

## **Unit I: Wole Soyinka-Telephone Conversation**

Wole Soyinka, the renowned Nigerian playwright, poet, and essayist, is a major voice in African literature and was the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. His poem Telephone Conversation, first published in 1963 in the anthology Modern Poetry from Africa, powerfully explores the absurdity and cruelty of everyday racism. Through a simple phone call between a Black man and a white British landlady, Soyinka exposes the deeply rooted racial prejudices in postcolonial British society.

The poem recounts a telephone conversation between a West African man and a white English landlady about renting a flat. The tone of the poem shifts between polite, sarcastic, ironic, and angry. The speaker begins the conversation with civility, but once racism emerges, he responds with biting sarcasm. His tone mocks the landlady's ignorance and challenges her condescending attitude.

Initially, everything seems straightforward, the price is acceptable, and the landlady does not live on the premises, which seems like a positive arrangement. However, aware of the possibility of racial discrimination, the speaker decides to be honest and informs her that he is African.

This revelation triggers a sudden shift in the conversation. There is silence that speaks volumes. Then comes the landlady's infamous and blunt question: "HOW DARK?" She then proceeds to ask more specifically.

"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.

" You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?"

Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light

Impersonality.

The speaker is stunned by the question, but he maintains his composure and replies with ironic humour. He compares his complexion to types of chocolate to "plain or milk" and finally describes himself as "West African Sepia," a term that confuses the landlady.

As she continues to press him for clarification, the speaker mockingly explains that while his face is "brunette," the palms of his hands and soles of his feet are "peroxide blond" and his backside has turned "raven black" from sitting.

Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see

The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet

Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused--

Foolishly, madam--by sitting down, has turned

My bottom raven black-

The poem ends with the implication that the landlady, stunned by his sarcastic defiance, hangs up the phone. Soyinka uses humour and irony to reveal the irrationality of racism. Silence in the poem is a powerful symbol. The pauses in the conversation reveal discomfort, hesitation, and unspoken prejudice.

Soyinka uses silence not as the absence of speech but as a loud statement about racial tension.

The main theme of the poem is racial discrimination. The speaker is not judged based on his character, manners, or qualifications, but solely on the colour of his skin. The landlady's question, "How dark?" reveals that even within racist attitudes, there exists a hierarchy based on skin tone, where lighter skin is considered more acceptable. The speaker's decision to reveal his racial identity upfront shows his self-awareness and dignity. Despite the landlady's offensive questions, he does not plead or attempt to fit into her biased expectations. Instead, he confronts her prejudice with wit and sarcasm.

Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* is a powerful critique of racism, both overt and subtle. It shows how discrimination can exist even in seemingly ordinary situations. The poem urges readers to recognise the cruelty and absurdity of judging people based on physical appearance. By giving voice to the speaker's intelligence, humour, and dignity, Soyinka humanises the victim of racism and exposes the ignorance of the perpetrator.