

14. Half-caste by John Agard

POET

John Agard (1949-Present)

John Agard was born in British Guyana. He is a playwright and poet. He began writing poetry while studying for his A Levels in English, French and Latin. He later taught these languages while working in a local library. He also worked as a journalist for the "Guyana Sunday Chronicle" and published two books. Agard's father moved to London and he came to join him with his partner Grace Nichols (a famous poet in her own right) in 1977. In 2012, Agard was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

BACKGROUND

Agard's father is from the Caribbean, while his mother is Portuguese. This means he is mixed race. When Agard moved to Britain in 1977 he encountered the racist word "half-caste" which angered him. The poem takes issue with the prevalent use of this word in 1970s and 1980s British society.

SUMMARY

The poem responds to a person who has called the speaker "half-caste". The speaker goes on to explain to the racist the positive things in the world which are produced by mixing things. Next, he shows how ridiculous the term is by imagining his body is only half formed or "half-caste". Finally, he concludes with an invitation to the racist to come back tomorrow, this time with a whole and open mind, and find out who he really is.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem "Half-caste" is an offensive term used to describe people of mixed race. The word "caste" comes from the Hindu class system in which individuals are born into different levels in society from which they can never escape. At the bottom of the caste system are the so-called 'untouchables' a group of individuals who, by accident of birth, are considered to be impure and with whom others refuse to associate or to employ. Thus "caste" refers to a notion of degrees of purity which have no moral or actual basis. From the 16th Century onwards, the word came to mean race or breed.

It is interesting that in Portuguese, the word "casta" means lineage or line of inheritance, while 'casto' means pure or unmixed. As Agard's mother is Portuguese, it may be that this meaning of purity also forms part of his perception of the word. By adding the prefix 'half' to 'caste' the term becomes one of abuse, suggesting that a mixed race person is only half formed, half made, and half pure. It also implies that it is acceptable to categorise other people in a 'caste' or class system which makes certain individuals superior and well-treated and others inferior and ill-treated.

The word was used, not only by racists in the 1970s, but also by people who were, possibly, ignorant of its offensive meaning. By giving the poem this title, Agard wants to shock the reader and make us think about how the words we use can hurt others.

The poem is written in free verse with no fixed rhyme scheme or rhythm. This expresses the speaker's off the cuff angry words. He just has to confront the racist. The poem is also

written largely without punctuation, forming one long sentence. This also means that all the lines run on from each other, using the technique of enjambment. This could suggest that the poet is breaking the rules of modern society and doing something different by standing up for himself. It could also underline the idea that his anger has made him speak without pause.

The poem is spelt phonetically. This means many of the words are spelt in the way a person with a Caribbean accent would pronounce them. This is a really clever technique. First, it makes clear that the poet is not ashamed of who he is and what his voice sounds like. Secondly, by writing the words phonetically, the poet forces the reader to speak with his voice. This places us completely in his shoes; we cannot help but empathise with him. We are made to imagine what it feels like to be mixed race and to be called 'half-caste'.

The first line of the poem begins with "Excuse me". This gives the poem a sense of hearing the voice of a real person who is responding to an encounter which has just happened. This is dramatic and exciting. The phrase "Excuse me" is at first sight a polite term. It is almost a stereotypically British comment. However, here the term is being used to confront an implied speaker who has presumably just called the poet "half-caste" which is not a courteous thing to do. The tone of the phrase is angry and outraged. The speaker wants the racist to stop and explain his words. The speaker goes on to say "standing on one leg I'm half caste". Here the racist is being confronted with an image which shows the ignorance of his words – the idea that if the poet is 'half-caste' then he is half made or only using half his body.

In the next stanza, the poet goes on to demand that the implied speak "Explain yusef". This is a direct instruction, requiring the racist speaker to account for their words. However, the racist's voice is not allowed to reply. Cleverly, the poet silences him or her. Instead, the poet supplies an answer himself, dominating the poem and showing his superior intellect and wit. The phrase "Explain yusef" is repeated four times throughout the poem. In this way, it forms a refrain. This keeps reminding the reader that the poet is not going to give up questioning the racist. It emphasizes the relentless demand of the poet for the racist to justify the use of his offensive term.

The poet provides a series of metaphors for being mixed race which are positive and, sometimes, highly cultured. First, he says that the Spanish artist, Picasso, who is widely considered to be the greatest painter of the 20th century, produces "a half-caste canvas" when he "mix red an green". This flaunts the poet's knowledge and shows that pictures which are sold for millions of pounds in the art world are made up of mixed paints. He also compares the idea of mixing races with the famous Russian composer Tchiakovsky who "mix a black key wid a white key" to make "a half-caste symphony". Again, this shows that mixed things are not negative; they actually form the art and music which the world most loves and prizes.

The poet uses a metaphor from British weather to show that being mixed race is like the typical climate of England which is usually produced by blending clouds and sunshine. He says "England weather nearly always half-caste in fact some o dem cloud half-caste till dem overcast so spiteful dem dont want de sun pass". This image makes fun of the British obsession with the weather, showing that there is nothing more typically British than mixed, overcast days. The poet also personifies the clouds. He describes them as "spiteful". This means they are cruel and unkind. Indeed, he says they are so mean that they refuse to let the sun shine. This invites comparisons between the cruel British clouds and the mean British racists. Both of them won't allow the sun to shine or the positivity of the world to enter.

The anger the speaker feels erupts into the poem when he uses an exclamation and a swear word. The poet says “ah rass”. “ah” is an exclamatory word which shows an outburst of emotion. Usually, “ah” also implies that the speaker is tired of something. This suggests the poet is bored and annoyed by having to educate the racist in the true value of mixed things. “rass” is a Creole term, meaning ‘arse’. The expletive is in a different language to show the speaker’s racial identity emerging. This suggests his personal anger, but it also underlines that the racist does not know anything about him and does not even understand his language, while the poet is able to argue eloquently in his.

The poem repeats the refrain “Explain yusef” as the speaker moves on to the final section of the verse. Now, the poet gives up trying to educate the racist through the clever imagery of mixing things, and instead pokes fun at the term “half-caste”. The poet describes what a half made or half formed man might look like and uses this image to show how ludicrous the racist term is. The poet extends this metaphor, depicting the “keen half of mih ear” and the “keen half of mih eye” with which he is listening to and watching the racist. The word “keen” has two meanings; it can mean eager or enthusiastic, but it can also mean sharp. Here the poet is using both these meanings. He is letting the racist know that he is listening to and watching him with enthusiasm because, unlike the racist, he wants to find out about him. It also shows that the poet is scrutinizing the racist sharply or with great precision. This is quite intimidating. While the racist has made a snap judgement about the poet and categorised him with the term “half-caste”, the poet has done the opposite. He has put the racist under a microscope to be judged and is searching to find out what kind of man he is.

The image of the half formed man is also used to show disrespect towards the racist as the poet offers him only “half a hand” to shake. This is making fun of the idea of being half formed, while also implying that he dislikes the racist so much, he won’t shake his hand properly. The poet goes on to depict the logical conclusion of calling someone “half-caste” or half formed; he says that when he sleeps he “close half a eye” and dreams “half a dream”, and when the “moon begin to glow” he only casts “half a shadow”. This suggests how silly the notion of being half a person is. It also underlines that the term reduces a mixed race person to someone without the right to a dream or even enough substance to form a shadow on the floor.

Having educated and humiliated the racist, the poet demands that he “must come back tomorrow”. This is an imperative, placing the poet in a dominant position over the racist; for all his rudeness, the racist has been mastered by the person he despises. The poet reminds the racist that next time they meet he must come with the “whole of yu eye an de whole of yu ear an de whole of yu mind”. This throws back on to the racist the term “half-caste”, suggesting that all the time it was actually him who was the half formed one because he only looked at the poet with half his brain. Therefore, he did not see all of him.

The final stanza of the poem concludes by telling the racist that when they meet again he will tell him “de other half of my story”. Thus the poet makes clear that the racist has judged him without knowing him; this is the meaning of pre-judice. He is giving the racist a second chance to find out the whole individual.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Search for my Tongue” – provides interesting comparisons with an individual who feels conflicted because their identity is a mixture of two languages.

“Poem at Thirty-Nine” – provides a juxtaposition with another poetic voice who speaks defiantly and proudly about her identity.