

Emma Couch

Dr. Karolyn Steffens

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The Harm of Single Stories and How to Fight Them in World Literature

The struggle between accurately identifying and stereotyping groups of people is ongoing. Often, people around the world are categorized as being one thing and one thing only, and this contributes to the idea of a single story. Single stories, as defined by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are stereotypes enforced by an agenda informed by one's cultural biases. In other words, they are intentional and overall detrimental to typically marginalized communities. Although stereotypes are not inherently negative, single stories capitalize on their cultural biases to the point that people are defined by what makes other people different than the cultural norm rather than their shared humanity. Adichie asserts that the problem with single stories is not that the stereotypes are untrue but rather that they are incomplete. Essentially, single stories fail to account for the complexities and diversity of individuals within communities. This phenomenon is seen worldwide both in recent and historical times.

Although it is agreed that single stories are harmful, the approach to dispelling these stories is divided. Some lean on the side of pessimism, arguing that single stories are too powerful for us to be able to adequately combat them. Others, like those examined in this paper, however, argue that single stories can be redefined by the very people who are being oppressed by them. This argument is instated by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story," Iryna Feofanova in her poem "The Hatred," Bisan Owda's TikTok, and Gabriel García Márquez's short story "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings." Each of these

texts are accompanied by works of criticism and/or context within my research. Overall, the debate about single stories is not whether or not they are harmful, it is about how to undo the harm they cause. By seeing single stories for what they are, one can not only shift their personal outlook on marginalized groups but also shift this view societally. Though the individual sources in this paper have different ideas on how exactly to oppose single stories, they all agree that, as important as it is for individuals to share their stories, having a global audience who is willing to listen makes all the difference.

Adichie, a Nigerian writer, defines single stories and discusses how they impacted her life in her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story.” In her talk, Adichie discusses how single stories shaped her childhood and caused her to have a unilateral view of what literature is. She states that only being exposed to British and American literature as a child caused her to believe literature itself has to be something she cannot identify with (1:46). This lack of identity is a hallmark of single stories. As Adichie emphasizes, “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” (9:14). Essentially, single stories cause issues with identity because they completely erase the complexities of character everyone possesses. She says this to say that single stories are inherently built on stereotypes. Stereotypes, by definition, are when you limit your perception of a group of people to one characteristic, and single stories are no different. Additionally, by saying “over and over again,” Adichie points out that single stories are repeatedly perpetuated which adds to the harm they cause. Single stories are not accidental misperceptions and misrepresentations of people, they are repeated intentional mischaracterizations. One such mischaracterization Adichie has experienced firsthand as a Nigerian woman is the stereotype surrounding Africa that is frequently perpetuated by the West. Africa is often classified as

uncivilized, wild, dangerous, and a multitude of other harmful stereotypes. Robin Brooks, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh, identifies this stereotype and the work that is already being done to combat this. Brooks states, “Combating the effects of such a negative mind frame, African women writers engaging commonplace stereotypes is significant to the enterprise of self-liberation and self-definition” (24). Basically, she is saying that, in order to overcome stereotypes about Africa and African people, these stereotypes must first be recognized for what they are: false and prejudiced. Defining what a single story is allows the oppressed to take power back from the oppressor, which is something Adichie and Brooks both agree on. Although Brooks focuses specifically on African women writers, she and Adichie have a similar mindset in terms of optimism about society’s ability to fight oppression and single stories. They both agree that if a global effort is made to share more stories that power can be taken back from the oppressor and, as a result, single stories as a whole.

One major humanitarian crisis that also relates to the idea of stereotyping and is still ongoing today is the Russia-Ukraine war. This conflict has had a profound impact on Russians and Ukrainians alike, and one Ukrainian woman, Iryna Feofanova, shares her personal experience. She writes about her life shifting from being a journalist and script writer to having to flee Ukraine with her daughter as her husband fights in the war. She discusses her emotions surrounding this major life change in her poem, “The Hatred,” by emphasizing, “And even if I find the place for hatred to discharge/ Then won’t it leave the blankness in my heart?” (11-12). In this quotation, Feofanova is saying that even if she finds a way to rid herself of the hate she is harboring it still will not be replaced with optimism but, rather, emptiness. As the name suggests, Feofanova’s poem is centered around the feelings of hate she has toward the war and how it has worsened her life specifically. There is an important distinction to be made about the form of

hate Feofanova is experiencing, however. In Brooks' writing, she mentions how single stories can lead to self-hatred by expressing, "I contend that [people] not only become that one thing to others; they can become that one thing in their own opinion as well. Self-rejection and self-hatred can be effects of constant degradation" (24). In this quotation, Brooks is zeroing in on how consistent exposure to a single story can literally change the way people view themselves for the worse. Feofanova, on the other hand, is expressing hate for the situation she is in. She has had her entire identity stripped due to the war, and this sentiment is shared by Ukrainians as a whole. Larissa Zaleska Onyshkevych, a Ukrainian drama scholar, analyzes this change in self-identity Ukrainians experience by arguing, "We know from many political observers that any destabilization of personal and/or national history and identity leads to a void in terms of that individual and national identity, and that what follows is a 'decolonized amnesia' [...]" (411). By the term "decolonized amnesia," Onyshkevych is referring to the loss of identity that is caused by the gaining of independence of an oppressed nation or region. This is a statement on colonialism as a whole, which is a major contributing factor to single stories and something Onyshkevych is clearly arguing against. Colonialism, by definition, is built on single stories. Because of this, when a colonized area is forced to build their identity on colonialism (a single story) that identity is not accurate to begin with. Then, when that colonized area becomes decolonized they are left, essentially, with nothing in terms of identity. Onyshkevych contends that the reason Ukraine is often not even recognized as its own country is because of the single story Russia has imposed on Ukraine as a result of their "mass totalitarian culture" (410). Contrary to Feofanova, though, Onyshkevych has an optimistic perspective on Ukraine's ability to rebel against the single story Russia has pushed on them. She argues that, though colonialism strips identity, post-colonialist writing can take back power from the colonizer. This perspective

is shared by Brooks whose writing centralizes around African female writers. Although these two women are focusing on different areas of the world, they share the same sentiment: writing gives a voice to the oppressed.

Similar to the Russia-Ukraine war, another ongoing humanitarian crisis is the Israel-Palestine war. People from Israel and Palestine alike have taken to social media to share their experiences with the war, and one female activist, Bisan Owda, has become a strong voice for the Palestinian people on the popular social media platform TikTok. One video she posted on February 29, 2024 displays a Palestinian protest in Rafah with children calling for a ceasefire. In the video one young boy holds up a sign that states, “Mr. Biden, our blood and the American pilot Aaron Bushnell blood is a ghost will follow you.” For context, Aaron Bushnell was a US Air Force member who self-immolated in protest against Israel. Basically, the boy in Owda’s TikTok is saying that the deaths of Palestinians and Bushnell will haunt President Biden and weigh on his conscience because of his choices in regards to the war. Social media is an incredibly powerful tool in terms of sharing information and receiving feedback in real time with ease, which directly goes against the idea of a single story. Because single stories are so centralized around a lack of information, the use of social media to document real-life experiences allows people outside of those experiences to see what is really happening and form their own educated opinions on the situation rather than just subscribing to stereotyped views with both current and historical events. One way single stories are baked into current and historical events is by how they are named. Julie Peteet, an author and anthropology professor at the University of Louisville, examines this phenomenon and argues, “Names, and their meanings, form part of the cultural systems that structure and nuance the way we see, understand and imagine the world” (153). In this quotation, Peteet is contending that names themselves

shape our perception of the world around us, which is especially true when it comes to the topic of war. Similar to Onyshkevych, Peteet ties this into the conversation of colonialism. Of course, colonialism refers to physically overtaking a territory, but this overtaking extends beyond physical borders; it also encompasses stripping power away from an oppressed territory in a cultural sense. By changing how we name events, the connotations of those events and the people involved are also changed for better or worse. Peteet goes on to stress that, “It is axiomatic that history is written as conceptualised and narrated by the winners” (154). By controlling how events are named and the connotations surrounding them, winners (those winners typically being colonizers) change how history itself is written. This is directly tied to the formation of single stories because the entire point of a single story is to alter how groups of people are perceived regardless of if these perceptions are true or not and, typically, they are false. However, Peteet and Owda both are optimistic about our ability to combat these single stories. They both call for activism in terms of actually reshaping how we see the world around us and, like the other sources, they agree that this reshaping will require multitudes of people to unite and share their stories as well as having a global audience who actually listens and internalizes the message.

Finally, “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” by Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian author, also centralizes around single stories and how they oppress people. In his short story, Márquez writes about an old man with wings who falls from the sky without explanation and how the people in the town he arrives in perceive him. In the story, it is stated, “The parish priest had his first suspicion of an imposter when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human [...]” (358). This quotation shows how throughout the story the supposed

angel's identity was continually questioned and defined by those around him, which is directly correlated to single stories. Rather than simply recognizing that the townspeople were wrong about the man being an angel, the priest instead suspects he is an "imposter" as if the man had malicious intentions when, in reality, the townspeople chose to define the man by his physical characteristics. Throughout the story the man's value is repeatedly defined by what he can provide for the community and family he is staying with rather than who he actually is, and Márquez uses this as direct social commentary on how we as people do the same. David Raney, an educator, expands on Márquez's social commentary by sharing his personal experience with teaching "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings" to his students. Raney states, "The problem with 'A Very Old Man' is it refuses to tell us what to think about it" (106). By "problem" Raney does not mean a genuine issue so much as a perceived one. In actuality, Raney is arguing that the fact that Márquez does not give us all of the answers makes his social commentary all the more powerful. We are highly accustomed to stories giving us all of the answers and telling us exactly what to think, but Márquez encourages the reader to make meaning on their own. This is similar to single stories in the sense that single stories are built on other people telling us what and how to think rather than encouraging individual critical thinking. Raney goes on to stress, "Asking is easier than answering [...] but the asking is what education is all about" (112). Of course, Raney means this in the scope of education, but this philosophy can be applied in a broader context as well. If people simply took the time to ask questions and critically think about how they view the world around them, single stories could be dispelled. The harm of single stories lies majorly in the lack of effort to disprove them and lack of motivation to learn and be more culturally aware. Like many of the other sources, Márquez is optimistic about our ability to fight single stories as

long as we can employ critical thinking and a desire to be more educated. The main determining factor is how willing we are to put the effort in.

Overall, it is undeniable that single stories with their ties to colonialism and oppression are inherently harmful and dangerous. However, it is also undeniable that these single stories can be dispelled if people globally are willing to unite and work cooperatively to do so. Individuals sharing their experiences is a great first step to this, but all of the aforementioned sources agree that in order for monumental change to be made we must be willing, as a society, to actually listen.

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