

## Telephone Conversation

By Wole Soyinka

Study Material for English (Compulsory Course) for 2<sup>nd</sup> sem (Regular)

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Wole Soyinka's **Telephone Conversation** is one of his most famous and anthologized poems which grapples with the issue of racism. A Nigerian playwright, poet and essayist, Soyinka's work has often been described as a powerful and serious agent to social change. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, the first African to be honoured in that category. Appearing initially in the collection *Modern Poetry from Africa* (1963), the poem **Telephone Conversation** is a provocative interrogation of racial prejudice which uses the subtleties of irony and sarcasm rather than anger and frustration to expose the veneer of racism behind the social civility of the western world.

The poem presents an imagined telephone conversation from a public booth between an African man (the speaker) and a white landlady with accommodation to rent. The setting is most likely London – a city which saw a huge influx of African immigrants throughout the post-war decades leading to a rise of racial tensions in the country. The poem begins with the speaker expressing satisfaction about the rent and location of the accommodation and is particularly pleased to know that the landlady did not live in the premises. The deal is about to be finalised when the speaker turns to the crucial moment of “self-confession” and warns the landlady that he is an African to avoid taking a trip only to be turned down simply for being a black. The speaker is being ironic in the use of the word “confession”, a word typically associated with the admission that one is guilty of a crime, to undermine the racist notion that being African

was an offence. With the revelation, the truth of racist conflict comes to the foreground and the entire dynamics of the poem changes. Clearly unwilling to have a tenant of colour, the landlady is, at the same time, trapped by the code of civil conduct that will not allow her to acknowledge what might be an uncivilized racial prejudice. Hence, there is an uncomfortable silence from her end and the speaker is completely taken off guard when the landlady dramatically asks him to explain how dark he is. At first, the speaker thinks he has misheard the question but when she repeats the same, he realizes that it is something very important for her to know before she allows him to rent her house. He is shocked and dumbfounded by her blatant racist question and feels reduced to being a button on the same phone wherein one has to choose between Button A, button B. He could feel the stench from her words and sees 'red' all round him: red booth, red pillar box, red double tiered omnibus.

The lady's insistent repetition of the same question or variations thereof highlights the tensions of race and discrimination in the poem. The more the speaker tries to answer the questions, the deeper the exchange slips into irony as the speaker answers the questions with double edged sarcasm which confuses rather than clarifies the situation. Oscillating between humour and irony, the speaker at first compares him to chocolate and finally declares his identity as "West African sepia", a term he knows will confuse the lady further. When she asks for clarification, the African caller replies that it is almost similar to being a brunette. He tries to hit her back by further adding that his face is "brunette", the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet are a "peroxide blond" while his bottom is "raven black". The speaker is being deliberately tongue-in-cheek in the comparisons here, but the point that the poet is trying to make is that race and identity are far too complex to be reduced to a simple,

binary choice between “dark” or “light”. Sensing that the lady might slam down the receiver, he pretends to make a final desperate plea to “see” for herself the varied colours of his body that he catalogues.

The poem is thus a dramatic dialogue in which a person of colour responds to the racial prejudices of a white woman with whom he is trying to negotiate rental accommodation. It is a critique on racism and related prejudices that can be seen lurking within the minds of countless individuals.

### **References**

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/educational-magazines/telephone-conversation>