The Dangers of a Single Story

Joseph Thornton

Sacramento state

The world is full of diverse human societies with cultures specific to each. Culture is related to beliefs and behaviors exhibited within a particular group. Differences in culture between countries may come to mind, yet there are also cultures specific to states or cities or even within cities (subcultures). Literature that originates from a particular society is often clearly based on the culture of that society, yet it is common for a society to distribute literature based on a different culture as well. Culture-specific literature often influences the reader’s regard for, or perception of the individuals within 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. Adichie presents three of the biggest dangers of a “single story”; one danger coming from people viewing cultures with no literature of their own as cultures that do not belong in literature, and the two other dangers coming from single stories creating inaccurate stereotypes of the people within a culture and using repeated representations of people as being “one thing”, essentially making them into that “one thing”.

Literature has the power to bring color and diversity to human life. Exclusively foreign literature within a specific culture may make individuals of that culture believe their own beliefs, behaviors, and ideas don’t belong in books. Adichie discusses in her presentation how her stories where full of characters based on the English culture when she began writing. She did not have the conviction that African culture belonged in books until she discovered writers of African descent. The absence of her own people within the stories she read impacted her in a way that caused her to assume that literature was restricted to one culture. Fox and Short (2003) stated that the lack of literature written about a people group from within a given culture, or literature 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 impact of this within her own life, seeing herself not worthy to appear in the pages of a story. Unfortunately this oppression did not end when she eventually moved to the United States, but came in the form of stereotypes.

The ideas that people form about a different society are directly correlated with the stories that they are exposed to. Adichie found herself living with a roommate that possessed a concrete idea of who she was. These ideas did not line up with what she had experienced or accurately represent her at all. Ideas formed based on literature or writings from an outsider’s perspective can be harmful. Adichie felt the impact of this immediately after moving from her own country. Williams (1997) argued that the majority of literature pertaining to the traditions of a people can be very selective and are chosen to emphasize particular stereotypes while others are excluded, furthering these stereotypes (as cited in Brooks, W, McNair, J.C., 2009). The stereotypes formed through the single representation or “single story” of Adichie’s people were more than just misrepresentations. She joined the many individuals around the world whose lives have been negatively impacted by stereotypes.

Individuals are shaped by what other people indicate they should be like. Giving a young boy a truck and a young girl a doll is a simple example of how the attachment of attributes to a young person can construct 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). Based on the inclination of the director, American Indians often portray themselves in American movies as simple-minded, or amazed by the technology of the white man. Adichie also felt a pressure to be a certain way because of her African Ancestry. However, fortunately she is an imaginative artist who does not conform to expectations but rather embraces her roots and traditions. Her confident approach is helping to form more accurate ideas in the minds of those around her of what it means to be African.

Adichie is passionate about her culture and a genuine example of what can result from 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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