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Vivekananda College

Thakurpukur

Topic - Enterprise by Nissim Ezekiel

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Department - English



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The poem Enterprise belongs to the section The Unfinished Man written around 1960. Ezekiel is a modernist and his poems are centred around the city. He is passionately a Bombayite and the city serves as an extension of his inner conflicts. Being a Jew he had an instinctive awareness of his unusual nationality which is primarily responsible for the recurring notes of anguish and anxiety in his poems. In his writings and interviews he had identified only with modern India and not with its historical and cultural past. He questioned conventions and the complacency of contemporary Indian life regarding them. His constant questioning of culture, especially monolithic culture is not entirely like Eliot though both are modern poets, Eliot tried to define culture in terms of Christianity whereas Ezekiel wished to broaden the scope of culture. Both however, represent the fragmentary, dehumanizing

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represent the fragmentary, dehumanizing aspect of urban life.

The overwhelming sense of imperfection around him propels the poet to undertake an enterprise, a journey for the enrichment of self. The poem works on the metaphor of exploration, a search for identity and the enrichment of self. But there is an ironical skepticism at play though it seems to be a travel and pilgrimage poem supposed to bring enlightenment. The appropriate mood is set by the laconic detachment of the opening stanza. The quest for self realization started with a note of delight and excitement and confidence to find spiritual meaning. But the irony of the enterprise is evident in "did not test the call"-the pilgrims had set off without looking inwards into their souls. The "sun raged" symbolises the discomfort and hardship entailed with the journey but newly begun, they thought they were coping well

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with them. Hard toil, indomitable energy and keen observation are naively thought enough to surmount the obstacles. The irony lies in the superfluity of their quest because though they gather knowledge of a sage who taught about spiritual wisdom perhaps, they did not tarry to know what he taught.

The superfluity is laid bare further in the third stanza. The spiritual poverty of the pilgrims is exposed when they fall apart on a minor issue and the one considered most intellectual, abandons the enterprise. The shadow of treachery looms upon the group. In the next stanza when there were attacks from outside, symbolically representing the sacrifice demanded against the lure of the external, materialistic world, also doubt and fear, considerable number asked to be allowed to give up the quest. The reducing number infuses anxiety in the poet but the leader assures him that the sea of salvation



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is near and the journey continues.

The next stanza reverberates the spent up state of the pilgrims, their enthusiasm has depleted, they are incapable of deciphering the codes of spiritual wisdom as Moses in the Old Testament did, he decoded religious messages from thunderbolts. Their pathetic ,mundane and hollow beings are still enmeshed with lack of common itemskhem disillusioned, disgruntled, reminding of Eliot's Journey of the Magi. Like the Magi they are also humbled by the knowledge of their inadequacy and meagreness. The Enterprise is about this disillusionment set against the purpose of achieving self-realization and knowledge. If any knowledge is at all gained it is that there is no turf to be gained as such and true wisdom can be gained in the land of their birth, their actual home.

The poem is also an allegory dramatizing in the first person, the doubly marginalized ( a

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The poem is also an allegory dramatizing in the first person, the doubly marginalized ( a Jew, a writer who writes in English) poet's quest for artistic identity.



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