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HOW DOES THE POEM
“TELEPHONE
CONVERSATION”
EXPOSE
THE PREVALENCE
OF
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION
IN
APPARENTLY EDUCATED
WHITE SOCIETY

ABOUT THE POET

Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde "Wole" Soyinka, 13th July 1934 is a Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist in the English language. He was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature for his "wide cultural perspective and... poetic overtones fashioning the drama of existence", the first sub-Saharan African to win the Prize in literature.

INTRODUCTION

Explanation of the topic:

“Telephone Conversation” by Wole Soyinka is a poem that explores themes of racism and prejudice through a telephone dialogue between an African man and a landlady. The poem vividly captures the discrimination faced by the man as he seeks accommodation, highlighting the absurdity and injustice of racial stereotypes. Through sharp irony and satire, the poet critiques societal attitudes and the dehumanizing effects of racism emphasizing the power dynamics inherent in such encounters. The poem’s use of language and vivid imagery, effectively conveys the complexities of racial discrimination and challenges the reader to confront the issue of prejudice and identity.

Reason for choosing the text:

The poem “Telephone Conversation” effectively captures the prevalence and absurdity of racial discrimination through a tense exchange between a black man and a white landlady. The poem uses irony and vivid imagery to highlight the landlady’s blatant racism when she learns about the man’s skin colour. The speaker’s calm, descriptive responses contrast sharply with the prejudice, emphasizing the absurdity and cruelty of racial bias. By framing the poem as a dialogue the poet makes the discrimination personal and immediate, illustrating how racism is present in educated white society.

Literary Devices:

Soyinka has used beautifully used a number of literary devices to elucidate a British White lady's inhumane attitude towards a Black African.

1. **Irony**: The speaker's polite and friendly tone contrasts with the landlady's racist attitudes. For example, when the speaker says, **"Madam, you should see/ the western wall,"** it is ironic because the landlady cannot see his skin colour over the phone.
2. **Imagery**: The poet uses vivid descriptions to create a clear picture in the reader's mind. For example, when describing the landlady, the speaker says, **"Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered/ Omnibus squelching tar."** This imagery emphasizes the contrast between the speaker's dark skin and the landlady's red surroundings.
3. **Tone**: The poem's tone is satirical and sarcastic. For example, when the speaker says, **"ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?"** he responds with humour by saying, "You mean - like plain or milk chocolate?" This sarcastic tone highlights the absurdity of judging someone based on their skin colour.
4. **Symbolism**: The colour of the speaker's skin becomes a symbol of racial discrimination. For example, when the speaker says, **"How dark? 'Dark.' Dark? 'Dark.' 'Dark.'"** **The repetition of "dark"** symbolizes the landlady's fixation on his skin colour and her prejudiced attitudes.
5. **Repetition**: The repetition of certain phrases adds emphasis and reinforces the speaker's frustration. For example, when the speaker says, **"ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?"** and the landlady responds with "But you are wrong," this repetition highlights the clash between their perspectives.

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

Summary of the poem:

‘Telephone Conversation’, as the title suggests, is a conversation over the telephone. It is between a black man seeking a room for rent and a white landlady who had advertised such an offer.

Over the conversation, the hypocritical nature of the landlady as a racist is brought to light.

An African man is looking for a room to rent, and he finds an advertisement in a newspaper. The ad says that there is no problem with race – white or black. As the man had bitter experiences with such ads earlier, he makes a telephone call to the landlady from a public telephone booth.

He tells the lady that he is a black man and asks if it is acceptable. The lady hesitates for a while; she wants to know if he is completely black or half-black. When the man says that he is not completely black because his palms and soles are white. The lady goes silent and hangs the phone even though the man pleads with her to at least meet him in person to see for herself if he is totally black. The poem shows how racial discrimination prevails hidden in the hearts of individuals. Even though there are laws against discrimination in the country, they become ineffective if individuals do not change their mindset. The landlady shows double standards. Publicly, she shows that she is not a racist, but privately, she shows her true attitude. The poem also captures the frustration of the black man. He is angered by the double standards of such individuals as the landlady. First, he is angry over the lady’s questions about his exact shade of color. Then, he becomes enraged and sees red all over. But, at the end of the telephone conversation, he is found pleading with the landlady to consider him.

Exposure of Prevalence of Racial Discrimination In Apparently Educated White Society

Politeness as a facade for prejudice

In the poem “Telephone Conversation” the poet illustrates how Politeness can serve as a veneer for underlying racial prejudices. The landlady’s initial courteous demeanor is quickly shattered when she bluntly inquires about the speaker’s skin colour, revealing her true discriminatory attitude. This shift from polite conversation to outright racism highlights the superficial nature of her civility. The polite façade is merely a mask that conceals deep-seated biases, demonstrating that educated and seemingly refined individuals can still harbor and perpetuate racial discrimination. The poet’s depiction of this interaction underscores the insidiousness of such prejudices, which persist despite outward appearances of sophistication and politeness.

a) The hypocrisy of the educated society

the poem “Telephone Conversation” vividly exposes the hypocrisy within educated and ostensibly enlightened society. The landlady’s initial display of politeness and her educated manner starkly contrasts with her immediate descent into racism upon learning about the caller’s race. The poet told that the lady was rich as the speaker could imagine her lips with red lipstick applied and the gold coated cigarette holder in her hands. This juxtaposition reveals a critical irony; despite her education and social decorum, her deep-seated racial prejudice remain intact. The poet critiques the hypocrisy by showing that education and sophistication do not necessarily eradicate discriminatory beliefs. Instead these attitudes often mask underlying bigotry. The poem thus challenges the notion that educated societies are inherently free from racial discrimination, highlighting the pervasive nature of such biases.

b) Prevalence of Racial discrimination in educated society

The poem “Telephone Conversation” exposes racial discrimination in educated white society through a seemingly polite interaction that quickly reveals underlying prejudices. The central theme of the poem is prejudice and discrimination based on colour and race. The racist attitude of the woman in the poem comes out from the way she shows her curiosity to know the colour of the person who wants to get her apartment on rent. The speaker’s confession in the beginning of the poem that he is African suggests that discrimination of this type is prevalent in the society. Therefore he wants to ensure that his journey to take the house on rent may not go waste because of his black colour.

c) Irony and satire

Irony is a crucial statement in the poem. The poem itself is ironic. the conversation that begins on renting an apartment transforms into profound commentary on racial discrimination. The speaker’s use of humor and irony to navigate the conversation underscores absurdity of situation while also highlighting the emotional toll of such encounters on those subjected to racism. The ending of the poem is full of irony and sarcasm. The black prospective tenant’s comments about his own colour and his request to the woman to come and see him is an ironical and powerful criticism on the racist attitude of the woman.

Themes of the poem:

1. **COMPASSION AND SELFLESSNESS:** The monk Upagupta shows true compassion when he helps Vasavadatta in her time of need. Even though she's sick and was turned away by everyone else, Upagupta doesn't hesitate to help her. He's selfless because he doesn't expect anything in return.
2. **BEAUTY AND UGLINESS:** The poem contrasts the physical beauty of Vasavadatta, the dancing girl, with her later physical state when she's sick with smallpox. This shows that true beauty is more than just physical appearance. Upagupta, despite seeing her in both states, treats her with the same kindness and compassion, suggesting that he values inner beauty over outer beauty.
3. **SPIRITUALITY AND WORLDLINESS:** Upagupta is a spiritual man who rejects Vasavadatta's worldly invitations in the beginning because it's not the right time. Later, when she's in need, he helps her. This shows that he's not attracted to the glitz and glamour of the world, but rather the spiritual path of service and compassion.
4. **TIMING:** The poem also deals with the theme of timing. When Vasavadatta first approaches Upagupta, he tells her that the time isn't right. But when she's in need, he tells her that the time has come. This shows that there's a right time for everything, and it's not always when we expect it.
5. **LOVE AND DUTY:** The poem also explores the themes of love and duty. Love isn't always romantic or physical, as seen in the pure and compassionate love that Upagupta shows Vasavadatta. He performs his duty as a monk not by preaching but by showing kindness and compassion to someone in need.

CONCLUSION

The poem “Telephone Conversation” is a powerful critique of racial discrimination, particularly within the context of an ostensibly educated white society. Through a deceptively simple dialogue, the poet exposes the pervasive and insidious nature of racism. The ending of the poem is full of irony and sarcasm. The black, prospective tenant’s comments about his own colour and his request to the woman to come and see him are ironical and powerful. The poem’s use of irony and satire and vivid language underscores the absurdity and cruelty of judging individuals based on skin colour, urging readers to reflect on their own societal norms that perpetuate discrimination.

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