

Linguistic analysis of wole soyinka's poem the telephone conversation

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Wole Soyinka's poem 'The Telephone Conversation' tethers on the paradoxical linguistic proclivities that hide and release racist preoccupations and the aggressive responses to it by an educated black man. Presented in a long single stanza, the poem makes use of the conversational free verse that reveals the thoughts and responses of the speaker to a landlady's silences and crisp queries. Soyinka gets rid of the conventional poetic devices and resorts to prosaic depiction of the whole event in poetic form. There are many run-on lines and capitalization of the whole utterances of the landlady used in order to stress the meaning of the action and conversation than to embellish it with metrical/musical patterns and rhymes. The focus is on the presentation of the event that leads the reader through seemingly simple conversations to the blunt, liberating end that shows how well the speaker identifies and responds to the innately racist disposition of the landlady. The single stanza form gives the poem an urgent, snappish character. The abrupt start, "The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent" prepares one for the subtle use of words by attributing a very complex attitude like indifference to the inanimate "location". The "self-confession" that the speaker refers to with regard to his African self is apt to surprise the sensitive readers. But the situation, where a white landlady is trying to find out more about her prospective tenant, calls for this. The speaker is seemingly unaware of her attitude and is rather confounded by her silence, which he presents as a sign of good breeding – perhaps to mislead the reader. When the voice comes, it asks the crucial question, "HOW DARK?" The speaker is evidently annoyed by this and her later simplification, "ARE YOU LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?" He mocks her implication, by referring to the

buttons in the public phone booth “ Button B. Button A”. He realizes that he is not left with many choices, and the answer would not matter much, taken into consideration the obvious racist outlook of the lady revealed through her laconic queries. His annoyance is further portrayed through the red color that he perceives in the booth, pillar-box and the double-tiered omnibus in the Leeds street. The lady simplifies the query by shifting the emphasis: “ ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT? When he explains that he is “ West African sepia” according to his passport, the lady explains that it is not clear to her what that means. It is at this point that the speaker loses all his patience and blurts out that he is brunette at his face, peroxide blond at the palms of his hands and soles of his feet, raven black on his bottom. This obviously offends and upsets the lady who cuts the line. Seemingly expectant of this reaction, the speaker rambles on to the mouthpiece, requesting the lady to come and see for herself, possibly his bottom.

There is not specific metrical pattern in the poem which relies on a free verse conversational narrative to present the harsh truth of racist shallow-mindedness that exists in an apparently civilized part of the world. However, Soyinka makes use of many subtle poetic devices to augment his work. “ Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled” exhibits a thoughtful instance of both alliteration and assonance. Referring to the public phone booth, he makes use of the curiously humorous expression “ public hide-and-speak”. The erudite expressions like “ spectroscopic / Flight of fancy” is used deliberately to reveal the sophisticated mind and thought patterns of the highly educated speaker who is annoyed to find himself at the receiving end of unjust racism. The syntax is transformed into real-life speech patterns, where broken

sentences are preferred to grammatically correct, full sentences. The capitalization of the landlady's utterances reveals naked her racist mindset. The compressed phrases, expressions and descriptions leave little space for editing, making the poem a significant artistic expression of fury that pervades a sensitive mind subjected to a socially unequal world view.