Chapter IV

POST-COLONIAL CONCERNS IN THE
POETRY OF GIEVE PATEL

Gieve Patel is one of great poets of 20th century and depicts the dark side of life in his poems. He feels shocked with the tyranny that he observes in society. His poems such as Say Torture, Bodyfears, Here I Stand, How Do You Withstand, Body, What's In And Out, Servants etc. confirm that he often fails to understand man's cruelty towards other human beings. Common place objects make him think seriously that a large gap exists between man and man. As a physician he feels that body is assaulted again and again by the human beings. How long will it tolerate the pair of scissors, knives and hammer? Generally the press-reporters get such news printed in the newspapers and stir people like Gieve Patel. Nissim Ezekiel is highly conscious of the gravity and sobriety that he finds in Gieve Patel's major poems. He is, of course, conscious of the power of words that he uses in a poem. His ideas develop in his mind fully and he expresses them after they have matured. Nobody can deny that he has sympathy with the down-trodden people.

In the poem From Bombay Central Gieve Patel describes the ugliness of the railway station though
he gets a seat in the compartment. He is fed up with the odour of various kinds as the non-passengers use the toilets of trains daily for passing out stool. A lot of them need public lavatories outside the railway station. Since there are no such lavatories, common people make the station dirty and it happens in the whole country daily. Some Up-trains and Down-trains are waiting for departure and the non-passengers don’t care for hygiene of the stations. Gujarat Mail, Delhi Janata Express, Bulsar Express etc. have the same fate and the poet feels nostalgia with the 'odour of human manure' (6). Every thing appears vague as it is difficult to distinguish between passengers and non-passengers. Many passengers reach this platform from 'adjoining platforms' as they have to cross the station-lines. There is a large number of porters, 'the station's population of porters' (9), who can't manage the passengers in any way. There is chaos here and there will be peace on this platform after the departure of Saurashtra Express. There are some vagabonds who want to steal the goods of passengers and the poet can't raise his voice against them. He says:

... while I clamber in

To take my reserved window seat

And settle into the half-empty compartment's
Cool; the odour of human manure

Vague and sharp drifts in

From adjoining platforms. (3-8)

He admits that he is comfortable in his seat and the compartment is half-empty. Soon there will be a crowd of passengers inside the compartment and his mood will be disturbed. The non-passengers have already used the train's toilets:

The station's population of porters,

Stall-keepers, toughs and vagabonds relieve themselves

Ticketless, into the bowels of these waiting pets;

Gujarat Mail, Delhi Janata, Bulsar Express,

Quiet linear beasts,

Offering unguarded toilets to a wave

Of non-passengers, Bombay Central's

In-residence population. (9-16)

This problem is peculiar in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Mostly the passengers are used to this odour. Sunlight enters a few open areas of the
railway station. Now there is an amalgamation of the smell of diesel oil, cool rails, hot steel, dung etc. Then there is a mixture of light and shade in several parts of the station. As the weather is hot, the poet is fed up with the smell of 'human sweats' (24). Due to his sensitive nature he listens the noise of water-taps. There is a wide gap between his expectations and real scenario. Even the bushes are 'worn-out' and hit his nostrils. Various smells seep into his clothes as he is particularly fed up with the tobacco smell of cigarettes. A few people smoke even inside the air-conditioned cinema-halls creating problems for non-smokers. The poet is in a mood to think of the relation between art and beauty. He has a few questions in his mind regarding the relation between art and truth. Like Keats and Emily Dickinson, he is interested in 'truth and beauty' and wants to identify beauty with truth. He feels a bit 'buffered' from the harm of the odour of railway station. Yet he is uncertain of the next moments of his journey. He tries to control his mood:

I sink back into my hard wooden
Third-class seat, buffered by
This odour, as by a divine cushion.
And do not suspect that this ride
Will be for me the beginning of a meditation

On the nature of truth and beauty. (34-39)

The message of his art is clear in the last line of the poem. He wants to know the way of uniting beauty and truth with his art — How to do it? What is intellectual beauty? What is its relation with truth? Will he be able to unite beauty and truth as John Keats did? What is the exact definition of truth? Is truth acceptable to the common people? Such questions are in his mind when he waits for the departure of his train. He does not mention the name of his destination. But the purpose of his art is clear here.

In the poem Old Man's Death he describes the reality about old age as old man is generally exhausted, sick and worn-out. Quite often his grandchildren consider him useless as he fails to adjust with modern techniques. The old man does not lead a comfortable life as he feels himself to be a burden for the family members. May be his grand children won't weep on the eve of his departure. It is possible that his would-be widow won't shed tears at the time of his death. People have no emotional attachment with him and hence he is unwanted in the family. His
pieces of advice are no more required in this age of scientific progress:

With this sympathy in his heart the poet laments the fate of old man:

There may be a very small comfort
In knowing yourself finally
Useless — when even grandchildren
Have grown beyond your love.
And your would-be widow
Has outhobbled you and
Won't be around to break with
One or two of her last thick tears. (1-8)

Since he can't do anything for the family, he is not needed. The expanse of his medicines appear to be a source of trouble for the members of family. As there is no social security for all old people, they appear to be useless. Even the doctors fail to attend them regularly. The old people wish to die as survival may create problems further. Their friends rarely visit them as there is nothing new to discuss and share with them. Tennyson aptly said that 'old order changeth yielding place to new'. The
generation gap can't be bridged at all and people become habitual of 'easy changes'. The old man imagines that the water of the Ganges will be sprinkled upon his dead body and then he will be put on the pyre for funeral. Old bed-sheets will be replaced with new-ones:

At the quick and easy changes:
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. (16-22)

However, the bed and the chair will remain the same in the changed scenario. The room will be the same as the figures are going to change with his death. Who can check this system of change? Who can turn the tables? After all, old age leads to death. Here the old man forgets that soul is immortal and it is only the body that dies with death. Due to his narrow vision, he thinks only of physical death and ignores the spirit.
In the poem *Forensic Medicines* the poet describes the problems of scientists who make experiments in the forensic labs. Various experiments are made upon the bodies of birds, animals and finally upon human beings to reach certain conclusions. Infinite means and a large variety of acids are applied upon dogs, rats, sparrows, monkeys etc. to examine their validity. Several cuts are made upon the dead bodies to examine the cause of death. There are many questions before the scientists of these labs such as — which poison has been added with the drink? What has been the proportion of poison and wine? How does the skin react in a natural and unnatural manner? Has the person been murdered with sharp knife or stone or bullet? What does the blood of group of the person reveal? The injured body is further cut with sharp knife to take out the bullet. Quite often the skull is opened with hammer. At times the eyes of the murdered person are examined in the lab. A few parts of the body turn blue with certain acids and confirm some facts. The small bones of mouth and nose may reveal facts about the murder of cause of murder. Quite often it is possible that two scientists differ from each other and give different opinion regarding the poison used. At times the scientists feel disgusted after a lot of labour and begin the operation again:
'do not forget
To return where you started : with a penknife
Strike at the rising sparrow's neck, ...

(40-42)

Many problems are solved with the smashing of teeth. Quite often the limbs of body are chopped off. This is a complex world and it is not easy to reach conclusion. A lot of dead bodies are preserved and research scholars are highly paid to detect the reaction of acids upon various bodies. Time factor is equally important in many cases. The gel of blood and blood cells are examined thoroughly to take out results. Many scientists believe that there are no hard and fast rules about human bodies. Yet the scientists of forensic labs make experiments in the labs and share their knowledge with other scientists of Asia, Africa and Europe. The poet uses the term 'these devise infinite means' (22). A few dead bodies are minutely examined inch by inch to discover them all :

... inch by inch
To discover them all : recall grace
Inherent in each new part, find
Weapon against it. Lop off limbs.

Smash teeth. (24-28)

Certain revelations are surprising when these acids reveal facts. The world continues to 'flourish' inspite of crimes and lab works. The scientists don’t want to miss any sign, symptom and symbol while writing reports in the forensic labs. The report is like a seed and the judgment of the court will depend upon the report of the scientist. The poet asserts the value of forensic medicines though they are not sold in the open market. Their secrecy is maintained in the labs as they are very important with the growth of crimes in society.

On the contrary the doctors are in a hurry while doing the post mortem of dead bodies in the post mortem room. Quite often the assistants of the physicians prick the dead body at several places and report is prepared with complex and obscure words. In the poem Post Mortem he says that the whole body is snapped carelessly at times. Irony is that the person looked after his body carefully for sixty or seventy years. His lever, lung and heart are ignored by the physicians as post-mortem is done in a routine manner. It seems that no scientific knowledge is required for this job. Often it is reported that the person died of brain hemorrhage or cardiac failure:
May be snapped,
With what calm
Liver, lung and heart
Be examined, the bowels
Noted for defect, the brain
For haemorrhage,
And all these insides
That have for a lifetime
Raged and strained to understand
Be dumped back into the body,
Now stitched to perfection. (8-18)

The poet's tone is bitter here as he exposes the careless approach of the physicians. He finally asks — How can they declare any death due to obscure reason? How can they ignore human rights regarding life and death?

In the poem God Or he defines the system of human body. There is God or some divine force to give function to big and small organs of the body and soul. He asks — Who makes the mind function? Who has created the system of supply of blood in arteries and veins? Who has created link between
heart and mind? Who has given five senses to human beings? Who gives them language to express their thoughts? Yet certain people are wicked and the poet uses the term 'meanness'. Quite often people feel frustrated as their actions prove fruitless. Things don't happen as they had expected and the poet uses the term 'fruitlessness':

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,
and into your crude meanness,
and your fruitlessness. (1-13)

Then the poet uses the terms 'translucence' and 'sun blazing' to indicate the light of reason. It is only divine force that is the source of this translucence. In the play Hamlet Shakespeare asserts
that a man is a piece of virtue, a 'paragon' and yet wicked at times. As a realist he accepts the bright as well as dark aspect of human personality.

In the poem *It Makes* he calls himself a 'bead' as he is fed up with the degrading daily routine of life. It is good that the body is 'seamless' and 'box of incorruptibles' (6). Quite often he fails to find out his way due to complexities of life. Yet he says:

I am a bead.
Sorted,
thumbed,
threaded,
strung,
fingered (did you say) by
threads of all hues
riddled through,
happily. (14-22)

Quite often he finds himself in the cobweb and, hence uses the words 'strung' and 'fingered'. As a doctor he feels elevated as his struggles are not severe. After all he leads a comfortable life. He has the capacity and inner desire to help the needy people in times of pain, disease and hunger.
In the poem *On Killing A Tree* he wants to remove the roots of a disease. If the disease is temporarily cured, it will harm the patient again. On the surface the poet is talking of cutting the branches and the trunk of the tree. He fears that green leaves will grow on the branches again. But the whole process of cure is slow and time-consuming and the patients ought not to expect miracles in a short time. He aptly says:

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. (1-9)

After all the tree has absorbed heat of the sun for many years. It has been fed by air and water for a long time. It has developed resistance against attack too as the bacterias don’t die in the short time. Due to malaria, viral fever, typhoid etc. the patient may be sick for a week. As the temperature is
controlled, he may feel weakness in body. The state of convalescence may continue for another week. The poet uses the term 'snapped out' as he does not want the patient to relapse. He says:

So hack and chop
But this alone won't 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. (10-18)

He does not allow the wound to gather puss again. Like the 'green twigs', the bacterias might flourish again. There are germs in the 'earth-cave' and total cure is necessary in the interest of the patient. He says:

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. (20-29)

In spite of being a painter, he has no love for the tree because he has another concept in his mind. As a physician he can't tolerate 'scorching', 'choking', 'browning' and 'hardening' of skin and face. Let it be done with proper medicines.

In the poem Public Hospital he describes the psychology of the physicians and the patients. With the passage of time the physicians develop the habit of checking the patients hurriedly. Quite often they become autocratic and dictatorial and dictate terms to the patients who are unwilling to take bitter pills and injections. The physicians don't feel embarrassed and ask the patients to pull down their clothes for check up. They want to judge their breathing system, beats of the heart, blood pressure etc. At times they snub the patients when the latter repeat their ailment again and again:
How can 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.

(1-9)

As a physician he is normally busy with the patients. But he feels offended when the people want to take fake medical certificate as they have the desire to escape from work. Such malingerers offend his aesthetic sense and he fails to tolerate them:

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. (10-16)

Yet he has affection for the patients as some of them behave properly with him. They appear in decent dress and he does not mind touching their body with best intentions. But he has no desire to violate the medical ethics:

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. (17-24)

In the evening he feels delighted as he finds the streets full of people. He has the job-satisfaction that he has done the best he could. It is true that he takes help of needle and knife and checks the tongue of patients. Yet his hands have performed their duty:
With needle, knife, and tongue,
Wreck all my bonds in them.

At end of day,
From under the flagpole,
Watch the city streaming
By the side of my hands. (25-30)

In the last stanza the poet mentions his
euphoria.

Like Mulk Raj Anand and Charles Dickens,
Gieve Patel shows his sympathy for Indian servants.
Yet he has no intention to offend them as he accepts
them a part of the social system. In most of the cases
they are the children of farmers and reach towns for
family works. Lights are on in the kitchen where
they take rest. In the villages, there is no big room
where all the brothers and sisters can take proper
sleep and hence the poet uses the term 'body to body'
(7). Generally their mouths smell of tobacco and
their fingers are hard:

Lights are shut off after dinner
But the city-blur enters.
Picks modulation on the skin;
The dark around them

Is brown, and links body to body,

Or is dispelled, and the hard fingers

Glow as smoke is inhaled

And the lighted end of tobacco

Becomes an orange spot. (3-11)

One fails to understand their psychology in the beginning. As they are uneducated, the world passes unnoticed by them. In other words they have no remarks on political and economic problems of society. This is the reason the poet regards them 'without thoughts'. However, their eyes are rooted deep in their faces. Generally they obey the master and remain silent when rebuked for their mistakes. One fails to understand as to why the poet compares them with animals. He says:

... They sit like animals.

I mean no offence. I have seen

Animals resting in their stall,

The oil flame reflected in their eyes,

Large beads that though protruding

Actually rest

Behind the regular grind
Of the jaws. (21-28)

Yet the poet has sympathy for them and wants to improve their conditions. The other side of the servants has not been painted by the poet as they often cheat rich people and kill them for money and gold. They know the secrets of the family and inform the gangsters for small amount of money. It is true that they feel dull with the same routine of the day. They have no freedom to go out of home as they perform their duties mechanically. Their condition is really pitiable.

In the poem What's In And Out the poet tries to seek the answer of few questions regarding soul, God, next life, death, infinite and fails to touch its depth as it is fathomless. His awareness about 'untouched organs' is little as he does not know much about the theory of creation, preservation and destruction of evils. Quite often he talks of liver problems and causes of melancholy. Yet the body is shorelike. He asks himself — What is the cause of his unwillingness to go further? Why does he fail to know the relation between the finite and the infinite? Why is he ignorant of the creator of this body i.e. matter? Why does God keep the soul a secret? What goes out of body at the time of death? How do human ashes mix in five elements? Will men
return to earth again? Just he can’t go beyond the skinwound as God has kept many facts secret. He frankly admits his ignorance about eternity and says:

— That's shorelike,
And I am held by unwillingness
To go beyond a lick, at most
A skinwound. Though 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. (9-17)

Human beings feel bewildered when they are sick. They feel shocked when they have the symptoms of a new disease. They forget their physical and intellectual guts due to pain. Only sickness makes them dull and dormant and they wish to get cured soon. The poet is conscious of the fact that he has a liver, heart and brain. Yet there are mysteries about these human organs also. He has a keen desire to gather knowledge about all the parts of his body. But alas! His hopes will not be fulfilled
due to divine system. Why should He not reveal the causes of pleasures and pains? Many things appear nice for the stomach and their excessive consumption makes people sick. The physical pains are of several kinds and different medicines are to be given for their treatment:

My body constituted of organs,
Their limits prescribed
By me, I say I have a liver,
A heart. Heart and liver
Do not feel exclusively. Yet
Before I die I should like
To have known me each way
All over. I know the stomach affords
A pleasure different from
The prick. And a different ache. (18-27)

Inspite of all sensations he fails to gather facts about the inner forces that govern the body and soul. The body is composed of several atoms. But the question arises — Who complicates the small and big bones with each other? Why does one’s body not obey one’s order? Why does man fail to control their physical system? Why does mind control body? Why
does soul control the mind, heart and other organs?
Yet he accepts:

... I walk today

An integral man. (34-35)

Perhaps he does not know — What will happen
tomorrow? Future is totally uncertain for him and he
finds himself helpless on many issues.

In the poem *How Do You Withstand, Body* he
describes the problems of physical body as it has to
tolerate various salts in the shape of medicines. The
patients of diabetes and blood pressure are supposed
to take six-seven tablets in the morning and repeat
the same before dinner. The patients of heart have
the same fate. The troubles of cancer patients are
worse than other patients. Yet the body obeys the
orders of the physicians and it is fated 'to walk
compliantly'. (13) Quite often the patients are
operated for particular ailments and they have to
surrender their body to fate on the operation table.
He calls it 'destruction repeatedly' (2) as a few
patients are operated for different diseases at
different stages. Perhaps the physical body hides
many diseases in it and one of them flares up at any
time. In a pathetic mood Gieve Patel says:
Before heroes! Offering
In your demolition
A besotted kind of love
Dumb, discoloured,
Battered patches; meat-mouths
For monsters' kisses. (14-19)

He repeats the same idea in the poem Bodyfears, Here I Stand as he is a patient himself at several times. How long the body will resist? There is a limit to the resistance power of the body. Finally the dead body turns into ashes and then in five elements. Yet everybody fights against diseases till the last moment and the poet aptly says:

Remember the living body's
Fight? (10-11)

At last the body becomes free from every bondage and soul, a prisoner of body, feels liberated with death. There is an end to all physical tensions and pains:

To let out pain
Beyond each sensory prison,
Tape record our screams. (13-15)

Like Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel describes the problems of beggars in the poem *Nargol*. Here he is subjective as a beggar woman follows him for four paisas. He pretends to ignore her presence but alas! She makes her presence felt to him and he feels bored. He tells a lie that he has no money to give her and yet she follows him. He feels a little tense as he is not in a mood to help her. Like Rober Frost, he unites love and need here as the poet does not hate the beggar-woman. She needs his help and the Indian beggars survive with charity and philanthropy. If all beggars depart with the negative reply of visitors, they are bound to go hungry and hence they persist. At times she appears 'cruel' (46) to him and yet he does not insult her. 'This is not the time' for begging (36) but she is not prepared to accept this argument. She does not get victory in her mission as he does not part with the coin he has in his pocket. If he had helped her, she would have triumphed:

One last tussle:
Was it not defeat after all?
Personal, since I did not give,
I gave in; wider — there was
No victory even had I given.
I have lost to a power too careless
And sprawling to admit battle,
And meanness no defence.
Walking to the sea I carry
A village, a city, the country,
For the moment
On my back. (61-72)

He does not bother for her as she may follow him again. Yet the poet never asserts that she has no right to beg anywhere. He does not deny the habit of begging as human needs can't be ignored at any cost.

His poem University reveals the gap between old universities and the new universities. In the beginning he raises the question — Are the students of Decca University better 'than those of our own'.

(3) Before 1947 the children of rich families could afford for higher education. They reached the university smartly dressed though their professors used to put on worn out clothes. These professors led a poor life and had a little money in the banks — bank balance (16). Then students of the universities led a carefree life though the professors tried to terrify them with poor 'award lists'. A few intellectuals were shot dead and the poet asks —
And why should I moan? (28)

The death of an intellectual does not mean that the learning process will come to an end —

Not a Fierce choice of learning. Not
Any newnets that ten years from now would
Spread alluvial across a parched country (33-36)

Yet he hopes that knowledge will spread far and wide and violence will stop on the campus of the university:

May your odour rise and trip up
Our brains. Tell us
To change our thought. (38-40)

Let good sense prevail in the mind of anti-social elements and politicians and education be out of their grip. Only higher education can elevate the masses as he supports the idea of mass education. The poet asserts that human life is incomplete and imperfect without higher education:
Before one puts away college
And good fellowship to join the beastly roaring outside. (24-25)

In the middle of the poem the poet hates the assasins who create violence in the university. The role of muscle power can't be tolerated at any cost. The rich and the poor students get education together as it is the age of democracy. Of course, he feels the need of peaceful atmosphere in the university as —

Not a
Fierce choir of learning. (33-34)

In the poem Dilwadi the poet describes the change in the village where industries have got to be established. The villagers resist for four months as they are not prepared to vacate their mud houses. After some hesitation the process of evacuation begins though they can't carry their loving trees with them. Soon they carry their belongings such as 'goats, vessels, drums, bicycles etc. and settle at a new place. In the end the poet says:

The contractors sigh.

From unpromising seed
Dilwadi blooms into a makeshift town.

Change is the law of nature. (30-32)

Thus, Gieve Patel is a supporter of marginalized people. His poem *What's In And Out* confirms his interest in the things that are not visible to human eyes. In the poem *Narayal Purnima* he paints the picture of village at the time of departure of rains. Here he admits his sympathy for Have-Nots and asserts:

Do I sympathize merely with the underdog?

Is it one more halt in the search for 'identity'? (2:13-14)
WORKS CITED


