Study material for Semester II, Compulsory Core English II

SHILLONG by Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel’s poem *Shillong,* describes the contrasting elements between the urban and the rural: between the natural and the artificial and between the simple and the complex. The hill town of Shillong, nestled in the North East of India, is represented by the poet as the idyllic setting to unwind, to commute with Nature and to be inspired. The underlying irony in the poem is that a city dweller fails to appreciate natural beauty, since he has adapted himself to a mechanical existence.

Ezekiel describes the serenity and picturesque beauty of Shillong to contrast with the confusion, turbulence, noise and hurry of a metropolis like Mumbai. He observes that a city dweller is trapped in his hectic and materialistic life and is bound by time simply to work. Shillong is a quiet place with a small river flowing by lazily, offering promises of pleasure and repose. But the modern man would say” what’s the use?” He would look at the picture of Shillong as belonging to someone else and prefers to stay in his ‘familiar unease’.

The peacefulness of the dawn, the rustling pines and cedars and the bird songs would leave the city dweller unaffected, because he is accustomed only to be self-absorbed with his anxieties and cares. The gathering clouds and the pouring rain would fail to cool the air he breathes, because his mind would be in a state of turbulence. The anxiety and confusion would remain in his mind , just like the prize possessions of a bride.

The city dweller would look at the beauty of Shillong without being affected by it. The peaceful silence would fill his ears but he would not be aware of it. If he happens to stare at a black and yellow insect it would not be to admire its beauty but to reflect on his own problems or ideologies. His knowledge of Shilllong would be informative and pedantic just as one learns the rules of grammar, when learning a new language. He would fail to appreciate its natural beauty or be inspired by it.

Ezekiel concludes the poem ironically with the words “back to books and heated human truths.” The truth is that man has transformed himself into a machine by forgetting to connect with Nature.