Telephone Conversation – Analysis

Soyinka’s Telephone Conversation depicts a conversation between a white lady and an African American man which casts a harsh light on the racism and prejudice which grips society.

The title reveals the fact that two people are talking on the phone, so the beginning of the poem is on a positive note: The man is searching for a house and the land lady has named a considerable price, and the area where it is located is an impartial and not racially prejudiced. Also the man could enjoy his privacy as the land lady does not live under the same roof. The African man is ready to accept the offer, but maybe there has been a similar incident in his past, for he stops and admits to her that he is black, saying he prefers not to waste the time travelling there if she’s going to refuse him on that bounds.  
There is silence at the other end; silence which the black man thinks is the reluctant result of an inbred sense of politeness. However he is wrong because when she speaks again, she disregards all formalities and asks him to explain how dark he is. The man first thinks he has misheard but then realizes that that is not true as she repeats her question with a varying emphasis. Feeling as if he has just been reduced to the status of a machine, similar to the telephone in front of him, and asked to choose which button he is, the man is so disgusted that he can literally smell the stench coming from her deceptive words and see red everywhere around him. Ironically he is the one who is ashamed by the tense and awkward silence which follows, and asks for clarification thinking sarcastically that the lady was really helpful by giving him options to choose from. He suddenly understands what she is trying to ask, and repeats her question to her stating if she would like him to compare himself with chocolate, dark or light? She dispassionately answers and his thoughts change as he describes himself as a West African Sepia as it says in his passport. The lady remains quite for a while, not wanting to admit to her ignorance, but then she gives in to curiosity and asks what that is. He replies that it is similar to brunette and she immediately clarifies that that’s dark.  
Now the man has had enough of her insensitiveness. He disregards all constraints of formality and mocks her outright, saying that he isn’t all black, the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands are completely white, but he is foolish enough to sit on his bottom so it has been rubbed black due to friction. But as he senses that she is about to slam the receiver on him, he struggles one last time to make her reconsider, pleading her to at least see for herself; only to have the phone slammed on him.

Wole Soyinka uses two main literary devices to drive home the message of the poem. The first of the two is imagery. Right at the beginning, the imagery used to describe the mental image the man has of the woman: “lipstick coated, gold rolled cigarette holder piped”, just from listening to her voice shows one that he thinks that she is, socially speaking above him, from a higher social class.  
Then when he hears her question regarding how dark he is, he is so humiliated and angry that he sees red everywhere. The imagery of the huge bus squelching the black tar is symbolic of how the dominant white community treats those belonging to the minor black one.  
The next most evident use is that of irony. In the beginning of the poem, the African says that he has to “self-confess” when he reveals his skin color to the lady. The color of his skin is something that he has no control over, and even if he did, it is not a sin to be dark skinned, so the fact that the man feels ashamed and sorry for this is ironical and casts light on how ridiculous racism is that one should apologize or be differentiated against solely because of the color of one’s skin. Also, it seems almost comical that anyone should be so submissive when he has actually committed no mistakes.  
On the other hand, the lady is continuously described in positive terms, suggesting that she is of a good breeding and upper class. Even when the reader finds out that she is a shallow and racist person who exhibits extreme insensitivity by asking crude questions, the man seems to think that she is ‘considerate; and her clinical response to his question shows only ‘light impersonality.’ The repeated and exaggerated assertions of the woman’s good manners and sophistication drip with irony as her speech contradict this strongly.  
Also the basis of the woman rejecting to lease her house to the man is because of the prejudiced notion that African Americans are a savage and wild people. This idea is completely discredited by the ironical fact that throughout the poem the man retains better manners and vocabulary than the woman, using words such as “spectroscopic” and “rancid”, whereas she does not know what West African Sepia is and is inconsiderate in her inquiries. Using irony in this manner, Soyinka proves how absurd it is to judge the intellect or character of a man depending on the color of his skin only.

The poem deals with a foul subject, that of racism and prejudice, in a lighthearted, almost comical manner. A most important device which Soyinka has used to highlight this sense of racism, which was previously widespread in western society, is that of the telephone. Had the person been speaking face to face with the lady, this whole conversation would never have taken place. She would have either refused outright, or would have found a more subtle way of doing so. The whole back and forth about ‘how dark’ the man is wouldn’t have occurred. Thus the telephone is used to make the issue of racism clear and prove how nonsensical it really is.  
Written in an independent style and delivered in a passively sarcastic tone, this poem is a potent comment on society. Soyinka might be speaking through personal experience, judging by the raw emotions that this poem subtly convey: those of anger, rage, shame, humility and an acute sense of disgust at the apathy and inhumanity of humans who won’t judge a book by its cover but would turn down a man for the color of his skin. In today’s world, racism might be a dying concern; but that does not mean that discrimination against other minorities has been completely eradicated. Despite the progressing times, people continue to harbor prejudices and illogical suspicions about things they do not understand: may it be others ideals, religions or traditions and customs. Thus this poem remains a universal message for all of us, as Soyinka manages to convey just how absurd all prejudices are by highlighting the woman’s poor choice of rejecting the man just because he does not share the same skin color.  
‘Telephone Conversation’ is a favorite, both for its excellent use of rich language and the timeless message it conveys.

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