

Question:

Rootlessness, alienation, estrangement, the emotions that come up in the life of the elderly in city life is the theme of the poem “Father Returning Home”. Discuss.

Answer:

The poem “Father Returning Home” brings into focus the boredom and alienation in the life of the city dwellers and the plight of old age. The pathos of an old father returning to a gloomy house late in the evening is well addressed in the poem. The poem begins with the description of the mundane routine of the poet’s father, divorced from human contact. The father goes out daily to work, travelling by the local train and comes back late in the evening. It seems that he has to travel a long distance as during his journey a number of “*suburbs slide past*” his eyes. He has to endure the vagaries of the weather in all the seasons. The poet is reflecting on the harsh reality of city, where fathers as bread earners of their families undertake tedious journey everyday from their homes to their workplace and back.

Through the urban experience showing the drab and fatiguing routine of a daily commuter,

the poem essentially tries to bring the modern man's estrangement from a man-made and crowded world. Experience of being de-linked and uprooted from one's own kith and kin, one's fellow men and one's true soil finds a parallel in the father's nomad like commuting in the train. The monotony and meaninglessness of his life is expressed in the simile,

"Now I can see him getting off the train

Like a word dropped from a long sentence."

It suggests the awkward situation of an old man in this world. Old people are just like words in the syntax of life which can be dropped off as when they have outlived their utility. They are out of place in a busy world. The meaninglessness of life in general is stressed here.

Ironically and pathetically enough, one who is so lonely in such a crowded world finds himself in his best company in the toilet, where contemplation and dialogue with the self is somehow possible. He ponders over "*man's estrangement from a man-made world*" in the

toilet. Previous to this, the poet has highlighted how the father's basic needs are not taken care of by the family members. He is provided a "*weak tea*" and has to eat "*stale chapatis*". Categorized as a burden, he ceases to matter to his children who no longer share their secrets and joys with him. He tries to compensate for the lack of company either by reading a book or listening to the radio. His life, having lost its charm, the present being totally disrupted, the only possible communication for him is either the past or the future. In his sleep he dreams of his grandchildren or his ancestors. Dreaming about them, he communicates with the *dead* "*yesterdays or the unborn tomorrows*". His alienation seems complete and irreversible.

The poet also mentions that the father dreams "*Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass*", which signifies the trip of the Aryans entering Afghanistan through the Khyber pass. However these nomads and many other later invaders found a safe and rich home in India, and so finally they belonged to the land. Modern nomads like the poet who are uprooted from one town to another city perhaps find it difficult in striking a root. It is

the irony and the problem of old age that the poet tries to bring out throughout the poem. The poem depicts the isolation, pain and misery of the elderly in their old age. Thus we can end saying that an excellent portrayal of the loneliness that old age brings out has been depicted in this poem. It reminds one of Yeats' line in "*Sailing to Byzantium*" -

"An aged man is but a paltry thing."