

**Western Perspective of African Authenticity:  
The Fault of a Single Story**

**Michael Oghenenyoreme Julius**

Department of Vocational Business Education,  
Faculty of Education,  
Niger Delta University,  
Wilberforce Island,  
Bayelsa State.  
[miklestheory@gmail.com](mailto:miklestheory@gmail.com)  
[www.admissionsandutme.com](http://www.admissionsandutme.com)

**Abstract**

There is a long held view amongst Westerners of how Africa should look like. This view is being held irrespective of the true state of Africa's current story which in all dimensions differs from their views. Hence, this paper on "Western Perspective of African Authenticity: The Fault of a Single Story" takes a review from Chimamanda Adichie's view of how Westerners sees Africa from a single story – a view that portray abject penury, deaths, malnutrition, needing aides to survive. While Chimamanda focused on Western perspectives, this paper differs by focusing also on local views of single stories and how it affects the presentation of figures in stories told. Consequently, it was suggested that stories must be told from ethnocentric point of view in order to ensure that many sides of it are told.

**Keywords:** Western Perspective, African Authenticity, Single Story

From time of long ago, the story of Africa had often been told from a view that portray Africa as a dying, beggarly, needy, dependent, pitiable nation and one needing aides from the Western world to survive. Consequently, any story that portray Africa as a growing, progressive and developing continent, having real innovators, scientist with modern discoveries, with bankers on corporate wears working in the banks, with universities having professors and people driving modern cars, such story is deemed as lacking what can be referred to as the "African

Authenticity". Accordingly, the Western world wants Africans to be pictured and painted as a place with village setups, filled with monkeys and apes and chimpanzees and all the demeaning and slavery images - a place that cannot progress without the support of the overlords.

The above view of African Authenticity owes from a series of Chimamanda's works (The Thing Around Your Neck; Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience; Purple Hibiscus; Half of a Yellow Sun and most specifically from her 2009 TED Talk - the dangers of the single story). All through her works, she tends to question the viability and worth of the view and boundaries placed on Africa as a nation. Chimamanda as a third generation of Nigerian writer was of the view that earlier determining factors that binds us as a continent could no longer be used as criteria for defining the African state and what it now represents.

According to Pereira (2016), Chimamanda, while in the United States, realized that the Western world holds a single story of what Africa really is, based on racist stereotypes. Radhakrishnan (2003) quoted Chimamanda's 2009 TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" thus: “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”. Hence, "this reductive portrayal of the African continent prevents outsiders from seeing an African as equally human” (Adichie, 2008).

In the words of Chimamanda, having what Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories" and growing up in Africa saved her from seeing Africans "as incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner".

The Westerners seems to hold on to the long held view of the African continent that is so dear to them. Updating this view to modern reality of African States has been an almost impossible endeavour to the Westerners as most studies have been largely centered and portrayed the view of Africa as a poverty stricken continent. This view, through the media, books, parent-to-child discussions and other relevant channels has been passed on to the younger generation.

May I take us down memory lane. I hailed from Agbarha-Otor in Ughelli Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. Around 2006, I was barely 19, working in a palm kernel factory located in Edoge street in Ughelli main town of Delta State, Nigeria. The palm kernel mill purchases cracked kernels from the nearby villages, mill and extract the oil therefrom and sell to bigger companies for onward processing to the standard of consumable groundnut oil.

It was in the above environment that a customer came visiting and through chats told us a story about his experience in London. According to him, he was in a public bus, and a young boy close by tried to adjust his jacket behind so as to take a view of his tail. According to the boy, he was told that blacks (probably referring to Africans in particular) have tails like normal monkeys. So, he tries hard to confirm. The customer in question however, adjusted himself properly to enable the boy confirm his curiosity. To his utter dismay, there was no tail. The tail must have been removed he thought to himself. This is the poor view that the western beings have painted of Africa.

In Chimamanda's "the danger of the single story", she narrated her ordeal with her American roommate who "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". Chimamanda's roommate may have had a single story of what African authenticity is, hence, could not imagine that an African could be a student as she is.

According to Chimamanda (2009), "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. In this single story, there was no possibility 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".

Chimamanda argued that this single story of Africa ultimately comes, in her own opinion, from Western literature. "Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses", he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts." Chimamanda faults this wrong Western perspective on the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West as tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

Holding a view of a single story is not exclusively reserved to the unlearned minds alone, it is a general view that cuts across ages. Chimamanda noted that a professor once told her that her novel was not "authentically African." By African

authentically African, the professor suggests that the "characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. Your characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African".

In the view of the Westerners, for an African story to be authentic, it must portray dying African figures and represented from a colonial point of view, otherwise, such work may score low even in improved academic settings. So to create a single story, Chimamanda suggest you "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become". "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". The consequence of this is that it robs people of their dignity. "It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar".

It is true that Africa had experienced catastrophes in leadership, wars, economies and the likes. With series of recession, coups, civil wars, Africa can be said to have had its fair share of crises like other continents, but to use this as the only story in Africa constitute a single story of the continent and does not reflect a true state of affairs. The other good stories of Africa are just as important, to talk about.

Single stories exist everywhere. Perhaps, it can be found between Africans and even in the neighbourhoods. In my family, a scenario played out between my elder sibling and my previous landlord's daughter. Growing up in the city of Ughelli in Delta State, Nigeria wasn't that easy. With a family of nine children and an intact parent, totaling an 11-member strong family, a father out of job and a pure traditionally righteous African mother who stood by all with the proceeds from her petty kolanut business, food were rationed, rents remained unpaid and only lived at the mercy of a fellow Christian landlord with sometimes oppressive wife and children.

It has become sometimes difficult for me to talk about my family without leaving a whole paragraph for mother. In my personal description, mama is a righteous woman, a model with fine example, a Christian woman worthy of emulation, a standard for measurement, a bearer of Christ' qualities and an embodiment of virtue, values and stood for anything good; A faithful wife and most loving mother who never spared the rod - a disciplinarian to the core and a firm believer in God to the later. Mama's story of her battle to bring us up brings tears to my eyes. It was incomprehensible then, but as I grew older, it becomes clearer to me. Mama gave us all basic education from where we took it upon ourselves to be educated. Many elder siblings even got to the universities level and graduated under mama's little funding capacity.

In time, my elder sister met one of the daughters of the previous landlord with the name Joy in a College of Education in Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria. Her surprise? "if someone told me you guys would go to school, I would doubt it". Joy held a single story of our capacity despite being age mates. Since we were poor and beggarly at the time, there is not way life can turn around for the better and allow us have good education as they expect for themselves. Seeing a poor man's child in a tertiary institution startled Joy. "What are you doing here?" a startled Joy had initially asked.

A multifarious approach to issues matters in any story. To tell a story, authors must adopt an ethnocentric point of view, that is, seeing the story from the view of locals to avoid unbiased representation of facts but to give an objective position that reflects the true nature of things. Chimamanda pointed that "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".

Africa is a continent with so much potentials, intellectuals, skilled and educated manpower with the needed population for self sustenance. The major problem Africa has that has continued to plague the continent has been leadership deficit. Sometimes, I conclude that Africa may never have the needed leadership until a concerted effort is made to get rid of bad leadership and hold leaders immediately responsible for their actions.

Africa has come of age but its institutions are weak and lack the necessary strength and independence from mainstream politics to fully withstand the pressure and power of political ill-will.

## **Conclusion**

Stories are very salient aspect of human history. Stories can be used to represent a people and how they live. Consequently, it is imperative to tell stories to upbuild, strengthen and uphold the right type of value in societies. Stories should be told as they are especially from an ethnocentric perspective. The African story most especially is one that has changed over the years and it is best to see it as it is.

## References

- Adichie, C. N. (2008). African authenticity and the Biafran experience. *Transition*, 99, 42-53.
- Adichie, C. N. (2009). The danger of a single story. Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 from [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)
- Pereira, I. C. (2016). Deconstructing the single story of Nigeria: Diasporic identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck'. *Blue Gum*, 3, 50-55.
- Radhakrishnan, R. (2003). Ethnicity in an age of diaspora. In J. Evans Braziel & A. Mannur (Eds.), *Theorizing diaspora: A reader*. Blackwell publishing. 119-131