

Class: B.Sc. Home Science

Semester: II

Subject: English Language and Communication Skills

Unit: II (Poetry)

Telephone Conversation

-Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off-premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. 'Madam' , I warned,
'I hate a 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, foully.
'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! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfounded 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 accent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted
I chose. 'West African sepia'_ and as afterthought.
'Down in my passport.' Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness chaged 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 brunette, but madam you should see the rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles 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?

About the Poet:

Wole Soyinka is among contemporary Africa's greatest writers. He is also one of the continent's most imaginative advocates of native culture and of the humane social order, it embodies. Born in Western Nigeria in 1934, Soyinka grew up in an Anglican mission compound in Aké. Though raised in a colonial, English-speaking environment, Soyinka's ethnic heritage was Yoruba, and his parents balanced Christian training with regular visits to the father's ancestral home in `Isarà, a small Yoruba community secure in its traditions.

Soyinka recalls his father's world in `Isarà, *A Voyage Around "Essay"* (1989) and recounts his own early life in *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), two of his several autobiographical books. Aké ends in 1945 when Soyinka is eleven, with his induction into the protest movement that during the next decade won Nigeria's freedom from British rule. The political turbulence of these years framed Soyinka's adolescence and early adulthood, which he chronicles in his most recent autobiographical work, *Ibadan, The Penkeleles Years, A Memoir: 1946-1965* (1994).

As a dramatist, he was influenced by J.M. Synge and many of his writings reflect mythologies popular among his tribe Yoruba. Some of his dramas include *The Trial of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *The Strong Bread* and *A Play of Giants*. Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. His literary essays are collected in *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

Synopsis of the poem:

Telephone Conversation is a poetic satire against the degenerated and inhumane condition of black people in 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. It also grapples with the issue of racism that lurks within the minds of countless individuals. The poem is a scathing comment on the prevailing issues of racism and racist prejudices.

Soyinka, through his poem, depicts a conversation between a white land-lady and a prospective black tenant and sheds a light on the prevailing racial discrimination and hatred in the society at large. The poem begins on a peaceful note with the conversation between the two people in which the African American man is looking for a place to rent. After considering the price, location, privacy and other relevant matters, he makes up his mind to consider the offer. Keeping in mind the incident of racial prejudice in the past, he decided to reveal his identity to the landlady. During the course of the dialogue, he straightway admits to the lady that he is black and does not want to waste his time and energy if the lady is going to refuse him on that bound.

After realizing the racial identity of the person, the complete silence ensued for a while. The prospective tenant considered silence as the reluctant result of the inbred sense of politeness. The poet deliberately uses the imagery of “Lipstick coated, long gold rolled Cigarette-holder pipped” to showcase the higher social class of the lady. Undoubtedly, the poet’s power of imagination enables him to visualize an affluent and sophisticated British land-lady belonging to the ‘progressive’ and urban world on the other side.

After listening to the landlady, all his assumption, as well as a figment of his own imaginations, were shattered into pieces. Keeping aside all the formalities, the landlady directly enquired from him that “HOW DARK...ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?” For a while, he thinks that he might have misheard but later realizes that the lady is repeatedly asking the same question with varying emphasis.

The questions turn out to be devastating for him as it represents a sense of racism. Therefore, he feels disgusted with the unexpected series of questions and fancies himself to be a machine, just like a phone. He can feel the stench coming out from her deceptive words and started seeing red everywhere around him. The emphasis of the lady, especially about the poet’s colour, reflects her racial bias towards the prospective tenant. The sudden change in the tone of landlady clearly reflects her coldness and apathy towards the people belonging to a specific community.

Perplexed and ashamed by the tense and awkward silence, the man tries to seek some clarification and thinks that the lady has given her the option to choose from. Understanding the intent of the lady, he himself repeats her question stating that if she would like him to compare himself with chocolate, dark or light. The usage of the metaphor such as spectroscopic not only

depicts the psychological state of her mind but also shows her eagerness to find out what colour the poet was. After a while, the man answered her question that his skin colour can be pictured as “West African Sepia” as it is written on his passport. The lady remains perplexed, not wanting to admit to her ignorance, and confused as she was unable to understand the answer and preferred to remain silent for a while. Afterwards, she could not restrain herself and seeks clarification from the man “WHAT’S THAT?” The man replies that it is almost similar to being a dark brunette.

The insensitivity of the lady almost compels the man to break all the codes of formality. In a satirical tone, he mocks the lady by saying that he isn’t all black, the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands are completely white. He knows that the landlady will never be convinced with his black complexion and he senses that she might slam down the receiver anytime. At his crucial juncture, he makes a desperate attempt to convince her to come and see for herself; only to have the phone slammed on him.

The poem, in a sarcastic tone, brings forth absurdity, human follies, racial hatred and discrimination that permeate into the society. By showcasing the absurdity of all prejudices, the poem mocks and criticizes the psychological state of women who rejects the rented accommodation to the man on the basis of his skin colour.

Issues raised in the poem:

1. Racial Hatred
2. Racial Discrimination
3. Absurdity of Racism
4. Colour Prejudice
5. Apathy and Inhumanity
6. Racism and Xenophobia
7. Motif of Ghettoization
8. Self v/s Other
9. Physical and psychological trauma
10. Black Subjectivities

Expected Questions:

1. How does the poet draw the reader's attention to the central idea of the poem?
2. Attempt a character sketch of the speaker of the poem.
3. This poem is about racial discrimination. But can it also be read in the context of other forms of discrimination? Is discrimination limited to race?
4. Critically summarize the main argument of the poem? Give examples to justify your answer.
5. Give reasons why the caller initially finds the accommodation attractive.