ZELEK Sebastian 03/12/2014

English CA

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” and “Telephone Conversation”

Even in a post-colonial, modern world, discrimination and segregation are still prevalent in our minds. It still shapes how we interact with each other, as depicted in these two poems. In Wole Soyinka's case, he is interrogated on his skin colour during a telephone conversation to rent a house. He takes it rather negatively and satirically, caricaturing the landlady but still willing to get the house. On the other hand, Maya Angelou writes in her autobiography how she forgot a poem while she was reciting it in a church, and was ridiculed for it. In the end, she ended up running away from the church, pissing, but happy that she's free. Both of these authors have met with discriminant remarks, but they chose to battle them differently.

Wole Soyinka depicts his conversation with the landlady rather sarcastically, at points caricaturing his responses and the landlady. His conversation begins rather normally, as hinted with a somewhat regular rhyme scheme, but that is immediately derailed with Soyinka's “confession”. The author almost regretfully admits to the landlady that he's black, saying that “Caught I was, folly.”. But where as we could expect that the conversation will be continued as usual, the landlady asks “HOW DARK?”. “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?”, these words bluntly show how single-minded people can still be. We are immediately hit with the idea of better and lesser category: if he's light black, he can rent the house, otherwise he needs to look elsewhere. The image of the landlady that the author creates is quite sarcastic, showing her as a stereotypical white “posh” lady, with a “gold-rolled/Cigarette”. All of this is playing on the stereotypes built by imperialism around these inter-racial relations, showing the whites as the elegant, civilized people, and the blacks as the “inferior race” that belongs at the side walk. It's the “public hide-and-speak” Soyinka talks about: a society dominated by the whites where the other “races” are meant to be hidden. That idea is reinforced by how the landlady's words are shown in Soyinka's poem: everything she says is written in all capital letters, showing how soulless her words sound. She heard that the person she's speaking with is an African, so she immediately began to box him down just because of his skin colour.

On the other hand, Maya Angelou shows her case of how the society was boxing down on her just because she was of a different skin colour. While reciting a poem in a church, she forgot a part of it so she was laughed at by the “children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church”. She felt so bad about it she wanted to “breathe out the shame”. Maya then starts to wonder how different the situation would be if she would be a white girl: “Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?” and “I was really white”. The reader could assume that if she was white, the whole matter would be just ignored. Instead, the people in the church pick up on her, with words such as “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”. While she backs off, she trips and starts urinating. That is the final straw for her, after which she runs away from the church, while the “string of urine was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks”. The society's box pressed hard enough and she eventually broke down and escaped.

Although, these authors don't leave their situations unfinished: they try to somehow come out of their oppression. Soyinka chose to actively fight the landlady by mocking the stereotypes she acts upon: he plays upon colours to point out the landlady's “impolite” interrogation, using the images of “plain or milk chocolate”, “West African sepia” or the opposition between blondes and brunettes. But in the end he's forced to calm the landlady, whom he might have upset with his own joke about colours of the skin, and he needs to plead her so he can get a chance to rent this house. Yet, instead of completely subduing himself to her, he asks her if she would rather “see for yourself?”, criticising how idiotic it is to categorise someone over a phone call just because they have a different skin colour. Contrasting with this active opposition, we still have Maya's case to “resolve”: at the end of the extract, we can see her happy “from being liberated from the silly church”. She escaped the box she was in in the church, and she could taste a momentary freedom from the box, at least for a moment. She could “let it go”, both figuratively and literally. But that moment of freedom is only momentary: she knew that when she would return home she would get “a whipping for it”. Soon, the box of discrimination would come back to claim her and put her back into the struggle. She ends her story with a note that making her “aware of her placement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult.” Essentially, she says that already growing up black is hard, but the added discrimination can be just too much for a child.

To conclude, these texts explore how the issue of discrimination is still present, and even if we try to fight it, we will still succumb to this “box of segregation”.