

Storytelling: Battling Prejudice Through The Creative Arts

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Lost in my own head, I was racing raindrops on the car window to pass time while we were stuck in traffic. The droplets distorted the light from passing cars into a flurry of soft reds and yellows. Next to me, sat my cousin Fatima with her four-year-old son, Raiyan. Because of the rain, the traffic had congested into a gridlock. For a four-year-old whose life's greatest tragedy is boredom, this was hell. Raiyan grew restless: whining, kicking the back of the front seat, agitated. After the fifth or so time that Raiyan had asked how much longer we would be stuck here, Fatima told him to quiet down. This worked for maybe a minute before he got started again. This time, Fatima tried something else.

"Shh, Raiyan! Stay quiet or the hijras will come take you away!"

Pin drop silence.

Fatima's threat had worked, but the silence weighed down on me with the heavy implications of what had just been said. Where my mother had used stories of ghosts and djinns, Fatima had made hijras the villain in hers. Innocent stories told by mothers to pacify their sons and daughters had, in this case, left the realm of the supernatural. Effectively, she had turned an already marginalized group of flesh and blood human beings into bogeymen.

The stories we tell are important. They are capable of breeding fear, hatred, and intolerance. But wielded correctly, a story may bring forth empathy, catharsis, love, morality, inspiration, and so much more. The creative arts teach us to be good and effective storytellers. In the past few years, we have seen the killings of atheist bloggers, LGBT activists and religious minorities. We have witnessed one of the greatest tragedies in the recent history of

Dhaka city: the Holey attack. We have watched as the indigenous Adivasis have had their homes burned to the ground. Now, more than ever, we need the creative arts to breed storytellers who will reunite us with tolerance and love.

Indeed, mankind's history of storytelling is long. The Lascaux cave paintings dating back 20,000 years ago were man's primitive attempts to tell stories of wild beasts and men who hunted them. The intricate mythologies, created by the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians that even dictated their political and social structures, too are stories. But we need not look so far back to understand the historical significance of storytelling. Was it not Bangabandhu's speech that told us stories of an independent Bangladesh that roused us into arms? Did our feet not march to the rhythm of Nazrul's poetry as we won our independence?

This essay means to propose storytelling through the creative arts as a twofold antidote to intolerance, bigotry and hatred towards marginalized groups. The first dose of this antidote offers the integration of storytelling into our educational curricula to teach love, empathy and tolerance. The second proposes that we teach children to be effective storytellers themselves through the creative arts to allow a forum of diverse viewpoints, which, in turn, will teach others to be open-minded about diversity.

During my time at the International School of Dhaka, I was an avid student of theatre. Part of our curriculum was to study theatre pedagogy: a field that educates and raises social awareness through the medium of theatre. With our target audience as children in the age group 6-8, we found that engaging stories were the best medium for them to learn about various social issues, such as the empowerment of women and girls. In my senior year, I also wrote and directed a play that told the story of a boy suffering from schizophrenia with the aim of raising awareness of mental health, in the spirit of theatre pedagogy.

While I cannot tell whether these projects truly left an impact on our audience or helped them be more compassionate, I do know that, at the very least, they helped start a dialogue about the issues we wished to address and familiarized the audience with a new point of view. While those were one-time projects, I feel that storytelling can be an effective tool in helping students become more aware of social issues and more

compassionate towards difference, if integrated into academic curricula.

Theatre pedagogy is also in the spirit of our Bangladeshi theatre form of Jatra. Using a character called the Vivek (translating into 'conscience'), jatra often incorporates moral lessons. A theatre form like jatra can be easily adapted into helping rural Bangladeshi audiences become more educated about relevant topics such as domestic violence, women's rights, third gender or hijra rights, and mental health to help remove the stigma that many marginalized groups face. The visual arts are also an excellent vessel for storytelling. In recent years, photojournalist GMB Akash has taken Bangladeshi audiences by storm, amassing almost half a million followers on Facebook. Akash's genius lies in the creation of a platform where he uses street photography and an accompanying quote to tell the stories of those whose voices are least heard and often silenced. This includes the marginalized social underclass of our country: beggars, rickshaw-walas, sweepers, house workers. It includes religious minorities, indigenous people and those plagued by social stigma: victims of human trafficking who are forced to work as sex workers, hijras, those suffering from mental illness, victims of acid attacks, and much more.

Akash uses these stories and images to change our perception of these marginalized groups and, most importantly, to humanize them. In this way, he can turn a boring statistic about poverty in Bangladesh into a living, breathing human being with a moving story about their struggles. This helps form our indifference into social change and compassion, proven easily by the outpouring of sincere well-wishing comments and the extremely successful fundraising initiatives through the Facebook page. It begs the question, then: how do we bring this same empathy and motivation for social change into the classroom?

The answer, again, is storytelling. Living in New York for most of the past two years, I had the great opportunity of attending a Human Library event. The Human Library is an international organization founded in Denmark that aims to break prejudice, bias and discrimination through social contact. In a standard event, a "reader" (the spectator) borrows a human "book" (a pre-selected participant), who shares their stories, engages in meaningful conversation with the spectators and answers questions about themselves. In the past, these events have included

participants who are homeless, refugees, recovering drug abusers, single mothers and those on the autism spectrum. Through interaction and conversation, spectators are able to attach these labels with a face and a story, which builds tolerance and acceptance.

This is something we are able to emulate in the classroom. In essence, both GMB Akash and The Human Library do the same thing: they tell stories to humanize marginalized groups to their respective audiences in order to help them build compassion and tolerance. Firstly, in the school environment, this can mean bringing in members of these stigmatized social groups as speakers who will tell stories of their own struggles, helping students breed empathy and an understanding of diverse viewpoints outside of themselves. In the long run, this can help nurture students into becoming broad-minded members of society, aware of social issues and interested in bringing about change.

Secondly, we need to promote the creative arts in today's education sector to help students themselves become storytellers, following in the footsteps of influential artists like GMB Akash who help tackle prejudice through stories and even mobilize audiences into social change. While working towards a degree in graphic design in New York, I worked on a project that helped to tell the stories of immigrants in the United States through poster campaigns. This was especially important during a political climate such as now in America, where immigrants have been pinned as the enemy in this past presidential election. By telling their individual stories, we attached named and faces to the label of "immigrant." We received much positive feedback about how hearing the struggles of these real life people helped many better understand their situation, while working with them to tell their stories helped my understanding as well.

We need to teach the next generation to use cameras, paintbrushes, pens and stages to tell their own stories and of others who have little opportunity to tell theirs. Our aim should be to help children, like my nephew Raiyan, become compassionate and open-minded individuals through stories that showcase different viewpoints, not ones that paint marginalized groups as monsters and bogeymen. Our aim should be to create a diverse tapestry of stories to eliminate prejudice and preach empathy by integrating storytelling into our academic curricula. There should be no "us and them," but only an "us"; an "us" that is made up of the resounding notes of a million different voices. ■