



The Impact of Racial Discrimination in Wole Soyinka's poem 'Telephone Conversation'

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Abstract

During the history of human race and civilization, no people have devised a system to get themselves victimised. But the racial and cultural history of a man do not lack in illustrations which reveal that some man-made systems and conspiracy have been devised by cunning men to get their fellow beings victimised. Cultures of racism have been propped up in the world to bring about unblock victimisation of Blacks and downtrodden people. But, great saints, philanthropists, philosophers, social thinkers, writers, poets of the world have written volumes together to inculcate a positive vision and accommodative attitude with humanistic touch in their writing. Wole Soyinka through his poem *Telephone Conversation* gave us message of understanding inhuman and manmade evil issue of racism discrimination. A humble attempt has been made in this research work to show the burning issue of racial discrimination in Soyinka's poem, *Telephone Conversation*.

Key words: racism, inhumanity, victim, fight

Wole Soyinka is a prominent African writer. He is the first African writer who was awarded by the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. In his acceptance speech at Stockholm, he speaks of race relations as he says, "They come to that point where a social reality can no longer be observed as a culture on slide beneath the microscope, nor turned into aesthetic variations on a page, canvas or the stage" (Ramaswami, 158). He has contributed a great deal mainly to African drama, African novel and poetry. This poem is a fight against manmade inhuman racial discrimination. This poem is a conversation between an African black man and probably a white landlady with accommodation to rent. This poem reveals the rise of racial tensions of the African immigrants throughout the post-war decades in Europe. There is unfamiliar conversation between the speaker and a landlady. The poem opens with the African speaker

clarifying the essential information about location, the cost and other details as in the following lines:

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. (Line-1-3)

The poem describes the telephonic communication between a landlady and the speaker who is a black man who wants to know about apartment on rent. The irony of the poem is in that the landlady is pleasant until she knows that the speaker is African. As poet writes in the following lines:

"Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey--I am African."
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. (Line-4-6)

In further conversation, she wants to know how 'Black' or 'Dark' the speaker's skin is. This poem is a very severe irony for whole humanity. It is very shameful where this incident has happened in reality or is happening somewhere under the name of caste, colour, religion or nationality. If this type of racial discrimination is happening somewhere on the basis of above manmade hurdles, it is a blot for whole humanity. Joseph Conrad, a very great novelist writes this severe condition in his novel *Heart of Darkness* as in the following lines:

A burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet Stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy...it was unearthly and the men were-No, they we're not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it-this suspicion of they're not being inhuman. (Conrad 37)

The poet used the literary device 'irony' which mean a way of speaking that shows you are joking or that you mean the opposite of what you say. Here in this poem also, the poet has used to decrease psychological burden from this type of racial discrimination. It is very shameful for whole humanity that someone asked any person's caste, colour, religion or nationality to give apartment on rent. The present poem described the prejudiced and socially evil mentality of the white landlady as she asked about speaker's colour in the following lines:

"HOW DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . .
"ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?" (Line no., 10-11")

As we think naturally and spiritually, we all humans are equal. Discrimination, of any types, is manmade and inhuman. If it is happening somewhere in the world, it shows our prejudiced and lower narrow mentality. These above lines remind the speakers claim in the poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America* by a great American poetess, Phillis Wheatley as in the following lines:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

"their color is a diabolic dyw." Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, May be refined, and join the angelic train. (Line no.,-5-8)

The present poem is not only the communication between white landlady and a black man, but in depth, it is a conversation between a prejudiced, socially evil narrow -minded mentality and a person who is suffering on the basis of racial discrimination. the following lines of the poem reveals the prejudiced traditional mind of a white landlady to know the ratio of darkness as she asked and the speakers reply as:

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.

This conversation is humorous and ironical. But in reality, it is a contrast. After reading this poem, reader can understand the reason behind writing this poem. There is sociological approach of the poet. This poem reminds the lines by great American poet, R. W. Emerson as he said about himself: "I am a poet, of a low-class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing be sure is very 'husky' and is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter and especially of the correspondences between these and those. (Ramanan, 10).

Finally, this poem describes the harsh reality of racial discrimination by a white landlady of the speaker who is a black man as Ramaswami wrote in his article "Wole Soyinka: The Nobel Laureate": "This is a "Social reality" turned into an "aesthetic variation" in a poem-the ethnocentric consciousness of an African poet brought in an encounter with a white landlady- in a racial context." (Ramaswami, 159). The poem reveals the presence of racial discrimination at the individual level in the society even after passing the strict laws against it. It also appeals to all the socially narrow, evil and prejudiced mind to broaden their mind towards black people.

This article describes the severe inhuman condition of black man who are suffering because of manmade inhuman racial discrimination. This poem is a sincere attempt of the poet as it appeals to all the prejudiced narrow mentality to broaden their humanitarian point of view towards black people and to widen their narrow prejudiced mind. The poem is a conversation between a white woman and a black man over the telephone. The poet, through this poem, can capture the essence of human interaction across racial differences. This poem becomes significant as it presents both the attitude of the white woman towards black people. The speaker, who is a black man, expresses his anger which the poet Wole Soyinka has beautifully describes by using literary device *irony* towards racial discrimination.

Works Cited

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