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The Danger of a Single Story

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Preface

For several years, I worked with Norway's largest solidarity organization by and for youth, Operasjon Dagsverk ("Operation Day's Work"). Through my work with the campaigns, I became increasingly aware of how Western media often portrays sub-Saharan Africa as nothing more than starving children, poor infrastructure and no development in any form. I learned how the media often shows only one side of a story, and tells that story until it is perceived as the truth. My work with Operasjon Dagsverk opened my eyes to the effect this has on how we (and by "we", I mean the West) perceive ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. This leads me to my focus in this paper: "The Danger of a Single Story".

1.0 Introduction

The inspiration for my paper is the Nigerian author, public intellectual and speaker, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) and her TedTalk “The Danger of Single Story”. The talk is thought provoking and it raises exactly the kinds of questions I am interested in exploring.

As for the critical framework of my paper, I will apply the work of the postcolonial critic and author Edward Said (1935-2003) and his term “Orientalism”. I will provide an overview of Orientalism as a concept and assess how this has influenced modern thinking. Furthermore, I will discuss “Modern Orientalism” and use examples from the movie “Aladdin”. I will use this concept when discussing what Chimamanda Adichie calls “The Danger of a Single Story”.

I want to explore what a “single story” is and see how it affects us. What are possible solutions to changing the single story and what are the potential obstacles?

2.0 Postcolonial theory

Edward Said was one of the most influential post colonialist theorists in the complex field known as postcolonialism. Other important postcolonial theorists are philosopher Homi Bhabha, and literary theorist and feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Postcolonial theory is used to describe studies of culture in former colonies, with focus on the relation in power between the former colonial masters and colonies (Skei, 2019). Postcolonial theory argues that to understand the world as we know it, we have to understand its legacy of imperialism and colonial rule (Elam, 2019).

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935. In 1947, his family moved to Cairo in order to avoid conflict, which emerged with the separation of Palestine and Israel. In Cairo, Said was educated at English-language schools. In 1951, his family moved to the United States and Said attended Princeton University and Harvard University. In 1963, he became part of the faculty of Columbia University where he in 1967 became assistant professor of English and comparative literature (Britannica).

Said's most important and disputed book "Orientalism", was first published in 1978. The New York Times Review of Books wrote: "The theme is the way in which intellectual traditions are created and transmitted." The ideas put forth in the work were new and radical, and they changed fields as diverse as anthropology, history and literature, and made them rethink their disciplines' boundaries (Bhatia, 2014). I will use the introduction of "Orientalism" to give an overview of Said's concept.

2.1 Orientalism: Overview

"The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 1).

Edward Said argues that the Orient, which refers to the East, is a Western invention. He claims that the Occident, meaning the West, has built an idea of the Orient, which has emerged from the simplistic Western view. This idea, or construct, made it possible for Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the

Orient.” (Said, 1978, p. 3). With the construction of The Orient, The Occident, became the “norm”.

By the late eighteenth century, Orientalism was known as the study of the history, languages, art, religions, philosophers, laws and cultures in the East. Orientalism as the study of the Orient, was a popular academic field in Western Europe. Edward Said’s theory, which I will be focusing on, gives Orientalism a new, negative connotation. Said’s Orientalism can refer to “the simplistic, stereotyped, and demeaning conceptions of Arab and Asian cultures generally held by Western scholars.” (Thomas, 2014).

Said claims; “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient- (...) whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist (...) is an orientalist and what he or she does is orientalism” (Said, 1978, p. 2). The research on The Orient, which ranged from the North African Mediterranean to East and Southeast Asia, was dominated by research in the French, English and German languages (Thomas, 2014).

Said elaborates on the concept and explains that there are three qualifications for Orientalism. The Orient is not essentially an idea or a creation with no reality to it. “The phenomenon of Orientalism”, Said explains, “deals principally with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient beyond any correspondence with a real Orient (Said, 1978, p. 5). Therefore, Orientalism as a term builds on the stereotype view of the Orient, which has no connection to the real Orient.

The second qualification explains that the ideas, cultures, and histories cannot be understood “without their force or their configuration of power”. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (Said, 1978, p. 5). Exactly when the Western domination arose in the world has many different answers. Historian Arne Westad argues that “Western predominance started with the industrial revolution”. With the revolution that started in Britain, the West, or more exactly the “North Atlantic societies”, got ahead of the rest of the world with technological, social and economic changes. (HistoryExtra, 2016) With these benefits and the urge for more, Western Europe colonized large parts of the world. By the start of the twentieth century the majority of the world's nations had been colonized by Europeans at some point (Blakemore, 2019).

Said’s main point is that the Orient has been constructed by the Occident and the construction has little connection to reality.

“It is true that Orientalism is less used by specialists today, both because it is too vague (...) and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism” (Said, 1978, p. 2). Today, Orientalism as a term is for many outdated. However, Orientalism in *practise* may not be as outdated as one would like to think. Later in my paper, I will look at examples from the cartoon-movie “Aladdin” (1992) to show a typical example of Orientalism. I will compare the original movie to the live-action remake from 2019, and see if attitudes against Middle Eastern cultures have changed.

2.2 Binary Oppositions and “The Other”

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet
- “The ballad of East and West” (1889) by Rudyard Kipling

Social anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) developed a theory of “binary oppositions”. Binary oppositions are two concepts in opposition to one another, one often being the dominant. (Fosshagen, 2017). Examples of binary oppositions are white and black, rich and poor, good and evil. The binary oppositions man and woman would, if thinking in terms of traditional stereotypes, symbolize strong versus weak, insensitive versus sensitive, dominating versus repressed. Binary oppositions are commonly used to refer to individuals, or groups, in relation to oneself. Strauss claims in his theory that all humans think in binary oppositions (Fosshagen, 2017). Binary oppositions have the ability to create distance between individuals and groups of people, and can lead to discrimination and prejudices (Marianaro, 2015). Binary oppositions in the relation between the Occident and the Orient are strong and weak, rational and irrational, right and wrong, where the Orient symbolize the negatives. One concept in Edward Said’s Orientalism is that of “the Other”, which refers to the Orient. The Other is distanced from “Us” and by giving someone this label, distance is immediately and naturally created.

Edward Said claims that the image of the Other is manipulated and created by the Occident. Said challenges Strauss’ worldview and his theory of binary oppositions, as he thinks we should not accept the labelling of the Orient as the Other.

3.0 The Danger of a Single Story

I believe single stories support the image of the Other. The phenomenon of the single story is from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TedTalk "The Danger of a Single Story".

Adichie says in the opening of her talk that she would like to tell a few personal stories about what she calls "The danger of a single story" (Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story- Transcript*, 2009). She gives the audience an insight into her childhood: Adichie grew up on a University campus in eastern Nigeria. She says that she was "an early reader". The books Adichie read in her childhood were exclusively British and American children's books. She says that even though she loved these books, they made her believe that the children in *her* stories also had to be "white, blue-eyed and talk a lot about the weather". Adichie says that this example shows how "impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children". Because Adichie only read western literature, she thought that she could not read or write books that she could truly identify with. She mentions Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, as two important authors in African literature that changed this.

Adichie tells us a story about Fide, her family's houseboy when she grew up. The only thing her mother had told her about him was that his family was very poor. "Finish your food! Don't you know families like Fide's family have nothing?" her mother would tell her. Adichie explains how she had gotten a single story of Fide and his family. That story was a single story of poverty. Adichie tells the audience that she felt pity for the houseboy Fide, because she had this single story of him. Later, Adichie learnt that poverty was not the only story of Fide. When Adichie went to Fide's village one day, and she explains how she was startled when she saw the beautiful basket his brother had made. She now had two completely different stories of Fide, which led to a more complex overall picture of Fide and his family.

When Adichie went to the United States to study, the single story affected her again. This time, Adichie's American roommate had a single story of *her*. She tells that the roommate had felt sorry for her before they had even met. She felt pity for Adichie because she had a single story of Africa, which was a single story of catastrophe. The roommate was surprised that Adichie could speak English so well, not knowing the fact that English is the primary language of Nigeria.

Adichie manages to put herself in the situation where she has a single story about someone as well as in situations where she experiences what it feels like to have someone with a single

story of her. After being told many stories about “Mexicans as people that were fleecing the health care system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border”, Adichie had gotten a single story of Mexicans. She felt ashamed of herself when she learned that her story was incomplete and she experienced how easy it is to believe in the single story.

Adichie tells that a student once came to her and said how “it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in her novel”. Adichie explains that after she read “American Psycho” it did not occur to her to think that all Americans were serial killers. This is, she explains, because she had *many* stories of America. Because of America’s cultural and economic power, it was almost impossible for her to have a single story of America and to think that all Americans were serial killers. The student did not have many stories of Nigeria. Therefore, it became more difficult for the student to think of the story of the abusive man in Adichie’s story as one story, rather than a complete story of Nigerian men.

3.1 Stereotypes

Adichie argues that the single story creates stereotypes. Adichie stresses how the problem with these stereotypes are not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.



“The World According to Americans” by artist Yanko Tsvetkov (Tsvetkov, 2012)

The artist wants to present a world according to Americans. While this map may be accurate for how some Americans view the world, it ironically also supports the stereotype of Americans being ignorant and stupid.

Cambridge Dictionary’s definition of a stereotype is “a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong” (Cambridge Dictionary). Assuming a type of behaviour based on a person’s ethnicity, social class or other “groups”, without knowing the person, is based on the stereotype of that person, and will often have little or no connection with reality. Nevertheless, do I believe it is important to not consider all stereotypes as dangerous. There are many examples of stereotypes that are not harmful. Some examples are Norwegians being “cold” and reserved in their behaviour, while Latin Americans are warmer and speaks louder and Japanese people being generally polite. These are not harmful because they do not have the intention of hurting anyone, even if they are not always correct. Stereotypes are especially dangerous and can have harmful consequences when a person of power uses them against a marginalized group without power.

3.2 The Single Story is Incomplete

Adichie says in her TedTalk that Africa “of course is a continent full of catastrophes”. She mentions “immense ones” such as the rapes during the civil war in Congo, and “depressing ones” such as 5000 people applying for one job vacancy in Nigeria as examples. However, Adichie stresses there are also many stories that are not about catastrophe that are equally important, if not more important, to tell. Nigeria is for example known for its delicious food, traditional weddings and Nollywood, which has the third biggest production of movies in the world (Saro-Wiwa, 2019).

The phenomenon of “The danger of a single story” goes to the heart of my paper, because it explores how the image of the Other comes to live. Adichie’s TedTalk will be the background for my next focus in my paper, where I will more generally explore “Us” and “Them”.

Adichie ends her TedTalk with a hopeful message: “(...) when we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise”. What if we were to set ourselves this goal, to have a world without any single stories; what could be the hindrances that would make the single story more powerful? What could help us reach the goal so that we can reject the single story?

4.0 Single Stories Made by Literature

Adichie says in her speech that she thinks Western literature has created the single story of Africa. One of the examples of Western literature she mentions is “The White Man’s Burden”, a poem written by the English author Rudyard Kipling in 1899. This poem can be used to “justify” colonialism, as it says that there lies a burden on the shoulders of the white man. It is implicit that the burden for the white man is to civilize the people that Kipling describes as “half devil and half child”. Adichie says in her TedTalk that single stories can “burden and rob people of their dignity”, which Kipling’s poem to an extreme degree does.

Another example of how literature can create single stories is mentioned in Said’s “Orientalism”. Said uses the example of French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), who travelled to Egypt and wrote about a woman named Kuchuk Hanem. Said explains how she, through Flaubert’s works became the influential model of the “Oriental woman”; She did not speak for herself, Flaubert spoke for and represented her (Said, 1978, p. 6). Said explains that the history of domination allowed Flaubert to speak for her and create the image of the “typical Oriental” woman. This is a picture that also aimed to justify colonial power, because it supports the constructed image of the Other as unable to speak or represent themselves, and in need of a white saviour. “The Orient was made into an object, which had to be known by the Occident, as it could not know itself” (Easthope, 1998).

Both of these literary works were written a long time ago, and may for some seem unnecessary to even mention. I think they show how powerful and dangerous words can be and how literature can shape how we look at other people in a negative way. It is especially dangerous if it used against someone who is marginalized and suppressed, because then the oppressor has power over the single story.

4.1 Orientalism: Today

I think the problem of creating distance between “Us” and “Them”, if not the Occident and the Orient, is still as relevant as it was 42 years ago. I think depictions in movies have a great impact of how we see ourselves in relation to the Other. I will examine the movie Aladdin (1992) to see how it portrays Middle Eastern cultures and compare it to remake of the movie from 2019.

The children’s movie “Aladdin” (1992) has its origin in “A Thousand and One Nights”, a collection of folk tales, mostly of Indian and Persian origin. The collection was translated to Arabic in the ninth century. The stories were assembled to a complete collection in the fourteenth century (Esborg, 2019). French author Antoine Galland (1646-1715) did the first European translation of the work which was published between 1704 and 1717, in 12 volumes (Britannica). Galland’s translation is allegedly based on what he heard from a Syrian storyteller, but he also made changes of his own. “Galland was very free in his translation, and omitted, altered in his text so that it would suit the French taste” (Wazzan, 1993). The stories Galland translated became very popular in the West, and they have undoubtedly been important literary works. Galland’s intention when he translated the stories was probably not to highlight negative stereotypes in Arab and Eastern cultures. However, if one should follow Said’s theory, any work written by western scholars about the Orient will reinforce the idea or construct of it.

“Aladdin” is an American animated children’s movie. A famous line from the movie’s opening song Arabian nights is: “Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face” (...) “It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home!”. Barbaric and barbarian are words that have been commonly used about people of different cultures from as early as the antique Greece. The Greeks called everyone that did not speak Greek barbarians. The word did not have negative connotations in the beginning, but as the romans started using the word about non-Greeks and non-Romans, the word got the meaning wild, cruel and raw (Persvold, 2020). This shows that humans “always” have felt the need to create distance between “Us” and “Them”.

Disney has many times been criticized for perpetuating racist depictions of other cultures. In 1993, The New York Times wrote a headline that said “Its racist, but Hey, its Disney”, as an answer to the opening song of the movie (The New York Times, 1993).

“Aladdin” builds on simplistic depictions and stereotypes of Middle Eastern culture and the “good Arabs” in the movie, have American accents, while the “bad Arabs” have thick, Arabic accents and scary facial features (Alsultany, 2019). In 2019, the animation studio decided they would make a live-action remake of the movie with the hope to not make the same mistake as last time.

*“Oh, imagine a land, it's a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam
Where you wander among every culture and tongue
It's chaotic, but hey, it's home”*

The melody of the opening song is the same as in the original movie, but Disney did the important decision to change the lyrics from “barbaric” to “chaotic”. “Wander among other culture and tongue” gives the feeling that Disney does not want to portray Middle Eastern cultures as “one thing”. Still, one could see this as a paradox. Egyptian belly dancing and Bollywood dancing, turbans and Palestinian keffiyehs, Iranian and Arab accents all appear in the movie. This could be an argument for Disney portraying all Middle Eastern cultures as the same and overgeneralizing the East (Alsultany, 2019). Then again, it could also be an attempt by Disney to be more inclusive and to show diversity. This leads me to the concept of “Hybridity”.

4.2 Hybridity

Postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha (1949-) has many important concepts and among them are “Hybridity”. Hybridity can have three different meanings: the meaning in terms of biology, ethnicity and culture. Being “hybrid” as an individual means “Having access to more than two ethnic identities” (Easthope, 1998). Even if some people want to believe it, no human being is “ethnically pure”. Cultures always inspire and get influence from other cultures. Things we as Norwegians view as “Norwegian”, for instance the “Bunad”, has been impacted by other cultures. Including many influences from different cultures when depicting a culture in the Middle East could arguably be the most realistic thing to do.

In the new version of “Aladdin”, the Arabic accent is not used as an identifier of the good and the evil characters. However, there are some examples of stereotyping, as well as exoticization in the movie. The antagonist in “Aladdin” (2019), Jafar, does fulfil the depiction of the

stereotypical Arab character, as he is portrayed as threatening and power-hungry. “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People” is a book written by American media researcher and author Jack Shaheen. Shaheen’s work uses a study based on over 900 movies to discuss the movie industry’s use of stereotypes. The study found that most of the depictions of Arab characters were of heartless, brutal and uncivilized, religious fanatics and that the minority are normal, human characters (Shaheen, 2001).

Even if the movie succeeds in having fewer characters depicted as violent and brutal, a character like Jafar will most likely confirm many expectations of an Arabian character. This is because there are so many other examples of Arabian characters such as Jafar in other movies. But what is the option? A movie needs an antagonist and without Jafar, the plot would probably not work as well as with him. The problem is that it has almost become the standard that Arabs are portrayed as him. We can recognize harmful stereotypes in the American political thriller “Homeland”, where Arabs almost exclusively are presented as terrorists and religious fanatics.

In conclusion, I would say that the remake of “Aladdin” shows that attitudes against Middle Eastern cultures have changed in Disney. I think, although after improvement from the original version, “Aladdin” creates a greater distance between “Us” and, referring to the opening song, people from “faraway places”. While this is technically true, geographically, the differences may not be as big as we think they are. This way of referring to someone, makes them mystical and then the distance also increases.

4.3 Literature as a tool to change the Single Story

Literature can tell the stories of individuals, places and groups of people. In Adichie's collection of short stories, "The Thing Around Your Neck" (2009), we can recognize stories Adichie told from her own life transformed into experiences of fictional characters.

In the title story "The thing around your neck", we meet a Nigerian character named Akunna who has won the "American visa lottery" and travels to the United States. The story only mentions her name once, and the story is written in a second-person narrative that tells "your" story: "You gave up a lot but gained a lot too". (Adichie, "The thing around your neck", 2009, p. 116) "They asked you where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd seen a car before you came to America." By making the reader "You", the distance between "You" and "I" is minimized and it makes it easier for the reader to relate to the story. Breaking up the binary opposition of "You" and "I" may help break other binary oppositions such as "America" and "Africa", with "English", "real houses" and "car" reflecting on America. This form of narrative gives the reader an insight into the experiences of the character. Another way of reading the story is to think that Akunna's story is not "unique", and that is why the name is only mentioned once. Akunna's story might be the story of many women from African countries travelling to the United States.

"Jumping Monkey Hill" is another story in Adichie's collection. This story takes place at an African writer workshop in Cape Town. In the story, we meet a British man named Edward who found his passion for African literature at Oxford. He says to a Senegalese woman that: "Homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really. "Which Africa?" Ujunwu blurted out". Edward explains that he is not speaking as an "Oxford-trained Africanist", but as one who is keen on the real Africa. We can recognize this story from Adichie's TedTalk. In the speech, Adichie told about her experience with a professor who told her that her novel was not "authentically African" and that her characters were "too much like him, an educated, middle class man". The British character in Adichie's story feels that he has the right to say what a "real" Africa is like. This character, as well as Adichie's professor, has an idea of what a "real" or "authentic" Africa looks like and even what it should be like. The story does not fit within his image and what he sees as representative of the continent.

Adichie does not exclude herself from the problem of believing in the single story in her TedTalk, and we see this in her short story collection too. In a story named “On Monday of last week”, we meet a woman named Kamara. Kamara is a Nigerian woman who has travelled to the United States. Kamara reads an advertisement for a babysitting job and she applies for it. As the boy’s father, Nick, interviews her, she wonders where his wife is. She ponders over whether Nick might have killed her and “stuffed her in a trunk”. “Kamara had spent the past months watching Court TV and had learned how crazy these Americans were.” (Adichie, “The thing around your neck”, 2009, p. 77). This example illustrates a common stereotype of Americans being crazy gun-lovers. Adichie shows in her story that stereotyping is something everyone can be guilty of.

When analysing a character in literature, one important part of the analysis is to find the special features and behaviours of the character. Most characters will have more than one single character feature, which automatically makes the character more than a stereotype. Literature has the power to create new stories and tell many different stories of different people. Therefore, I believe literature is one of our greatest tools to change attitudes, and to fight against the single story.

5.0 The Future

I see echo chambers in social media as a problem to reject the “single story”. An echo chamber can be described as “a bounded enclosed media that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal”. Echo chambers create a common frame of reference and positive feedback loops for those who listen to, read and watch these media outlets.” (Jamieson & Capella, 2008). In echo chambers, people seek the single story.

Discover magazine refers to a study done by researchers, first published in “Physical Review Letters”. The mathematical method the researches use in their study tries to find out if people with same or similar opinions are more likely to interact with each other. What the data of the study showed, was that people tend to only respond to tweets from people whom they share the same beliefs with (Yui, 2020).



Published in “Physical Review Letter” (Yui, 2020)

Internet has gone beyond the limits of literature, and Statista reported that in January 2020 almost 4.54 billion people were active internet users (Clement, 2020). Twitter, Facebook, and other social media-platforms have connected people from all over the globe and given people access to different sources. These platforms gives us the tools to change the single story.

However, as the study showed, people tend to seek opinions that matches their own. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter may therefore possibly create a greater distance between people, and delay the process of globalization.

American president Donald Trump uses insulting rhetoric to create a common enemy in immigrants. In 2014, Trump tweeted “When will the U.S. stop sending our \$’s to our enemies, i.e. Mexico and others” (Reilly, 2016). The language used creates distance between Us and “Our” and “They”, which in this example is “Mexico and others”. What happens when the acceptance for this use of language increases?

PhD Student in psychology Steve Rathje asks the question: “Do we need a common enemy?” as he questions why the political polarization in the U.S. has increased over the last years. He refers to a study that showed that people find comfort in having an enemy, especially in face of uncertainty and fear. This raises the question; could a world without “Us” and “Them” be? Could we live in a world where “Us” and “Them” exist, but where they are not identifiers of right and wrong, but rather viewed as equally imperfect with different strengths?

6.0 End

I wanted to explore Adichie’s phenomenon; the single story, because I think the message in her speech is highly relevant and important. The single story affects political opinions and decisions as well as how I see people around me and they see me. It is easier to give in to the incomplete stories, than to actually face them and challenge what we believe. I think it is incredibly important to be critical in face of single stories, when presented in books, news articles, on social media or other platforms. I believe fighting against single stories is one of the most important things we can do in the polarized world that we live in. I think we ought to remember that there is always more than one story.

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