



Poetic Impressions of Violence in Patel's Verse

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of some of Gieve Patel's poems which depict violence in today's society. The poet is alarmed at the spurt of violence in the society. He has portrayed violence and death in his poetry with a multidimensional outlook. Gieve Patel raises his voice against the violence in war and communal riots. In his poems there is a relentless and pitiless portrayal of violent acts taking place in almost every nook and corner of the country. Some of his poems like 'Audience', 'Day to Day Gauge the Distance', 'Continuum' and 'University' have been discussed.

Key words: violence, war, suffering, brutality, agony

Gieve Patel is shocked by the unreasonable brutality that he observes in the society. The poet is unable to understand man's cruelty towards fellow human beings. Common place objects make him think seriously that a large gap exists between man and man. His poetry mourns the fact that man has become an 'object'. (As in poems like 'University', 'The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel'). His poetry tries to focus on the tortures involved in the being and becoming of man. Horrific images of mobs in rage and the slashing and slicing of men are depicted in the poem "Audience". The poet is shocked to find that during the inhuman acts of cruelty, the multitude looks on as mute spectators as if humanity has died. It seems as if humaneness is a long- lost thing of the past. In the poem, "The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, Images of violence abound in his poems in a direct, unemotional yet forceful tone, at times too strange for the refined tastes of the reader.

The poem "University" is a poetic narrative of the cold-blooded annihilation of hundreds of students and teachers by the Pakistani army at Dacca University during the Bangladesh revolt for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. The savage in Dacca was accomplished in a flash and the killers moved away unscathed. The horrible massacre makes the poet ask:

"Why should I moan?". The statement is ironical. Violence and murder of human beings have become so routine and incessant that the victims have become too meek to afford a murmur of revolt. Patel ironically equates the massacre of men to "slaughter of chicken". No one cries when a chicken is butchered. No wailing, no moaning is heard. Distressfully the poet comments that victim human beings have been reduced as insignificant as "chickens". Patel is worried that even a protest seems to be a folly as mankind is split between the torturer and the tortured, the killer and the killed. It

has set into a rule of nature that some are preordained to be killed by others and “emptied into untimely graves”. (Kapoor)

He compares the students to lifeless dolls.

----- . Students,

Dolls emptied into untimely graves,

May your odour rise and trip up

Our brains. Tell us

To change our thought. (Patel 55)

In ‘Audience’, a man is tortured in front of public who stand as mute spectators. ‘Little knots of muscle with shocking patches of hair’ appear on the victim’s body. The crowd watch the barbaric act with sadistic pleasure. It seems as if the “Audience” approves and applauds each blow on the victim’s body and the applause gets louder when the victim’s agony increases. The poet asks a question as to whether this cry is different from any private act of torture or violence? He says that may be the tormentor is tolerated but the public approval of the violent act matches the resonant frequency in the private torturous attack.

Match weight for weight

The shared full- throated applause

Of a crowd----- (Patel65)

Patel has written several poems on “violence inflicted on the human body”, with the perspective of an observer. However the poet realizes that the concept of “being safe” is illusionary, merely incidental. The poet visualizes himself as a near-victim, with terror lurking around him. The feelings of powerlessness grip him in the poem “Day to Day Gauge the Distance”.

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

Gut the body’s flesh to wax.

Inviolate, I stand pin-pointed,

While slaughter moves

A jagged, well- aimed

Line, never intentionally

Missing me. (Patel 51)

The above poem highlights the destruction caused by war. If the globe was recast as a “sheet of paper” then slaughter taking place around the world could be marked by pins. The poet stands at one of such pins endangering his life. Across the earth, along latitudes, longitudes, poles or even equator, no one is spared by the tentacles of violence. The poet is also at one of the target points he feels.

A study of Gieve Patel’s poetry may give an erroneous impression that his concern with violence is an obsession and hence not normal. He himself is apprehensive that this charge may be levelled against him. He says in “Continuum”:

Do you ascribe to me coarse feeling

And obsessiveness

The way I return

To nerve- endings ? (Patel 66)

He returns to the nerve-endings to find that the sensations that are being conveyed are those of violence. He is continuum “with the century’s skin”. (Kapoor)

The poet feels that modern life is a complex set of traditions which have been continuing since ages. We will have to ‘break our nerves’ to do away

with these. Whenever an act of violence is committed, the poet is deeply distressed and agonized by the bruises or wounds inflicted on the victim.

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,

And would you have me ignore it? (Patel 66)

"In a poetry so committed to excavating the darkest areas of human desolation, any musicality would seem like dissonance, any resolution like dishonesty. However even as Patel witnesses and archives the 'chorale' that rises from the world's forsaken cellars', there is an implicit sense of wonder about what---- if anything ----- lies beyond this scream of besieged corporeality." (Subramaniam)

Patel discovers that the cries of agony of the tortured from the "world's forsaken cellars" have become a part and parcel of life in this century. As if the victimised tortured populace of this country are a part of the choir group which "sings the daily Chorale"; a sad song of helpless agony of tortured souls. Patel describes it as a "song of ravaged pitch". The poet asks the reader "Would you have me ignore it?". "The poet seems to first present the arguments to himself, deflecting the sum total of his experience, observation and speculation against his sharp-edged sensory equipment, then pitches them right into the face of the listener." (Peeradina)

In the poem, 'The Ambiguous Fate' of Gieve Patel, he being Neither Muslim nor Hindu in India". Patel ironically refers to the communal rioting in India. The significant but reprehensible aspect of modern life – the rise of the cult of violence and the brutal urge to wound, to torture and to kill --- did not escape the attention of Patel. He sensibly records

the animal desire in the human society very sensitively. Images of violence abound in his poems in a direct, unemotional yet forceful tone, at times too strange for the refined tastes of the reader. As Bruce King says: "Patel's excellent poems derive much of their strength from the way he is both strongly aware of the local conditions of life yet defends himself from involvement" (King). The poem is a horrific portrayal of communal violence. The gory barbaric communal riots in India where the horrific violent struggle between the Hindus and Muslims disrupts the harmony in the country and gives immense hurt to the Parsis who are not on either side. The plight of the Parsi community is also depicted as they are detached from the happenings around them, in spite of the fact that they are also a part of the society, Patel helplessly looks on with contempt at the rage engulfing each side seeking the blood of the other; the detachment does not please Patel and is expressed in the following lines:

To be no part of this hate is deprivation.

Never could I claim a circumcised butcher

Mangled a child out of my arms, never rave

At the milk- bibing, grass- guzzing hypocrite

Who pulled off my mother's voluminous

Robes and sliced away at her dugs.

Planets focus their fires

Into a worm of destruction

Edging along the continent. Bodies

Turn ashen and shrivel. I

Only burn my tail. (Patel 56)

'A circumcised butcher' snatches a little child from protective arms and 'mangles it to death'. It is a demonic act provoked by intolerance and bloodthirsty madness generated by the religious sectarianism. Patel finds both Hindus and Muslims equally cruel towards the opposite communities. In Patel's poetry, nothing is more real than a felt body

with a peripheral burn. It is this smouldering tail that sings every intricately- wrought poem." (Bose)

Gieve Patel wants to highlight the fact that in such times of communal unrest, riots and unlawful activities, the hapless victims are mostly children, women and the elderly who are physically weaker than the rowdy hooligans, the perpetrators of violence. There is unnecessary loss of property and lives are at stake owing to the vested interests of antisocial elements at play. The innocent victims are injured and suffer silently while the rioters go scot free. Patel considers death and destruction as the burning issues of today. These are unnecessarily inflicted on the innocent people irrespective of their religion, caste or creed.

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