

Telephone Conversation

-Wole Soyinka

'Telephone Conversation' is a poetic satire against the widespread racism still prevalent in the modern western society. As the title suggests, the poem depicts a telephone conversation between a west-African man and a British land-lady who shockingly changes her attitude towards the man soon after he reveals his racial identity.

The motif of a microcosmic telephone conversation is employed by the poet to apply to a much broader macrocosmic level where racial bigotry is ridiculed in a contest of human intelligence, also portraying the poet's witticism and his ingenious sense of humor.

The poem begins on a peaceful note, befitting the narrator's satisfaction for having found the right house-

'The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent.'

The land lady also emphatically mentioned that she lived 'off premises', thereby ensuring that tenant would enjoy absolute privacy and freedom. The conversation however drifted to an unpleasant turn of events, soon after the man surprisingly decided to make a self confession to reveal his nationality-

"Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey-I am African."

A sudden unexpected silence followed and the awkward pause in the conversation is strengthened by a caesura, trying to emphasize the impact of the African's race being revealed to the land lady. An uneasy atmosphere is created and the word 'silenced' reiterates the sudden change in the land lady's attitude as well as the man's intuitive sensitivity towards the unfriendliness on the other end of the phone.

'Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding.'

It seemed as if the narrator was caught in a foul act and the expression 'Pressurized good-breeding' is only an ironical manifestations of the polite manners the land-lady was supposed to have for the job of renting premises.

After considerable period of silence when the land-lady spoke again, her words seemed to come from between lipstick coated lips that held between them a long gold-rolled cigarette-holder and the impression she gave off was that as if her status in the society was all of a sudden upgraded. Undoubtedly, the poet's power of imagination enables him to visualize an affluent and sophisticated British land-lady belonging to the so-called progressive and urban world on the other side.

Tension rises with the explicit racial discrimination conveyed through the question-

"How Dark?"

The land lady's effort in seeking clarification in something quite irrelevant that is, his skin colour, in the course of the conversation is emphasized. She repeated her question, reinforcing the racist overtone in

the English society. The lady's pushy, unequivocal stance in pursuing the answer rendered the man speechless. He suddenly seemed confounded.

'Button B, Button A.'

The automation imagery shows the man's temporary conclusion and implies the rampant racial discrimination taken for granted in the western society.

Shock changes to disbelief that transforms itself quickly into sheer disgust and utter indignation.

'Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar.'

The narrator is jolted back into reality from his trance like state and he makes a frantic attempt to ascertain the situation. The revelation comes with the repetition of the question by the land lady with varying emphasis.

'ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT? You mean-like plain or milk chocolate?'

It was soul shattering to the narrator that the land lady could so insensitive to his feelings. Fuming with anger, the man decided to inflict similar humiliation on the racist woman choosing a superior vocabulary and replying in an acutely sarcastic tone.

"West African sepia-and as afterthought, 'Down in my passport.'

He quickly forces her into submission and exposes the ignorance of the lady clearly illustrating that beneath the lady's glossy and lavish exterior, she was just a shallow judgmental racist. Paying no attention to the land lady's disrespect for him, he took a firm control over the conversation defending the dignity and integrity of his ethnic identity from the ruthless onslaught of the land-lady. He goes on to describe the various colors one could see on him;

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

Unabashed he goes on to state that the palm of his hand and the soles of his feet are peroxide blonde and that friction by sitting down had turned his bottom –raven black. With a slow but furious realization the lady began to set the receiver down. 'Sensing....' the man rushed to ask sarcastically:

"Madam", I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather see for yourself?"

The quasi politeness of the tone of the poet can hardly conceive the ultimate insult inflicted on the land lady and shows how indignant the man was, also ending the poem with a tremendous sense of humor, apart from the obvious sarcasm.

'Telephone conversation' is a favorite, both for its excellent use of rich language and the timeless message it conveys, that is to avoid silent resignations to such policies of the racist society and also that Intellectual superiority is not determined by racial color.