The danger of a single story

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Cultures are everywhere. One can find different cultures within a country, between neighboring cities, and most prominently between countries. Each of these cultures will produce literature based on both their own culture and probably literature based on other cultures. What people read about a culture tends to influence what they think about the people in that culture. In her short testimony on ted talks, Chimamanda Adichie discusses her experience growing up in Nigeria surrounded by foreign literature and her struggle to find the voice of her people. Three of biggest dangers of a single story that Adichie presents in her presentation are the following: first the lack of literature generated from within a culture can create the idea that one’s own culture does not belong in literature, second that single stories create inaccurate stereotypes of the people within a culture and third the representation of people as being one thing repeatedly makes them into that thing.

Literature brings color and diversity to human kind which some would argue is “the spice of life”. The effects of exclusively foreign literature in one’s culture can create the idea that one’s culture does not belong in books. In her Presentation Adichie discusses how, when she started writing, her stories where full of characters based on the English culture. She did not feel that African culture belonged in books until she found writers of African descent. The effects of not seeing her own people within the stories she read unknowingly cause her to assume that literature was restricted to a culture. Fox and Short (2003) stated that the lack of Literature written about a people group from within, that is not a true representation of their traditions, can hinder them from receiving an accurate public/self-representation (as cited in Brooks, W, McNair, J.C, 2009). Even at a young age Adichie felt the effects of the lack of literature written from within her culture, and it caused her to see herself as not worthy of appearing in the pages of a story. When Adichie eventually moved to the United States she faced a similar type of oppression but this time in the form of stereotypes.

The ideas that people form about a people group are directly correlated with the stories that they are exposed to. Adichie found herself living with a roommate that had very concrete idea about who she was. These ideas did not line up with what she had experienced, living in her home land, and did not accurately represent her at all. The Writings written from an outsider’s perspective can be, as Williams (1997) argued that the majority of literature pertaining to the traditions of a people can be very selective and are chosen to emphasis particular stereotypes while others are excluded to further these stereotypes (as cited in Brooks, W, McNair, J.C., 2009). It is very harmful to receive information from illegitimate sources and Adichie felt the effects of this immediately. The stereotypes formed through the single representation of her people were not simply a matter of misinformation with little other effect.

All people are shaped by what people attribute to them. Giving young boy’s trucks and girl’s dolls is a simple example of how the attachment of attributes to a person constructs who they are. Dane Morrison talks about an outsider’s writings on the American Indian and how they perpetrated myths about them, creating silly or often harmful stereotypes thought to be true by American society (as cited in Stewart, M.P., 2002, p. 181). American Indians often portray themselves in American movies, as a result of the director’s wishes, as simple minded or rather amazed by the technology of the white man. Adichie felt pressure to be a certain way because of her African Ancestry. Thankfully she is a very intelligent and analytical artist who does not conform to expectations but rather embarrasses her roots and traditions, helping to form a new idea in the minds of people around her of what it means to be African.

Adichie is very passionate about her origins, and is a great example of what can come of educating people on the dangers of a single story. By creating literature about her culture she allows African children to see themselves as worthy of literature, through willingness to stand up against false stereotypes she empowers the African immigrant and by displaying the true nature of African culture and not conforming to what people expected of her Adichie begins to break down the invisible barriers of segregation.

References

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