



## A COMPLEXION DIALOGUE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

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### Abstract:

A simple telephone conversation enquiring about lodging turned into an enquiry about race – Wole Soyinka's poem *A Telephone Conversation* satirises racism, in simple terms. Wole Soyinka, a recipient of Noble Prize for Literature in 1986, an outspoken critique of racial segregation and apartheid, satirises racial hatred in the poem. The poet brings forth the seriousness of racial discrimination by using a dialogue between two people, and the poem aims to capture racial bigotry through a telephonic interaction. The dialogue between two unnamed individuals, marked difference only being the colour of their skin, quickly becomes a conversation less about finding a lodging and more about an enquiry about the black man's skin colour. Wole Soyinka's remarkable satirical poem dexterously combines humour with the serious topic of racial discrimination.

**Key Words:** Discrimination, Racial Hierarchy, Black, White

In the context of discrimination (racial and social), Wole Soyinka concentrates on the background of 'post-colonialism' in the 'tri-continental' set-up and elaborates the implications of hierarchy that exists at large in the global consciousness. *Telephone Conversation* (1963) documents not only the interaction between the 'white' landlady and the 'African man' but also presents the 'conversation of complexion' between them. The apparent but necessary seriousness which the woman has at her disposal while speaking over the telephone is the original sensibility that is possessed by the superior race. Interestingly, this egotistic sophistication in the voice of the landlady with occasional suspicion and distrust allows the man on the other side of the receiver to understand the difference between appearance and reality. In a sense, this particular conversation through a phone call is more revealing than a face-to-face conversation or an encounter. It must be kept in mind that a virtual encounter between two people often lacks genuine acquaintance. At such instances, it is hard to understand whether it is pretense or whatever is said is truly meant. But a conversation through a phone, where both are unknown to each other, the identity of the speakers are concealed except their mutual correspondence through voices where there is much more genuineness through blunt.

The sensibility of the 'black' in response to the 'white' and vice versa is the predominant motive that aids in the analysis of racial discrimination in *Telephone Conversation* (1963). The rifts that take place in spite of cultural assimilation in the modern age, the reactions and the pre-conceptions are the two most fundamental aspects of anticipation on the part of the whites and these preconceptions are the reasons for the blacks' consequent humiliation and sufferings.

In this poem, the white landlady's behaviour, driven by her preconceived notions about the 'other' basically influenced the man to act on vulgar and unsophisticated grounds. This is the modern manifestation of class and racial hierarchy that exists behind the illusionary humanist code of conduct that preaches equality and consideration. After all enquiring about complexion and continuous questioning about the comparative difference if colours are nothing more than pestering on the humility that is taken for granted by the woman who unconsciously emphasised her superiority without considering the sensitivity of the other man.

The African himself is not surprised at such a conversation where the progression of enquiry is embarrassing. He undoubtedly had expected a man like himself to go through such situations when specifically he is in need of a lodging and that too in the country of the colonisers. His is the condition where the colonised comes to the colonisers and encounters the binaries that had preexisted. Like him, there are countless souls who are subjected to such situations. The two individuals do not reveal their names and carry on with the conversation anonymously only to highlight the fact that the general consciousness of the established and the immigrant population is the same for all and sundry as is reflected in the poem.

There is no reconciliation at the end of the poem because the conversation ends abruptly due to the impudence of the African. The negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) perceives and in an attempt to look beyond the racial connotation believes,

I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos – and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth. (Fanon, 27)

This perspective is implemented in the replies of the 'black' African. He continues to be indifferent, keeping aside his humility glorifying the preconceived distortions of the 'white' woman about himself. He never gets irritated or egotistic but maintains a downright tone of burlesque. He is laconic and gives subtle answers

that have the capacity to melt the steel pointed at him. The moment we start believing in structures, we admit a binary opposition between the centre and the margin. Somebody privileged and somebody pushed to the periphery. There is a clash, a superior power which smothers the inferior. The normal racism seems to exist within and against colonial realism. The way in which the white lady interacted with the 'black' African seems to highlight the concept of 'erasure', the permanent obliteration of the native's view. *Talking Timbuktu* (1994), a musical collaboration between Malian guitarist, Ali Farka Touré and American guitarist/producer Ry Cooder in their joint venture speaks that for some people when you say 'Timbuktu' it is like the end of the world, but that is not true. 'I am from Timbuktu' and the residents of Timbuktu can tell you that they are right at the heart of the world.

In the context of this poem, if the colonial regimes sought to create rigid boundaries between races and cultures, indisputable by-products of colonialism. Hybridity has become a rallying crime for many post-colonial theorists and writers like Wole Soyinka and Frantz Fanon. Colonial and postcolonial subjectivities are now widely understood as hybrid conditions. This 'imitation' and 'mimicry' is something that is disregarded by the African man and it is worthy of appreciation that this man from the third world in the milieu of a cosmopolitan society remains upright in his vulgarity, only to protect his original self of a native in front of the colonisers who categorise him as a 'black' and as an 'African'.

#### **Conclusion:**

The 'Herranvolk' theory propagated by the German sensibilities in the wake of creed consciousness was the beginning of the fundamental racist thinking. 'Blood and Race' in its origin has multiple connotations which is applied with respect to the perspectives of the time and the people concerned. Colour becomes the yardstick of comparison and differentiation with respect to the dignity and social position of the early modern humans. With respect to the outlook of general perceptions racism in its very source becomes not only a complicated but also a consciousness which is imbibed in the natural code of conduct. A 'black' is a black because he is not a 'white'. Hence, the policy of exclusion is intrinsic to the understanding of this racial mysticism. Like 'Blood and Race' the next propaganda which gave rise to the patriotic German nationalistic outlook was the concept of 'Blood and Honour'. It is interesting to note that 'blood' remained constant while 'honour' became something which had to be gathered at the expense of the 'Race'.

Tracing racism to the history of mankind is no less interesting to trace its evolution at the present. The preconception of the binaries of 'superior' and 'inferior', the 'coloniser' and 'colonised' and 'white' and 'black' had given rise to the varied assumptions and experiences that had acted as highly informative and inspiring to the writers and authors who intend to document it. Shylock the Jew and Othello, the Black Moor of Venice are representatives of the discriminated race who breeds and pulsates under the apparent unity of the social fabric. History has remained as a chronicle where characters for their complexions had changed the course of thinking and the way life should be perceived. Honour, Power and Privilege are the elements which used to be of the foremost significance in our past, in our feudal society. Hatred, prejudice and inferiority complex are the elements which predominate the modern human sensibility beyond race, class; its misery and sophistication respectively.

African and Latin American sensibilities, conflicting to their colonisers, the whites, is the stepping stone to the documentation of racism in its critical, literary and academic context. Race and gender has become the modern concern for thinking minds who believe that in spite of its radical and liberal approach the divisions existing in the apparent social diorama. Instead of having any further protests and dissatisfactions with the existing paradigms of hierarchy that prevails in the panorama of social inflexibilities we must carry on with the constructive and structural criticism that will maintain the existing balance in this society. Racism although has become the basic problem of division yet it is something that has highlighted the general perception to consider the rifts existing in the unity of modern living.

Wole Soyinka had maintained the diplomacy of understanding the futility of radical approach as a retaliation. So his protagonist, the black African man is endowed with wit and black humour which repartees the sophisticated and stereotyped prestige and blank illogical honour of the racially superior class. The white woman is just a victim of the collective consciousness who just follows the footsteps of her predecessors. Hence in the psychological manifestations of the human mind since the past the sensibility remains the same. The only consolation is the hope of coexistence which has gathered the attention of the modern mind set and they are genuinely interested in making and being a part of the change which promises to decrease the barriers and rifts between the opposite complexions, who cannot exist separately but must progress hand in hand.

#### **References:**

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