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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 16: Gieve Patel

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Political Conditions

- Post-Independence
- Wars fought in Vietnam, Bangladesh and the Middle East
- 1969 Gujrat Riots: Communal Violence
- Emergency in 1975
- Insensitive society
- ‘Green Movement’ writer

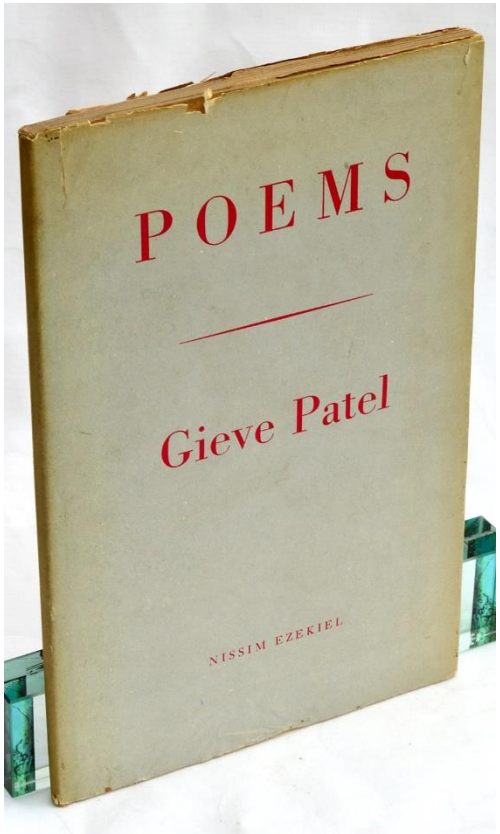


Introduction to the poet

- Born in Bombay,1940 to Parsi parents who were from a small village named Nargol in Southern Gujrat.
- Anglophone poet belonging to a minority community and to the culture of Bombay.
- Doctor by profession : Doctor-Poet
- Exhibited for Contemporary Indian Art, Grey Art Gallery, New York City, 1985.



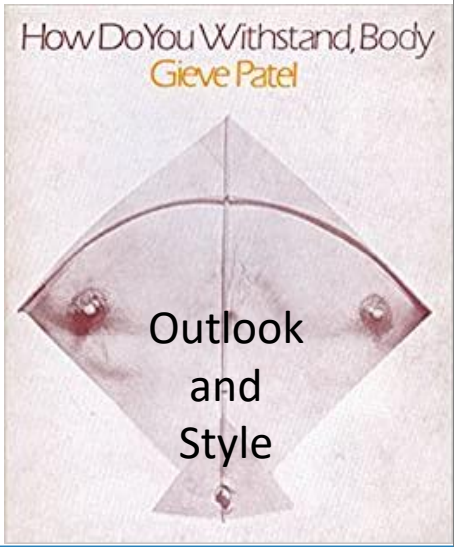
Painter, Playwright and Poet



Introduction to Poems

First two books published by Ezekiel and Clearing House

- *Poems* (1966)
- *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976)
- *Mirrored Mirroring* (1991)



Translating the work of 17th Century Gujrati poet Akho

Characteristic Features of Patel's Poems

- Under-privileged
- Social consciousness
- 'Situational' poetry
- Bare colloquial Style
- Lack of imagery and metaphor
- Precise and economical
- Dense and oblique in meaning
- Lacking in poetic sentiments
- Reflect upon actual situations not imaginative.

Contd...

- Co-presence of love and violence in sexuality
- Body's suffering
- Quest for inner peace
- Later inclined towards religious poetry expressing love affair with God.

"My family wanted me to do medicine only; there were some friends who encouraged me to pursue only writing – on the grounds that one would interfere with the other. But then, these people began to give up on me. That helped! I decided to do all three and I've been happy since." ("In an Interview To Arundhathi Subramaniam")

Predicament of Self and Identity

Do I sympathize with the underdog?
Is it one more halt in the search for ‘identity’?

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.
And the rulers who had such praise for our manners
Disappeared one day. So look instead for something else:
Even accept and belong. (“Naryal Purnima”, Poems,24)

“Forensic Medicine”

A case in point, the expert says;
A woman thrust glowing faggots
Where properly
Her son’s sparrow should nest.
Puerile in-law practice, he says,
But good as any other
To set the story rolling; begin
With a burn in the sparrow’s nest
To extend over all therefrom emerging
Fan and flourish of the world:

Contd…

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;
Bodies whose gel of blood and skin
Have not exchanged years against sweet air
Will not relinquish with ease.

Contd…

Against these devise infinite means,
The pictures in my book will instruct.
Change vantage point inch by inch
To discover them all: recall grace
Inherent in each new part, find
Weapon against it. Lop off limbs.
Smash teeth. Push splinters
Underneath nails and lever them
Off fingers; offer acid in a drink of wine,
The house of song is blasted. Soft skin
That clothes the gentlest dunes will retract
Before knife and bullet. Proceed.

Contd...

Flick pages. The regal column of the neck
Upholding the globe of sight and sound
Is often undermined; or straight
Charge at speech and sight, 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.

You are now full circle
With nothing
Not thought of, not done before.

Analysis of the Poem “Forensic Medicine”

- Hospital poems
- Wounds and pains of human body
- Medical violence and cruelty
- Rough style and tight rhythm
- Dispassionate and detached
- Abundant in grotesque images
- Prosaic

“On Killing a Tree”

It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding
Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leperous hide
Sprouting leaves.

So hack and chop
But this alone wont do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
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.

Contd...

No,
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,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed,
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.

Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done.

Analysis of the Poem “On Killing a Tree”

- Eco-criticism
- Full of satire
- Violence against environment
- Graphic imageries
- Medical imageries
- Death and decay of self

“How Do You Withstand, Body”

How do you withstand, body,
Destruction repeatedly
Aimed at you? Minutes,
Seconds, like gun reports
Tattoo 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. It's your fate,
Poor slut: To walk compliantly
Before heroes! Offering
In your demolition
A besotted kind of love:
Dumb, discoloured,
Battered patches; meat-mouths
For monsters' kisses.

“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.” (King)

The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He Being Neither Muslim nor Hindu in India

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.

“Mirrored, Mirroring”

God or
something like that
shot
through each part of you, down
to your
small fingernail, well into
pits and wells
you
did not know of, beamed
right into all of that,

Contd…

and into your
crude meanness,
and your fruitlessness; flooded
might be
the word for
it;
trans
lucence, the sun
blaz
ing through, lift
ing the most of you
out
of sight, save for
a persistence
of veins.

[From: *Mirrored, Mirroring*; Publisher: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991]

Views of Contemporary Poets

- There are poets who have been prescribed poetry as therapy by their shrinks, though I don't think Patel belongs to this category. His poems go far beyond the personal or the so-called 'confessional', as he attempts to come to grips with the overpowering reality around him. (Manohar Shetty)
- His poems are generally lean of shape, and spare of movement and gesture. They are characterized by quick, unexpected figurative turns, and complex attitudes. His steady-eyed appraisal confronts the disorienting aspects of experience on a middle ground between evasion and involvement. (Mehrotra)
- Patel's excellent poems derive much of their strength from the way he is both strongly aware of local conditions of life yet defends himself from involvement. (King)

Conclusion

- Patel's early poems are protests and feelings of guilt.
- There is an element of his professional affinity and detest in his poems but that shows his struggle for identity.
- An urge for all forms of life shows his consciousness as a poet.
- Sensitivity to social injustice and suffering is found in majority of his poems.

Summing up

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! (from *Mirrored, Mirroring*)

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Thank You