

Othering, Racism, and Stereotyping: A Postcolonial Analysis of Wole Soyinka's Telephone Conversation

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ABSTRACT

The research analyzes Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone Conversation" using the Postcolonial framework as a tool of analysis. Wole Soyinka's writings germinate the concerns of Postcolonial African identity from the rigid Western world lens. The Postcolonial approach views racism and colonialism as discursive practices. After years of freedom and racial struggle, African people are still far from realizing their individuality as a stable superior self. Racism is persistent in Postcolonial individual identity. African poetry has been influential in speaking out the heart of Africans in reclaiming their identity and self. The current research culminated and explored the relationship between Orient and the Occident; the relation between the black renter and the white landlady. The study has interpreted Soyinka's poem through the Postcolonial view of Othering, Stereotyping, and Racism, which threatens black identity in the poem's context. The analysis yields that prejudice towards the non-Western community prevails in social contact between the colonizer and the colonized.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Other, Black, Racism, Stereotype

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to analyze Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone Conversation" in light of a postcolonial viewpoint. The term "postcolonial" refers to the racial, social, ethical, and cultural representation of humans in modern times when countries and people became independent from long colonial rule; however, colonization by Europeans was initiated in the sixteenth century and culminated in the horror of the World War I blowing away eighty percent of the world as colonized (Rafi et al., 2018). Postcolonialism as a field studies social, cultural, and literary inheritance of colonial and colonized and also targets exploitation of colonized and hegemony of the imperial powers. The concept of Othering is complex and broadly refers to the "process by which imperial discourse creates its 'other'" however, Othering and Stereotyping are introduced in postcolonial studies by Gayatri Spivak and Homi k Bhaba, respectively (Mushtaq, 2010). The concept of Racism is a result of colonization by Europeans during the sixteenth century. Othering, Racism, and Stereotyping are the most critical concepts in Postcolonial theory. Its foundation can be traced back to the work of Franz Fanon in 1961 with his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Voicing*, which can be interpreted as a cultural resistance toward African nations (Barry, 2002). There are several frameworks to analyze a literary work from a Postcolonial perspective. To quote some, Orientalism, a groundbreaking work by Edward Said in 1979, flagged the notion of Postcolonial studies. Edward Said, the Palestinian-born cultural critic, regarded "Orientalism" as

Article History

Received:
August 10, 2022

Revised:
September 23, 2022

Accepted:
September 26, 2022

Published:
September 30, 2022

a Western ideological structure observed by the Western world, in which the West ontologically, hegemonically, and epistemologically dominates the East (Gosh, 2016). Orientalism encapsulates the notion of exteriority (Said, 1979). Wole Soyinka, born a Nigerian, is a playwright, poet, essayist, and connoisseur of African literature and shares the same standing with his compatriot Chinua Achebe in African world literature (Msiska, 2007). His writings march to expose intolerant colonial agenda towards minorities, mainly black ethnic community. Many of his plays and poetry are a public harangue used as a coercive tool to break Western world conventions of viewing Africans as demonic others on political, social, and cultural forums. Soyinka received a Nobel prize in literature in 1986 for his vigorous defense of embracing African heritage. Soyinka is a composer of several poems; *Abiku*, *Night*, *Civilian and Soldier*, *Dedication from a Moremi*, and *Telephone Conversation*. The Postcolonial theory discusses the effect of colonization on colonizers' culture and society and deals with retaliative discourse from the colonizers (Ashcroft, 2017). This research qualitatively explores Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone conversation" with postcolonial concepts such as Othering, Racism, and Stereotyping.

Research Questions

Q1: How are Othering and Racism reflected in the poem "Telephone Conversation"?

Q2: How Stereotyping of the Black Race is depicted in the poem "Telephone Conversation"?

Q3: What is the relation between Orient and Occident, and how does Wole Soyinka view the relation between the two in his poem "Telephone Conversation"?

Research Objectives

1. To explore elements of Othering and Racism in the poem.
2. To explore elements of Stereotyping of the Black Race in the poem.
3. To explore the relation between orient and occident, and the narrative of Wole Soyinka.

Literature Review

"Othering" was coined by Gayatri Spivak, implying the "process by which imperial discourse creates its other." According to Das (2005), colonizers consider the colonized as marginalized others. Therefore, in Postcolonial theory, Othering is the Western view of not recognizing the East as befitting Western culture and identity. The concept of "Other" has been a talk for centuries: Ancient Greece defines it as Barbarian, another Savage in the seventeenth century, and Radical in the twenty-first century. From the time of the conquest of the Americas in sixteenth-century Spain, the concept of "other" does not possess any uniformity; there are several types of others that vary in the manner they are treated (Dervin, 2016). The sociological paradigm views "Othering" as a discourse differentiating "us" and "them" in terms of political and moral values, where power is used to marginalize the other and make "self" superior. Othering often leads to stereotypes that she is not good as "we" are and bringing such marginalized representations in society, social, discourse, public forums, and media (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). Another concept imperative to Postcolonial theory is Stereotyping. According to Said (1978), Occidentals promote Othering by viewing the Middle East as mysterious, demonic, and inferior and representing them positively. According to Edger and Sedgwick (2007), "a stereotype is an oversimplified and usually value-laden view of the attitudes, behavior, and expectations of a group or individual." The works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha have marked the poststructuralist shift in postcolonial race theory. Such views, which may be deeply embedded in sexist, racist, or otherwise prejudiced cultures, are typically highly resistant to change. Bhabha explained the notion of "fixity," which gives rise to stereotypes where the other is rigidly unalterable and fixed (Childs & Williams, 2014). Stereotypes in the Postcolonial world are based on fixed notions of "others" as negative, inferior, evil, unprivileged, uncivilized, corrupt, and unequal. West usually considered Africans as Inferior blacks based on the notion of stereotyping. Ifowodo (2010), in his research "re-constructing identities, history trauma and healing in Postcolonial narrative", explored that Wole Soyinka's *Death and king's horseman* depicts the metaphysical trauma of African society, which goes beyond the perception of good and evil. Another researcher, Joseph (2015), explored how multiple African poetries reclaimed their lost culture and space.

According to social scientists' race is a social construct. Racism defines human beings as biologically and physically unique. With the expansion of Western colonialism, the term "racism" was used to validate dominancy, exploitation, and slavery against non-white people (Clair & Denis, 2015). Chavan (2021) researched "The Impact of Racial Discrimination in Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone Conversation" the researcher has concluded that racial discrimination is a manmade issue and appeals public to eliminate elements of racial differences from their minds. However, racial prejudice promotes hate and halts growth, as reflected in the discourse in the poem; it also impacts positive human relations.

The present research explores the African consciousness of self and the discourse of a white lady in Soyinka's poem Telephone Conversation and discusses how Racism, Othering, and Stereotyping persisted in colonizers' psychology. Such an attitude is considered a threat to colonized beings, making them insecure about their identity as humans. Soyinka's poem Telephone Conversation will be analyzed from the Postcolonial perspective of Othering, Racism, and Stereotyping. Telephone Conversation is a literary composition that cuts deeper into the heart of racism and prejudices towards black Africans. The poem unleashes the discourse between a white landlady and a black African renter, casting light upon hatred toward Africans (Suryani, 2013). A white lady who is probably of Western origin constantly mocks and humiliates African men for their race, culture, and ethnic identity. Analysis of this poem confers that African writers are constantly involved in unleashing the treatment of black Africans. Thus, the research will fill the gap in existing research by revealing that Racism, Stereotyping, and Othering are perils for black Africans despite their freedom from the colonized past. The poem is unexplored in the field of research, emphasizing the Postcolonial concepts. The research topic is not researched before, which is further considered a research gap to be filled through this qualitative research. The poem sheds light on the discriminated conversation between the Landlady and the Renter and criticizes how the Landlady ostracized the Black Renter through her discourse.

Research Method

The researcher uses the qualitative approach in this academic research using the Postcolonial framework. The primary source of data collection and sampling is Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone Conversation." The detailed textual analysis brings out the postcolonial issues such as Othering, Stereotyping, and Race Threats. The clash of cultural identities where one individual's ideology demeans others and considers himself superior is embedded within the title of postcolonial literature (Sawant, 2012). In the case of this research, contextual and textual analysis unleash the unstable bond between the colonizer and the colonized.

Data Analysis

Othering and Stereotyping the Black

"The landlady swore she lived

Off premises"

The fear and consciousness of the renter as a demonic other broke out in the poem's initial lines; when he claimed that "*The landlady swore she lived Off premises.*" It can be noted that the renter is afraid to face the lady as he is conscious of her treatment when she visits him. This is directly linked to prejudice toward the marginal African community. Despite having an independent financial status where a renter could easily rent a place for himself, he is hesitant, and her inner spirits speak of his fear. It might be considered that the renter is aware of the reservations.

"Madam, I warned,

"I hate a wasted journey - I am African."

The above lines dominantly prove the renter's consciousness of a marginalized self. He revealed his identity prior to the deal. He does not want his journey to be wasted because he knows he would be outcasted like Jews. "*I am African,*" finally, a claim by the renter proceeded by the silence on the Telephone. "*Silence. Silenced transmission of pressurized good-breeding*" the silence transmitted between the two. This silence has a very symbolic and significant meaning. Multiple questions can be

posed. Why is the landlady silent, knowing his black identity? Aren't blacks human? Do not they have equal rights to rent and live? Here begins the colonial notion of "Othering." The black community is like heaps of bones; frail creatures who do not belong to the center. The silence of the landlady has othered the black renter. Silence speaks louder than words and reveals what cannot be exposed through words. Mushtaq (2010) claimed that Othering is the ideology that describes whites as righteous, civilized, clean, and having only the right to live luxurious lives. Massy and Denton (2018) state that blacks and white were provided with the same privileges and facilities differently. The landlady's hold in her mind is still dubious, as it becomes difficult to believe such discriminated attitude toward others and a superior attitude toward the self. Renter also appears to be self-confessing as he says, "*Nothing remained but self-confession*", which is a true representation of blacks as inferior and exterior; they have no right to speak and, ultimately, withdraw. The poems trace back to the apartheid when blacks were given legal autonomy, but still, the sense of Othering and stereotyping continued in social and casual life. Neither the colonizer nor the colonized could seep through colonial racial discrimination. On the other hand, a white lady's lips are coated in lipstick and have a cigar pipe or cigarette between her lips, representing the West. The West has always seen itself elevated. The renter's confession shows his culpability; he is African; he is black; this is a heinous crime. The landlady could not take flight from her relentless stereotyping and blatantly asked, "*HOW DARK?*". As in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, blacks were referred to as moving like ants. The lady propagates discrimination based on color. His confession howls her; it is such a racist comment that it rules out the renter's cultural and racial identity. It is a common belief in stereotyping that blacks are considered negative, evil, and hellish. It became unbelieving to believe the renter as he says, "*I had not misheard*" he is traumatized by being judged based on his color; even his skin tone will decide whether he will be permitted to rent the apartment or not. The latter act of Othering states the sidelining of blacks in society by depriving them of basic living rights. The landlady constantly mocked him with sarcastic and ironic questions; she even compelled him to ask; if she meant that he was dark like chocolate or less dark like milk chocolate. The racial judgment became a norm from the beginning. Still, it gained dominance after the Eurocentric notion of racism, regardless of the stringent laws against it, which became the focus of many Postcolonial and non-European writers. Blacks are victims of Stereotypes and Othering, which is not their fault but the oriented attitude imposed on them (Mahmood, 2019). There is a psychological contest between the renter and the landlady; the renter is not ready to use the word "*Black*" for his identity. He utters, "*You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?*" this openly addresses the psychology of black Africans about their identities; they have become dubious about their color. He is not ready to accept himself as black; he resists; he howls; he screams to negate black skin color stereotyping. Renter's mind is in the abode of accepting the negative representation of black and accepting his black skin. Soyinka embarks on stating that he does not endorse stereotyping; he considers the behavior of masters as "*Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.*"

Racist conversation on the Telephone by the landlady

"West African sepia"

"Down in my passport."

Soyinka yells about the representation of East and West, representation of master and slave. He draws a comparison between the portrayal of both races. The white lady is assumed to be coated in lipstick with the cigar, whereas the renter struggles to prove his identity as not black but milk chocolate or white sepia. Soyinka makes his arguments strong "down in my passport" says the renter; the passport picture of every individual is supposed to be alike. Landlady and the renter have the same color on their passport, representing the equal status state on a legal basis. A passport is an official legal document that suggests equality for every citizen, whereby equality does not prevail in social institutions and the day-to-day hangout of different races. Othering is related to the marginalization of black on the state level, but the inculcated psyche of stereotyping prevails on cultural and social levels. "The Africans lost the capacity to develop and explore their independent trauma-free identity due to colonizers' attitude. With the process of decolonization, they try to unbind the traps of imperialism through culture, protest, poetry, etc." Wole

Soyinka protested against the psychological trauma that occurred as a result of racial discrimination. The renter suffers from a psychological threat; he suffers from reclaiming his identity. The poem is a discourse between the master and the slave. Landlady belongs to "good-breading," but her words are rancid. As Said writes, the present status of colonizers mirrors the history of colonization. It would be suspectable to ignore the cruelty of the West in shaping the present state of the colonizer. Therefore, the relation between the colonizer and the colonized cannot be interpreted from a unilateral perspective (Hamadi, 2014, para.10). Hence, the conversation between the renter and the lady is ingrained in the colonial behavior of the West. The ideology of the Western master has influenced the landlady, and the Postcolonial trauma influences the renter in black Africa. Renter is reluctant; he is pleading with the lady to recognize her identity as he asserts, "*Facially, I am Brunette, but madam, you should see the rest of me, Palm of my hand, soles of my feet.*" These lines openly criticize Western behavior as the renter implores to watch his sole and palms because even the blackest skin has a white sole and palm. He was aware; his skin color would not be recognized as sometimes he explained his skin tone as milk chocolate and sometimes as Brunette. Lady could not stop her investigation of the skin color "THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" Therefore, he ended up urging the lady to see his sole and palm. The West is like a scientist in a lab who dissects the frogs; similarly, the lady dissected the dignity of the black caller. The paradox is that the lady rules him out without seeing him based on the preconceived oriental image. The conversation between the landlady and the man is the conversation between a prejudiced-stuffed mind and a racial discrimination victim (Chavan, 2021). Moreover, the renter is slapped by the thunderclap from a lady "*One moment, madam! Sensing Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap About my ears*" "*Madam,*" the lady shuts the phone without welcoming his explanations; she considers him negligible, and his identity is nominal. The sensory discourse exposes the ruthless treatment of the West towards the East. The poem depicts the bigoted contact between the orient and the occident. There is a strong association between African history and Postcolonial theory as both look at how white Western thoughts dominated non-white culture. According to Spivak (2003), subalternity results from material differences and real conditions among different groups, which we witness in the poem's context. Gayatri Spivak, in her acclaimed work, "Can the Subaltern Speak," highlights the portrayal of third-world individuals in Western discourse and sheds light on the powerlessness of such individuals to express themselves (Hamadi, 2014, para.11). The latter mentioned dilemma is evident in Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation."

Conclusion

According to Altman (2020), post-colonial writers tend to divert attention to the trauma, mental prison, social injustice, and racism faced by non-European and non-white communities. African literary figures played an important role in exposing the dictatorship, which sprang up in their social contact even after the legal autonomy of the black race. Telephone Conversation stands as a symbol of exploitative colonialism dominated by racism, othering, and stereotyping. Wole Soyinka's relentless use of the words "*Madam*" and "*Dark*" in the poem is imperative to the dichotomous relation between Orient and the Occident. Wole Soyinka, in the poem, protests against colonial rule and the discrimination faced by blacks. The poem is a psychological narrative of colonizers' practice of othering and stereotyping the black man. The elements of othering, racism, and stereotyping are evident in The lady's discourse which is rancid and disgorges racist remarks by developing a sense of inferiority in the renter. The renter struggles to declare and claim his identity; the marginal colonial influence psychologically suppresses him. Wole Soyinka epitomizes the threat caused by the post-colonial practice of Othering and Stereotyping based on racial discrimination. According to Young (2020), post-colonialism attempts to change people's views to propagate equal relations between them. As a post-colonial writer, Soyinka embarks on changing the Western view of the East, mainly Africa, through the poem Telephone Conversation. The conversation between the two is a nightmare, and this attitude must be vindicated and changed.

Acknowledgments

None

Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.

Funding Source

The authors received no funding to conduct this study.

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Appendix

Wole Soyinka

(b.1934)

"Telephone Conversation"

The price seemed reasonable, location
 Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
 Off premises. Nothing remained
 But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,
 "I hate a wasted journey--I am African."
 Silence. Silenced transmission of
 Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
 Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
 Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was foully.
 "HOW DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT

OR VERY DARK?" Button B, Button A.* Stench
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It *was* real! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis--
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?"
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. "West African sepia"--and as afterthought,
"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent

Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
"DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
"THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
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--One moment, madam!"--sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears--"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather
See for yourself?"