aimed at incorporating their economy and precision, aesthetic distance and unified vision in Indian poetry. Unlike them, however, he puts emphasis on "poetry as the communication of insight and significance."<sup>14</sup> He, by his reviews and talks, set the tone for modern Indian poetry in English.

An English critic, Bruce King, in his first comprehensive study of the post-Independence Indian poetry entitled, Modern poetry in English, has devoted the entire chapter, "Ezekiel and His Influence", to trace out Ezekiel's

influence on English poetry written by Indians. According to him, Ezekiel not only advised others, set standards and created places of publication but significantly influenced Indian English poetry by opening it up to reality in its many guises.<sup>15</sup>

Patel's Poems, in its use of precise tone and language, recalls Ezekiel; nevertheless, Patel differs from Ezekiel in the use he makes of local details. In Ezekiel, the details of Indian society appears more often to image forth his inner struggle; whereas in Patel, the outer exists in its own right. The leper woman in "Nargol" or the urchins in "Naryal Purnima" have their own world which clashes with the poet's inner world. The poet-persona's moral conflict presented through concrete dramatic situations is the most distinctive feature of Patel's early poetry.

How Do You Withstand, Body contains poetry which resembles Ezekiel's at times in its focus on life in Bombay. For instance, these lines in "City Landscape"

I pick my way  
 Step by giner step between  
 Muck, rags, dogs,  
 Woman bathing squealing  
 Children in sewer water,  
 Unexpected chickens,

• • •

recall Ezekiel's

Always, in the sun's eye,  
 Here among the beggars,  
 Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
 Hutment dwellers, slums,  
 Dead souls of men and gods,  
 Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
 Virgins, wasted child  
 And tortured animal,  
 ...

"In India"<sup>16</sup>

But, in this book, Patel's concern for violence is unique and is largely absent in Ezekiel.

Mirrored Mirroring shares Ezekiel's preoccupations of his mature years. For example, in the following poem, Ezekiel expresses his need for some God ironically:

Do not choose me, O Lord,  
 to carry out thy purposes.  
 I'm quite worthy, of course,  
 but I have my own purposes.  
 You have plenty of volunteers  
 to choose from, Lord.  
 Why pick on me, the selfish one?

O well, if you insist,

I'll do your will.

Please try to make it coincide with mine.

"The Egoist's Prayers"

(Hymns In Darkness, p.49)

The same kind of sceptical, ironic attitude towards the divine finds expression, for instance, in Patel's "The Difficulty":

In the beginning

it is difficult

even to say,

'God',

one is so out of practice.

And embarrassed.

Like lisping in public

About candy.

At fifty!

but Ezekiel often addresses his God and this gives a prayer-like quality to his verse; whereas Patel's poems about his relationship with his God retain dramatic quality

of much of his early poetry.

Patel's approach to Nature resembles that of the American modern poet, Theodore Roethke (1908-63). As C.W. Gillam writes, Roethke "writes about Nature, especially the small creatures and natural objects, with an extraordinary intensity which makes us see them in a new way and helps to break down the barriers which our intellects usually erect between ourselves and the outside world."<sup>17</sup> Patel also aims at dissolving the barriers between himself and the world of nature, but Roethke's use of "surrealist" technique for achieving the communion is absent in him. Roethke explores "the developing consciousness of a child by the use of apparently unrelated and illogical ideas and words which seem to verge on nonsense"<sup>18</sup>; whereas Patel expresses the consciousness of "Embattled mind" which has suffered "soul-stabbings/by smiling friends" ("Turning Aside").

Like Walt Whitman (1819-92), Patel follows the natural rhythms of the spoken language as well as its colloquial tone, but avoids Whitman's indulgence in wordiness in his poetry,

Despite these influences Patel's verse has a voice of its own. Ezekiel points out its distinctive qualities when he states: "Sobriety, balance and a slow, sometimes heavy gravity, are the main qualities of Gieve Patel's verse."<sup>19</sup> M.N. Sarma also says that "his poetry is of a distinctive and individual character, which strives to focus on the tortures involved in the being and becoming of man."<sup>20</sup>

Sarma's, like most of others, critical scrutiny of Patel's verse has taken into consideration only two of Patel's volumes viz., Poems and How Do You Withstand, Body. Again, much of this critical scrutiny is in the form of a general survey of Patel's poetry. Consequently, many of the judgements lack uniformity in crediting value to Patel's verse. On the one hand, Nita Pillai states: "The strength in his first volume of poems resides in the ability to weld uncompromising image with association, and within the antimonies of detachment and attachment, move to a point where perception, glimpse, coup d'oeil, whatever, begins, depending on the particular poem."<sup>21</sup>; on the other hand, Vineypal Kaul Kirpal believes that Poems is "an amateur, first work.... It fails to involve the reader into the experience. This is its major flaw."<sup>22</sup> Again, Pillai holds that Patel's poems in How Do you Withstand, Body "crumple into limpness"<sup>23</sup>; whereas Kirpal asserts that the second book is "easily a more mature work and ... places Gieve Patel among the important contemporary Indian-English poets."<sup>24</sup>

The present study is the first comprehensive study of Patel and examines his verse included in all the three volumes from a single critical perspective so as to reveal the exact nature of Patel's contribution to Indian poetry in English.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bruce King, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 279.
2. Ibid., p. 22.
3. K.N. Kutty, "Native Poet," Quest, 51 (Autumn 1966), p. 102.
4. Ibid., p. 102.
5. K. Ayyappa Panikar, "Peacocks Among Patriarchs," New Quest, 2 (August 1977), p. 60.
6. Ibid., p. 60.
7. M.N. Sarma, "The Ambiguous Fate of Being Human: The poetry of Gieve Patel," Indian Poetry in English, ed. Vasant Shahane and M. Shivaramkrishna (Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India Limited, 1980), p. 145.
8. Modern Indian Poetry in English, p. 119.
9. Ibid., pp. 66-67.
10. Ibid., p. 25.
11. Keki N. Daruwalla, "Introduction," Two Decades of Indian Poetry, p. xvii.
12. Ibid., p. xvii.
13. Modern Indian Poetry in English, p. 109.
14. Ibid., p. 78
15. Ibid., pp.91-109.
16. "In India" in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English,

- ed. Saleem Peeradina (Bombay: Macmillan India, 1972),  
p. 14.
17. C. W. Gillam, "Introduction," Eight Modern American Poets (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1971),  
p. 32.
18. Ibid., p. 32.
19. Quoted by Keki Daruwalla in Two Decades of Indian Poetry, p. 118 (source unstated).
20. M.N. Sarma, Indian Poetry in English, p. 143.
21. Nita pillai, "Gieve Patel," Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p. 98.
22. Vineypal Kaul Kirpal, "The poetry of Gieve Patel: A Critical. Scrutiny," Living Indian English Poets, ed. Madhusudan Prasad (New Delhi: Sterling, 1989), p.175.
23. Nita Pillai, p. 98.
24. Vineypal Kaul Kirpal, p. 180.