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TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BY WOLE SOYINKA

POEM ANALYSIS

**NAME OF GROUP: GROUP FIVE (5)**

**COURSE: INTRODUCTION TO POERTY**

**COURSE CODE: ELS122**

**NAME OF LECTURER: DR SOLOMON EDEBOR**

**DATE: 8TH APRIL 2020**

**TITLE: TELEPHONE CONVERSATION**

**POET: WOLE SOYINKA**

**TABLE OF CONTENT**

1. **MATICULATION NUMBER AND NAMES OF GROUP MEMBERS**
2. **INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM (POEM RENDITION)**
3. **BACKGROUND OF THE POEM**
4. **SETTING**
5. **SUMMARY ANALYSIS**
6. **RHYME SCHEME**
7. **THEME**
8. **THONE**
9. **LANGUAGE AND STYLE**
10. **ABOUT THE POET**
11. **POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**
12. **CONCLUSION**
13. **REFERENCE.**

**MATRICULATION NUMBER/ NAMES OF MEMBERS**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
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**TELEPHONE CONVERSATION**

**BY**

**WOLE SOYINKA**

The price seemed unreasonable, location indifferent.

The landlady swore she lived off premises.

Nothing remained but self -confession. ‘Madam,’ I warned,

‘I hate wasted journey- I am African.’ Silence.

Silenced transmission of pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,

Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled

Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, folly

‘HOW DARK?’ … I had not misheard … ‘ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?’

Button B. Button A. stench of rancid breath of public hide –and- speak.

Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double –tiered

Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shammed

By ill-mannered silence, surrender

Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification

Considerate she was, varying the emphasis-

‘ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?’’ revelation came.

“You mean- like plain or milk chocolate?”

Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light

Impersonality. Rapidly, wavelength adjusted,

I chose. “West African sepia”- and as an afterthought,

“Down in my passport.” Silence for spectroscopic

Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent

Hard on the mouthpiece. “WHAT’S THAT?” conceding,

“DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.” “like brunette.”

“THAT’S DARK ISN’T IT?” “not altogether.

Facially, I am a brunette, but madam, you should see the rest of me.

Palm of my hand, sole of my feet

Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused-

Foolishly, madam- by sitting down, has turned

My bottom raven black- one moment madam!”- sensing

Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap

About my ears – “Madam,” I pleaded, “wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?”

**BACKGROUND/ INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM**

Wole Soyika is an important figure in postcolonial literature. Colonialism was a political system that developed in the 19th century, in which European countries like England and Belgium ruled over countries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere around the globe. When Soyinka was a young man, in the 1950s and 1960s, this system began to come apart: countries like Nigeria, where he was born, won their independence. As these countries struggled against and intellectuals arouse, led by figures like Aime Cesaire, Franz Fanon, and Soyinka himself. They bitterly opposed the Europeans who controlled their countries, and they worked to develop independent literary traditions: new kinds of poetry that testified to the complicated and difficult histories their countries had endured under colonialism. These poets and artists hoped to use literature to build resistance to colonial rule- and create cultural pride among their countrymen.

Post-colonial artist and writers also hoped to bring attention to the injustice- large and small- they had suffered at the hands of their colonizers. “Telephone conversation” contributes to this broader project. Even though it describes a relatively small injustice, it testifies to the difficult conditions that many artists and intellectuals like Soyinka faced while studying and working in Western countries. It documents the small, persistent and dispiriting difficulties that colonized people faced in dealing with their colonizers and the ways in which such difficulties diminish and dehumanize them. But, with its biting wit linguistic virtuosity, the poem also makes a strong case for resilience and brilliance of the people who endured such treatment- and their capacity to passionately resist it. The new traditions originated by post-colonial writers became some of the most vibrant and important literature of the 20th century. In recognition of his vibrancy and of his crucial contributions to it, Soyinka was awarded the noble prize in literature in 1986.

**SETTING**

“Telephone conversation” is set in an unnamed country, implied to be England (Soyinka studied in Leeds, a city in north of England, as a young man and the speaker mentions a “pillar box” in line 13 a kind of mail box that’s used throughout the united kingdom). Specifically, it takes place in a red telephone booth, during a phone call between the speaker and a landlady from whom the speaker wants to rent an apartment or room of some sort.

The speaker is careful not to provide too much detail, however, and never positively identifies which country the poem is set in. This is important: even though the poem zeroes in on a single phone call- a single racist incident- it reflects more broadly on the challenges that black people face in majority white countries like England. In other words, the poem is saying that incidents like this can and do happen to black people in wide range of settings, other words racial discrimination.

**SUMMARY**

“Telephone conversation”, written by Wole Soyinka, is a poem that highlights the impact of racial discrimination in the macro structure of society. The title of the poem reveals that two individuals having a discussion on the phone and how the black man on the receiving end is been racially discriminated. In other words, it is about the way both race (black and white) fail to communicate to each other without discrimination.

At the beginning of the poem, it is informed that the narrator of the poem, is looking for a rented apartment and he felt that the price and location seemed reasonable (indifferent to race or color). Being positive and exited, he makes a telephone to the white landlady, asking for a room to rent.

**“The price seemed unreasonable, location indifferent.”**

However, he feels he must let her know he is black. To his greatest surprise the landlady remains silent as soon as she got his identity as an African.

**“Nothing remained but self-confession. “Madam,” I warned,**

**“I hate wasted journey- I am African.”**

**Silence. Silenced transmission of pressurized good-breeding.**

This is where the lapses in communication begin; her silence be situated prove which reflects her indifference and reservation towards the blacks. She further inquires about his color, as she confirms him to be black she hangs up the phone. This incident shows the level of discrimination suffered by the blacks, in a more elaborate understanding, the landlady has not said anything nor has she denied his request, she just hangs up the phone, as she choose not to listen to him anymore. It is a satirical poetry written in 1963. In response, the speaker cleverly mocks the landlady’s ignorance and prejudice, demonstrating that, characterizing people by their skin color, diminishing their humanity.

Change is possible, only through the mutual dialogue of black and white, but this poem does not hint towards the possibility of such dialogue. The open ended structure of the poem represents the uncertain future of the blacks. It is certain how long they have to plead in such manner.

**FORM, METER AND RHYME SCHEME**

“Telephone conversation” is written in free verse, meaning it doesn’t have a regular rhyme scheme. This keeps the poem feeling unpredictable; the reader doesn’t know where this uncomfortable conversation is going to next.

The closest thing to a rhyme comes in lines 28-29, which end with the words “see” and “feet”. The /ee/ the sounds in both words are assonant. That binds them together, creating an effect which is almost like rhyme but the /t/ sound at the end of “feet” keeps this from being a perfect rhyme.

The lack of rhyme in the poem is potentially significant on another level. Rhyme creates link between words. When a reader encounters two words that mean different things but sound the same, they start to think about the connections between them, the underlying harmony that binds those things together. But there isn’t any harmony between the speaker and landlady-or, at least, her racism keeps them from finding it. The poem’s refusal to use rhyme, even occasionally, thus mimics the divide between the speaker and the landlady.

FORM: The poem is written in a single, 35-line stanza of a free verse. Meaning, it does not have a specific meter or rhyme scheme. The poem feels conversational rather than tightly controlled and it is also very unpredictable. It’s not clear to the reader where this conversation will go next. The speaker also uses sharp enjambments to create suspense and surprise, alongside short phrases like “Red booth. Red pillar box.” That creates a punchy, staccato rhythm. This rhythm mimics the telephone conversation, with all its short curt exchanges and its awkward pauses. Even though the poem doesn’t meter and rhyme, then, its form still dose important work, capturing the speaker’s feelings- and the dynamics of the telephone conversation itself.

METER: The poem is written in a free verse meaning it does not follow a set meter. Instead of the steady, predictable rhythm of a metrical poem, the rhythms of the poem vary much like they would in an actual conversation. This keeps the poem surprising and unpredictable throughout, the reader never quite sure where the speaker will go next while formulating a response to the landlady’s deeply inappropriate and racist question.

THE SPEAKER

The speaker in the poem “Telephone conversation” is an unnamed person from West Africa. This person is living in a majority white country, implied to be England, were Red phone booth “pillar boxes”, and double decker buses are common. The speaker needs to rent an apartment in this country, but that’s more or less all the readers learn about the speaker, though they do get a funny and satirical account of the body. The fact that we the readers never learn anything substantial about the speaker- where the speaker works, what the speaker likes to do, and so on is part of the point. The speaker does not reveal any of his personal information during the phone conversation with the landlady, she never asked him to do so. She was only interested in the color of the speaker. By avoiding revealing anything else about the speaker, the poem illustrates how racism reduces and dehumanizes people. It cuts away everything that is human and vibrant about the speaker, until only skin color is left.

**THEME AND THONE**

Telephone conversation is a poem concerning the racial discrimination between Caucasian and African. In the poem, the poet wanted to rent an apartment from the landlady originally. However, after the statement that he was African, the conversation turned to discuss the poet skin color swiftly and it lasted till the end of the conversation. Repetition was used to emphasize on the issue of racial discrimination. “Dark’ was repeated to show how much the landlady cared about the speaker’s skin color, because “Dark’ usually connects with the dark skin color of African. The land lady was obviously discriminating other race. It could also be shown from the question she repeated asking “Are you light or very dark?” after he told her he was African, her tone suddenly changed.

**RACISM AND THE COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY**

Basically the poem Telephone conversation is a poem that satirizes racism. The speaker, who is black, makes fun of the white landlady who won’t rent to the speaker until she knows his skin color “dark” or “light.” In contrast to the landlady’s reductive idea about race, the speaker suggests that race and identity are complicated and multi-faceted. Judging a person based on their skin color, the poem argues, is therefore ignorant, illogical and dehumanizing.

At first, the landlady seemed ready to move forward with renting to the speaker, even “swearing” that “she lived off premises.” She can’t detect the speakers race through the phone, a fact that emphasizes that the speakers identity is comprised of more than his race and that skin color is irrelevant to the speakers suitability as a tenant.

But when the speaker makes the self -confession, about being African, the conversation abruptly shifts to a discussion of skin tone. The speaker is being ironic in the use of confession, a word typically associated with the revelation of something criminal; to determine the racist notion the being African is a bad thing. Clearly the speaker understands how black peoples housing prospect are unfairly limited by a racist society.

Indeed, in response to this confession the landlady asks whether the speaker is dark or light, a question so absurd that the speaker briefly wonders if he has misheard. The landlady is playing into the ignorant idea that black people with lighter skin, whose skin is closer in appearance to that of white people, are superior to those with darker skin. Her only concern was how dark the speaker was, instead of asking other relevant questions, such as his profession, habits and so on, she reduces it to a single attribute which was his skin color. Racism, the poem therefore makes it clear, is inherently reductive and dehumanizing.

As such, the speaker refuses to answer the landlady’s question directly, instead offering a series of clever replies that reveal the landlady’s question to be offensive and illogical. The speaker had to describe himself as West African sepia” a joke that goes right over the slow-witted landlady’s head; technically it is like saying, well, in black and white photograph my skin is gray.

The speaker also notes that the human body is not just a particular color, the speakers face brunette, but the speakers palms and foot soles are peroxide blonde. The speaker is deliberately tongue-in-cheek in the comparisons here, but the point is that race and identity are too far complex to be reduced to a simple, binary choice between dark or light “Button B” or ”Button A.”

The speaker does not just criticize the landlady’s action but also, the way she thinks about race itself. He refuses to let complexity of human identity be reduced by ignorant choice that the landlady offers. For he ingenuity, however, the poem does not end on a triumphant note. As the poem closes, the landlady is about to hang up on the speaker- suggesting that, as a white person, she still holds the power in the society to effectively silence the black speaker.

**TONE**

The poet conveyed his feelings on racism through a telephone conversation with a landlady. The tone of the verse form was satirical and playful. He compared the instruction degree between himself and the landlady and expressed his choler towards this incident, on the other minus. He besides mocked the landlady as his own enjoyment.

Enunciation was used in two facets:

* First, the poet used enunciation to show his choler. Such as “Red” was repeated usage to stress the choler of the poet, when the landlady kept inquiring him. “Are you dark or really dark?”, because red normally associate with burning fire.
* The poet used hard enunciation such as “sepia, brunette” to diss the landlady of her not every bit knowing as she was, because he knew the female adult didn’t understand what these words meant. He was mocking the land lady and was wholly basking in it. This sort of irony added on to the dry tone of the verse form.

Imagery like “stench of rancid breath” was used to show the dissatisfaction of the poet towards racism. Since people would experience raging and unsorted when they smelled something “stench” and “rancid”.

To reason, the poet carried a satirical and playful tone throughout the verse form, at the same clip. He besides experienced his dissatisfaction towards racism.

**LANGUAGE AND STYLE/ LTERARY DEVICE**

**IMAGERY AND IRONY**

Wole Soyinka mainly used two (2) literary devices to deliver the message of anger and frustration, towards the racial discrimination at the micro level of the society. One imagery, “lip stick coated, gold rolled cigarette holder piped” is the mental image of the lady made by the African speaker by just listening to her voice on the phone. His attitude towards her is that she is socially superior than him and from a higher strata.

The image of a huge bus crushing the black tar is highly symbolic of how major white community dominate the insults the minor African community. He becomes so angry when she further asks about the darkness of his color to confirm his identity that he sees red every were.

The other important poetic device is irony that, the poet uses in the poem. The irony lies in the fact that the lady has given an ad about the flat stating that the price is reasonable and indifferent , in the case of color of the skin of any people, but when the African room seeker confess about his identity, she holds silence and dose not respond to him. Her words and action do not match in any way. Her words appear to be liberal and generous, but in reality her actions are full of hatred and indifference, just the opposite of her words. This vehement irony is meant to attack the so called social equality created by the whites. The next irony is that the African speaker self-confession about his identity to the white lady, which vividly shows his loser mentality and lack of confidence in his own color of the skin upon which he does not have any control. He has to be so meek and fel lower as if he has committed any crime.

**METAPHOR AND ALLITERATION**

Metaphor like spectroscopic was used to compare the lady’s mind with equipment which was used to judge a color. The significance of using the metaphor was to show the landlady was eager to find out what color the poet was.

Alliteration like clinical and crushing was used to emphasize the coldness in the landlady’s tone, when she knew he was African.

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem uses a lot of enjambment, meaning that his anxiety and discomfort express themselves via sentence that spill from line to line as the speaker tries to get through this racist telephone conversation. The poem’s end-stops, by contrast, tend to apper in the speaker’s moments of self-assurance and confidence.

**ABOUT THE POET**

Wole Soyinka was born on 13 July 1934 at Abekuta, near Ibadan in Western Nigeria. After preparatory university studies in 1954 at Government college in Ibadan, he continued at the university of Leeds, where, later in 1973, he took his doctorate. During th six years spent in England, he was a dramaturgist at the Royal court theater in London 1958-1959. In 1960, he was awarded a Rockfeller bursary and returned to Nigeria to study African drama.

Soyinka’s poems, which show a close connection to his plays, are collected in idanre, and other poems (1967), poems from prison (1969), a shuttle in the crypt (1972), the long poem ogun abibiman (1976) and Mandela’s Earth and other poems (1988).

Wole Soyinka won the Noble Prize in literature 1986, he was staying in Nigeria at the time he was presented this award and his motivation was “ who in a wide cultural perspective and with poectic overtones fashion the drama of existenc.”

**POSSIBLE QUESTION**

1. What is the critical overview of the poem “telephone conversation” by Wole Soyinka?
2. Consider the poem as a fine monologue.
3. Discuss the poet’s experience with the landlady.
4. In what ways are soyinka’s credible?

**CONCLUSION**

Even though the poem is meant to mimic a real-life conversation, there are quite a few instances when the poet plays with language. First, we sense a sort of wordplay when the speaker uses irony to suggest the woman’s racist behavior. Secondly, besides irony, the plays with language through repetition.

Finally, majority of the verbs employed in the poem are in past tense, an element which indicates that the speaker renders a conversation that has already happened in the past.