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PATEL'S POETRY, THE VOICE OF A PARSI

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is an analysis of some of Gieve Patel's poems which convey his feelings and thoughts as a member of the Parsi community. The image of "Parsi social settings" can be seen in many of his poems. Poems like 'Naryal Purnima', 'The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He Being Neither Muslim Nor Hindu in India', 'Squirrels in Washington', 'It Makes', 'The Place', 'Seasons', 'Grandparents at Family Get-Together' depict a Parsi outlook.

KEYWORDS: Parsiness, Naryal Purnima, detached, identity crisis

INTRODUCTION:

Being the member of a minority community ie Parsis, Gieve Patel's poetry reveals a dilemma. "Parsiness" influenced his growing years. Even his plays portray Parsi characters in the peculiar Parsi settings. His poems express the plight of Parsis and their struggle for space. Among Parsi poets, Gieve Patel is considered as one of the foremost. Other notable ones being Keki. N. Daruwalla, Adil Jussawala and K.D. Katrak. For example, a poem like 'Grand Parents at Family Get Together' portrays the Parsi traditions and depicts a sense of longing. It is a vivid portrayal of Parsis in the postcolonial scenario.

BODY:

'The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He being Neither Muslim nor Hindu in India'. This poem is a harrowing portrayal of communal violence. The gory barbaric communal riots in India where the appalling 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, inspite 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

Edging along the continent. Bodies

Turn ashen and shrivel. I

Only burn my tail. (Patel 56).

Patel alienates himself from the settled land while the communal holocaust or civil riots happen in India; and also retains his Parsi identity to witness it all. He has taken up a particular violent incident and described the happening in a sensational manner to evoke a strong hatred for violence inflicted on fellow human beings. The violent communal attacks were not directed against the Parsis. No Parsi woman was assaulted by the Muslims or the Hindus.

Yet Patel feels estranged from the society. He says with bitter irony: "To be no part of this hate is deprivation". Even hatred is welcome because it is human. "I only burn my tail". The world around the poet is on fire but his community is unscathed by the raging fires. But he is no Hanuman, and the burnt tail is no myth. 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)

The poem 'Naryal Purnima' depicts the identity crisis of the Parsi community. In the pre-independence era the Parsis had very good relations with the British. They had a flourishing business owing to the British patronage. However when India gained independence, the Parsis felt a feeling of insecurity and searched for an identity of their own. The following lines depict the poet's thoughts:

Do I sympathize merely with the underdog?

Is it one more halt in 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. (Patel 29)

Similarly, the poem 'Squirrels in Washington' expresses the Parsis search for identity. Gieve Patel ponders and wonders as to why the squirrels maintain a safe distance from him in Washington. The following lines express the poet's feelings:

Squirrels in Washington come

Galloping at you on fours then brake

To halt a few feet away

The object of my wonder. Do I

Emit currents

At close quarters?

Ah Daphne! Passing

From woman to foliage did she for a moment

Sense all vegetable sap as current

Of her own bloodstream, the green

Flooding into the red (Patel 115)

In the above lines, the poet alludes to the myth about Daphne's metamorphosis into a Laurel tree in order to evade the embrace of Apollo. An analogy can be made here with the Parsi community. The Parsis are oblivious of the reality and changes taking place around them. They stick to their age old traditions and beliefs. They refuse to accept non Parsi grooms although their fast dwindling numbers are alarming.

Parsis adapting to the changing scenario in the post- independent India is portrayed in 'It Makes'. Patel considers himself a sorted , classified bead, 'thumbed' on a string by threads of all hues, 'riddled', challenged to live happily in India and adapt himself in a land of varied heritage. The poet voices his opinion in the following lines:

I am a bead

Sorted,

thumbed,

threaded,

strung,

fingered(did you say) by

threads of all hues,

riddled through,

happily.(Patel 117)

This poem "It Makes" expresses the pain and anguish of the Parsi community after Independence. The Parsis are not targeted by any of the warring fanatic groups but they are unable to remain like a mute audience and choose an active neutral role by helping the needy and the destitute. In the poem, "The Place", space consciousness of Parsis is reflected. The issue of accommodation as one not simply borne of availability affordability or suitability but imparted by inward reasons. The following lines portray the poet's feelings.

See now, Well loved, we make
Too much of places where to meet,
And why some should seem right,
Not others. The tryst is inward.(Patel 99)

The poem “Seasons” echoes the Parsi desire to believe in universal love. Oneness of all creations is expressed in the following lines.

I would give much
To be able to believe in
Universal love,
Falling upon me from everything,
Just waiting for me
To reach out towards it
Periodically.(Patel 33)

In the poem “Grandparents at Family Get-Together”, Patel talks again about the glorious Parsi past and the longing for it, through Grandparents. It is a portrayal of the condition of Parsis who are stuck to their past pride and fading away into misery in post independent India. The following lines express the poet’s thoughts:

I watch them in their hallowed
Corner----- hallowed, but corner
Just the same ----- seemingly regal
Because deaf and blind,
Old pharaoh and his old wife
Rehearse immobility
For the mummying time.(Patel 17)

The poem, ‘On Killing a Tree’ can be understood as a continuous metaphor of passive violence with the purpose of rooting out or destroying an entire culture. The poet may be hinting at ‘the destruction of an entire culture ie Parsi culture’. The image of the tree represents human values and ethics. The tree spreads its green branches which symbolize a protective cover for humanity. The poet wishes to convey the fact that just as a tree takes time to grow from a seed, a culture also develops gradually with time. The following lines depict his vision:

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, (Patel 3)

A simple knife cut is not sufficient to kill a tree. The roots of the tree are deeply embedded in

the earth and it derives its nutrients from the soil. New branches come up when the branches are cut. The bleeding bark also heals with time. The roots must be scorched and choked in the sun . The lines below portray the poet's thoughts:

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

Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done.(Patel 3)

CONCLUSION:

Gieve Patel's poems depict the feelings, trials and tribulations of his community. He wishes to convey the message that adapting to change and accepting it is the best option. In the post colonial era, the Parsis have stood the vagaries of time and faced the hurdles in their path with a brave face. His poems are the mirror of a Parsi soul.

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