

Race and Ethnicity in the Poem “The Telephone Conversation”

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Abstract

This article deals with Race and Ethnicity. *The Telephone Conversation* is a poem written by Wole Soyinka which clearly depicts the theme racism. Racism means it is the difference of skin colour, eye colour, or difference of structure. There is a conversation between the landlady and a tenant, who is in need of a house for rent. The African tenant wants to live among whites. The turning point of the conversation is, when the tenant exposes his own identity as an African. Here the theme of Racism emerged through the cold and freaky voice of the white landlady. The landlady often used to ask the colour of the tenant. Though the tenant told her about his colour as brunette, she had the curiosity to know the actual colour of the tenant. Finally, the tenant burst out and continued the conversation in a different way, rather in a vulgar way. This poem clearly exhibits the theme Racism.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka, *The Telephone Conversation*, Racism, Marginalisation, Colonisation, Domination.

Afro-American literature is greatly focused on marginalisation. This poem “The telephone conversation” deals with the sorrows and sufferings of Africans who lived in the United States of America during colonisation. Racism is revealed through the claims and practices of one group of people who claims superiority over another. In the context of the poem under consideration here, it is a discrimination and domination of white people over people of other skin colours. In South Africa racism played a major role. People were separated according to their own prominent communities and these communities had their own churches, hospitals, schools, and other institutes and they were not allowed to marry from outside their race.

Racism and marginalisation are curses that have occupied the humankind. In this poem we find that the African tenant wants to have an identity and liberty to live among the white peoples.

The history of European dominance of Africa through military and economic strategies is a long history and is often bloody one. The 1880s marked the intensification of conflicts between European countries for the control of the regions of Africa. Especially prominent countries in the imperial project for the last part of the nineteenth and early

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twentieth century were France (especially in West Africa), Great Britain (East and South Africa, the Gold Coast), Belgium (the Congo), Spain (the Western Sahara), Italy (North Africa), and Germany (East Africa). The struggle for control of African territories was driven in part by the rich natural resources of the various regions of the continent as well as by a desire to control crucial routes for overseas trade. The political and economic tensions that circulated just below the surface of the struggle for Africa informed many of the international crises that led to World War I. The rush to colonize the Congo, the rebellions that threatened the building of the Suez Canal, and the seemingly perpetual battles over control of the Nile headwaters are three examples of many crises provoking incidents that are usually recognized as precipitating the political tensions that erupted into war in 1914.

Furthermore, the cultural impact of Colonialism was immense. The varied cultures of each African locality were subsumed by the culture of the country occupying that locality. In short, native Africans were treated as second-class citizens by the ruling class of European colonists. Thus, it is important to note that though Soyinka's poem explores the speaker's experiences of racism and displacement in a foreign country, that speaker would likely be subjected to similar experiences in his own birthplace as well.

In Britain, prior to the 1900s, there was often tension arising over governmental and cultural attitudes towards immigration. Originally these tensions grew from hostility towards peoples of a different culture and appearance, most notably towards members of the growing Jewish community and later towards immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe. Due to the tensions and concerns created by immigration, the British parliament decided to restrict immigration in 1905, a decision that has repercussions even today as the country continues to maintain very strong legislative control of immigration levels.

Following World War II, Britain suffered through a slow and often debilitating return from the economic hardships of the previous decades. The economy was able to rebuild, albeit slowly, and the signs of recovery proved a beacon to immigrants who were seeking refuge or a better lifestyle in the United Kingdom. Under the British Nationality Act of 1948, the British Government decided to embark on a major change in the law of nationality throughout the Commonwealth. All other Commonwealth countries, with the exception of Ireland, had their own British subject nationality status. Since the middle of the twentieth century, racial tensions have ebbed and flowed in Britain, driven in part by the economic climate of the day and by the realization that the large populations of different nationalities, notably South Asians, Africans, East Asians, and Eastern Europeans, have reconfigured Britain into a country populated predominantly by people with a foreign heritage.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, racial policies and trade practices were a central mechanism for controlling a disenfranchised work force comprised largely of Scottish and Irish workers. As immigrant populations expanded through the early twentieth century, so did the discriminatory conduct, which had to take into account the presence of an

increasing number of workers of Jewish heritage as well as immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe.

“The Telephone Conversation” is the poem about the marginalisation, slavery, racism and so on. The conversation between the black tenant and the white landlady in this poem represents racism and discrimination. The theme and the tone of the poem deal with the racial discrimination between the Caucasian and African tenant. In this poem, the African tenant wants to rent a house from the landlady during colonisation of white peoples. They had rules and regulations showing their hatred for dark complexion peoples. They thought that the dark complexion is vulgar and awful.

When the prospective tenant exposed that he was a dark complexioned person, suddenly the face and the voice the landlady changed became cold. By this we could clearly feel that the landlady was discriminating against the people of other races. Alliteration like clinical crushing was used to give more importance to the coldness in the landladies’ tone, when she knew that the man was an African.

The African tenant openly exposed that he was an African even though he knew that he couldn’t get a house for rent. The landlady asked about the actual colour of the black tenant repeatedly though the African explained about his features several times. The landlady raised the question about the race of the African.

He assumed her image to be with “lipstick-coated, long gold rolled cigarette-holder piped”.

Here the poet reveals the racism of the landlady. At a point, the tenant was upset and said that “Madam you should see the colour of my remaining part of my body like palm of my hand, soles of my feet are a peroxide bond. She examined his conscious of speech through the conversation

“how dark? ... I had not misheard...
Are you light
Or very dark? ... ”

The most horrible comparison of her view about racism is shown in the phrase “omnibus squelching tar.”

We could recognize the feelings of racism through the poem “The Telephone Conversation”.

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