

Unit 7 CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

The Danger of a Single Story

Part 1

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that **my poor mother**¹ was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how **lovely**² it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of **ginger beer**³ because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of

¹ The adjective "poor" is often used to offer someone sympathy in a situation. Adichie is partly making fun of herself here as she sympathizes with her mother who had to read all her young stories.

² The adjective "lovely" describes something pleasant. It is more popularly used in British English than American English.

³ The drink "ginger beer" is usually a non-alcoholic, carbonated, sweet drink. There are also alcoholic versions. In the U.S., a somewhat similar drink is called "ginger ale."

chocolate, whose **kinky hair could not form ponytails**,⁴ could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the **unintended consequence**⁵ was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

Part 2

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in **domestic help**,⁶ who would often come from nearby rural villages. So the year I turned eight, we got a new **houseboy**.⁷ His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: **a single story of catastrophe**.⁸ In this single story, there was no possibility

⁴ The adjective "kinky" is commonly used to describe black or African hair. By pointing out that her hair cannot go in a "ponytail," Adichie is illustrating again how different she was from the white protagonists in the stories she read.

⁵ An "unintended consequence" is not a primary one, but secondary.

^{6 & 7} Adichie uses both the words "domestic help" and "houseboy" to refer to someone who lives in her home to help with cleaning, cooking, and other chores. The former is the more generic, accepted term to describe such a job. The term "houseboy" was likely a common colloquialism when Adichie was young.

⁸ The "single story of catastrophe" that she describes refers to the problems of poverty, illness, and famine that are often associated with Africa.

of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. . . .

But I must quickly add that I, too, am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The **political climate**⁹ in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were **fleeing**¹⁰ the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind: the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans, and I could not have been more ashamed of myself. So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

. . . But to insist on only these negative stories is to **flatten my experience**¹¹ and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. . . . I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

. . . I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories. My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called **Farafina**¹² Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don't have anything in their libraries, and also of organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories. Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. . . .

⁹ The term "political climate" is used to describe the populace's general attitude, and surrounding tensions, in regards to a certain political topic or social issue at the time.

¹⁰ To "fleece" someone means to dishonestly take money from them.

¹¹ Adiche is likely using the word "flatten" here to describe how stereotypes make our experiences one-dimensional.

¹² Farafina's website is farafinatrust.org.