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The Structural Incomplete Power, Stereotypes and the Single-Story Paradigm

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***Abstract*—The concept of the single story, popularized by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, highlights how oversimplified narratives reduce complex cultures and individuals into incomplete stereotypes. These singular depictions often stem from cultural isolation and are reinforced by institutional power dynamics that dictate whose perspectives are shared. Consequently, marginalized communities face severe real-world consequences, ranging from internalized bias to systemic criminalization and social marginalization. This paper examines the epistemological machinery that constructs these narratives, drawing connections between Adichie's framework and structural power dynamics. Ultimately, the study argues that dismantling these harmful stereotypes requires actively promoting diverse, multi-layered literature and embracing overlapping narratives to restore human dignity and epistemic justice.**

***Index Terms*—Single Story, Epistemic Violence, Hegemony, Stereotypes, Representation, Adichie.**

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Human understanding is deeply vulnerable to the narrative frameworks available in mainstream media and literature. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie notes, individuals are especially "impressionable and vulnerable" during childhood to the literature they consume, which frequently dictates their foundational worldview (Adichie, 2009). When media networks and institutional literature publish an unvaried message, they inadvertently instruct the public to generalize and build reductionist assumptions around entire demographics. The single story operatively creates an artificial hegemony, where the perspective of the powerful becomes the default reality for all.

The root of the single story does not exclusively stem from malicious intent; it frequently emerges from simple misunderstandings or a systemic lack of background knowledge regarding distant cultures. However, when left unchallenged, these single stories transform into definitive cultural paradigms. For instance, Adichie reflects on her own experience with her college

roommate, whose "default position" toward her was one of "well-meaning pity" due to a localized, Westernized misconception that all individuals from the African continent share an identical background of systemic poverty and structural disadvantage. This pity is not neutral; it is an assertion of patronizing superiority, built upon centuries of historical text that positioned the Global South as an inherently broken, helpless entity requiring Western intervention.

II. INSTITUTIONAL POWER DYNAMICS AND THE 'NKALI' PRINCIPLE

To understand why single stories persist, one must look at the structural machinery behind them. Adichie introduces the Igbo concept of 'Nkali'—a noun that translates to "to be greater than another." Stories are deeply intertwined with power; who tells them, how they are told, when they are told, and how many are told, are entirely dependent on the infrastructure of power. Power is not just the ability to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.

This closely aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, where the ruling class manipulates the value system and mores of a society so that their specific worldview becomes accepted as the universal norm. Institutional power—housed in publishing giants, global news corporations, and elite academic structures—determines the boundaries of visibility. When marginalized groups are excluded from the mechanisms of cultural production, their realities are either entirely erased or distorted to serve the conscience and comfort of the dominant demographic.

III. SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT AND EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

The consequences of reductionist framing extend far beyond simple misunderstandings; they manifest as real-world systemic harm. When a singular narrative of a community emphasizes only criminality, poverty, or cultural backwardness, it justifies institutional bias. In legal systems, housing markets, and job distribution, the single story operates as an invisible screening mechanism that penalizes those who have already been stereotyped. This process can be described through Gayatri Spivak's concept of 'epistemic violence,' where the knowledge systems and lived realities of marginalized subjects are systematically invalidated and replaced by Western or elite discourses.

Furthermore, the single story inflicts a profound psychological tax via internalized oppression. When the only representation available to a young mind is one of lack, failure, or subalternity, individuals within marginalized groups begin to perceive themselves through the distorting lens of the dominant narrative. The single story robs people of their agency, convincing them that their historical trajectory is limited, flat, and predetermined by their socio-economic or racial background.

IV. DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES THROUGH NARRATIVE MULTIPLICITY

Dismantling the single story requires more than just correcting individual biases; it requires a radical restructuring of our literary and cultural landscapes. As Adichie asserts, the problem with stereotypes is not that they are completely untrue, but that they are incomplete—they make one story become the only story. Therefore, the antidote to a single story is a deliberate engagement with a multiplicity of stories. It requires seeking out narratives that contradict, overlap, complicate, and enrich our understanding of humanity.

Educators, authors, and policymakers play an indispensable role in this transformative process. Curriculum design must move beyond tokenism and actively integrate subaltern literatures that represent marginalized communities not merely through the prism of struggle, but through joy, mundane domesticity, innovation, and philosophical depth. By embracing overlapping narratives, literature can fulfill its true purpose: to act as both a mirror for self-recognition and a window into the authentic complexities of the 'Other'.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the single story is a tool of containment that limits human potential and reinforces artificial social hierarchies. By examining the intersection of power, stereotypes, and narrative authority, it becomes evident that the pursuit of human dignity is directly tied to the democratization of stories. When we reject the single story, we reclaim a kind of paradise—a world where individuals and cultures are recognized in their full, magnificent complexity, rather than being reduced to structural incompleteness.

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