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Dismantling the Single Story

I lived most of my life near the Kaneshie Market, in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. Similar to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story in her "The Danger of a Single Story," my parents believe I started writing as early as they could remember. Although not specific enough, I would also rather not disagree with them. After all, they still keep framed pieces of my letters to them on their birthdays, silver wedding, and other special events. They still keep the poems and stories I had made for them, as bad as they might have been as of then. Those times in my early childhood, I wrote stories about nuclear families and their vacation trips to wonderful places such as Disneyland. I wrote about rollercoasters and the four seasons. My characters were nothing like the people in Kaneshie. Yet, just like Adichie, as a child I had never lived outside my home country. I had never lived outside of Kaneshie or Ghana for that matter. We only had two seasons, the wet and the dry. And I lived with my extended family with several of my cousins. We had no vacation trips, no Disneyland. There were more crucial things to spend money on, and sometimes vacations meant more work than fun.

Just like Adichie, because I only read Western books, I formed the perception that all stories had to be written in the way the Western ones were written. All characters had to be just like those in my foreign books. Fortunately for me, one of our radio stations introduced a national reading project. This reading project would provide African story books at a reasonable

cost and give rewards to those who could answer questions on them. Those were the favorite moments of my childhood. My father would return home late from work with the book for the month from the radio station. Of course he would add the incentive of not getting caned for reading. Unlike my sister who would sometimes choose the cane, I loved reading these books. African books by African writers became my definition of amazing. *Weep not Child. The Dancing Money Box. Things Fall Apart. No Sweetness Here. Ananse In the Land of Idiots. Dilemma of A Ghost.* Just a few of the books I read and that I loved and that I remember. Similar to Adichie's experience, the Western books I read only taught me a single definition of what writing meant. They taught me what my characters were supposed to be like, the kinds of seasons there were and what my stories were supposed to be about. In the African books I read, I realized that there was not one way of telling a story. These books were about people I could relate more to. People who played Oware, a Ghanaian pebble game. People who mostly grew up sharing small spaces with cousins. People who were simply much more like I was.

In Kaneshie, we lived in a decent home. My father had sold plantain before. My mother had sold drinks on her head to make just enough money for school. They both worked very hard to thrive. That means for my cousins, siblings and me, school was our priority. Going to school was not an option, and doing well in school was a requirement. It was an expectation. Hearsay made us believe that if we did not study hard enough, we would be "poverty-stricken like those in the Kaneshie market." A place which was filled with what Theresa Ennin in *Makola*, one of my favorite Ghanaian poems about the busiest market in Ghana, would describe as "Urchins and school dropouts," "Leaders and teachers yet unborn." Just like Adichie thought about Fide, her family's house worker, my idea of the market woman was that she was poor. That was the only

story I had heard of her. When she gave me a free meal one day after a number of encounters, I became stupefied. Was she not the same poor woman? The reason why I had not thought of her as a kind woman was because all I had heard about her was that she was poor, and that that was all she was. That was the “single story” I had heard of the market woman. By assuming that the market woman could be nothing but poor, I made one story of her become the only story I knew of her.

Several years later, I recollect this lesson as I leave Ghana to go to college in the United States, just like Adichie did when she left Nigeria to go to college in the United States. My American friend was shocked that I was a school editor, and that I had done all my work in English. What baffled him most was when I told him that English was the official language of Ghana. Just like Adichie’s American roommate, this friend was surprised I spoke English so well. My friend’s assumption of me was that because I was African, I had lived a pitiful life, the life shown by American TV shows of Africans in general. My friend also believed that since I had lived my whole life in Ghana, I had not been exposed to most of the infrastructure and technology America had. My friend thought of Africa as a country in which people lived the same lives. In many ways, Adichie’s story felt very similar to mine. We both experienced the consequence of people’s stereotypical understandings of Africa. Just like Adichie, in my home country, I had never consciously identified myself as African though I have also fully embraced that identity. In the U.S. I have suddenly become an “expert” on Africa. In late night philosophical discussions, I am supposed to know all about Rwanda and Ethiopia and be able to translate some Swahili words into English. In fact, I know little about these countries and I speak

Ga, Twi, and Fante, which are all Ghanaian local languages. I am, however, trying to add Swahili to that list.

As time went on, I began to understand my American friend's preconceived notions about me, just as Adichie understood of her roommate's response of her. If I had grown up in America, and all I knew about Africa was from TV shows, I too would think of Africa as a place of war, sickness, hunger and poverty. Certainly, Africa has its problems. The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs's 2017 Revision report explains that the African population is rapidly increasing beyond available resources and is expected to double in 2050. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) data released in October 2019 also explains that every 2 minutes a child in Africa dies of Malaria and that Sub-Saharan African children account for most of the deaths. Several university graduates do not have jobs. I do not attempt to deny the reality of the problems Africa faces. I also do not isolate myself from these problems. In the era of 'Dumsor,' the name Ghanaians have given to power crisis, my friends and I as well as several other students had to use torch lights or candles to study for our national examination. Each day, to get to school, I had to take a 'trɔtrɔ' ride along some of the untarred and bumpy roads of Accra, then after, walk quite a distance to school. Although all of this is part of my story, it should not be the only story about me. To do so would ignore all the fun times I had with friends, all the gatherings around fire to talk, all the journeys we took and the jokes we made about each other, as well as the great bonds we made and even all the shared memories and shared struggle which at times became reference points in our enjoyable conversations.

Perhaps if I had not formed only one notion of the market woman, and had been at least told that she could be nice at times, I would not have been shocked at her kind gesture. After I

had asked her how come she was so different from the rest, she asked me what I meant by “different” and what I meant by “rest.” The truth is that I had no response to her questions. I realized that the notion that she was a market woman and therefore had to fit into a category of people reduces her humanity, and could be discouraging to any one in a category to move out of the defined characteristics of the group. That makes me wonder about what would change if the world was shown positive views of Africa. People would see the beautiful scenery, rivers and natural resources. They would see places like Kilimanjaro, the highest point of elevation in Africa, the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, and Nzulezo, a village on the surface of Lake Tandane in Ghana. Poverty would no longer be the single story of Africa. Neither would disease nor suffering. Then perhaps everyone one would think of Africa differently. They would learn about ‘Kpanlogo’ and ‘Azonto,’ some African dances and may appreciate African songs and the rich cultural heritage. African people would be more incentivized to create a better society since they are no longer perceived as possessing only negative attributes.

My story cannot represent the diversity of stories of Africans or Ghanaians or even friends who have shared similar memories and struggles. My story is literally a single story, one story. When we choose one story and make it the only story about a group of people we risk forming a biased opinion about them which dehumanizes them and which could be a danger to not only those people, but to us as people who rely on information to make our decisions and interactions. Even this story about myself does not provide all the details about my life, all my experiences, my interests, and the kinds of skills I possess. In the very fundamental unit of society, the individual, no single story can capture the actual story.