Knocking Down Stereotypes

If a society constantly categorizes people by ethnicity, cognitive behaviors and severe stereotypes, it may lead people to question their cultural identity. When negative comments are made to a specific ethnic group, **what affects do stereotypes have on them?** In the Netflix film *Homecoming, King* Hasan Minhaj addresses many stereotypes that have been negatively placed on the Muslim community. The film expresses Minhaj’s feelings and emotions towards the stereotypes and how they have impacted his life. *King* is a witty stand-up comedy conveyed with a passionate tone that distributes the message of equality rights in America. Many ethnic groups have faced inequality in America including First Nations people. The spoken word “Knock off Native” was written and performed by Winona Linn who is a Canadian from Ontario who was born into the First Nations Meskwaki clan. Linn delivers a powerful message of sharing her experience of being mis cultured due to her physical appearance. **Although there are differences in formatting and tone, both *King* and *“*Knock off” convey the same message of struggling to face discrimination based on their skin colour. However, in *King* Minhaj experiences physical fear and verbal abuse through the stereotypes his culture has about who a terrorist is. Meanwhile, in “Knock off”Linn faces the expectations of having to look like Disney’s Pocahontas to fit the stereotypes of how her culture is perceived. Ultimately, both protagonists in the stories feel the need to prove themselves as worthy of their cultural identity without having to feel shame for not fitting the stereotypes.**

Discrimination creates fear and shame for one’s culture, two of many effects that negative stereotypes and racism have had on Minhaj. Minhaj has faced discrimination on multiple counts however; the time of 9/11 was one of the most frightening experiences for him. On September 12th Minhaj and his father experienced verbal abuse and vandalism to their car for sharing similar features to the people who were responsible for the bombing. The racist remarks that were made to Minhaj’s family made them feel unsafe and fearful for living in America with a Muslim background. In the Netflix stand-up, Minhaj expressed to the crowd that the night of September 12th was the first night where he felt like his families love and loyalty to the country was under attack. As a young child Minhaj did not understand why his father did not confront the people who vandalized their vehicle. Minhaj asked his father about the situation and his response was: “These things happen, and these things will continue to happen. That’s the price we pay for being here,” (Storer, 28:31-28:41). Minhaj’s father is very grateful to be in America and is willing to accept a few discriminatory comments and actions if that is what it takes to live in the country. However, Minhaj is not an immigrant and knows his equality rights do not differ depending one’s race.

Though discriminatory comments may be made due to a groups ethnic background, assumptions and unrealistic expectations of what a culture is supposed to look like can be just as harmful to one’s cultural identity. In the spoken word “Knock Off” Linn communicates the struggle of being mis cultured. Born with green eyes and fair skin, Linn portrayed the message of being insecure for not fitting in with her culture. When a man called Linn a “Knock Off Pocahontas” she knew the stereotypes were made to pick away at her self-esteem. Although Linn does not look like Pocahontas, it is unreasonable to assume that all people of indigenous decent share the same features. Linn passionately states in her spoken word: “I wanted to tell him Pocahontas was more than a pictorial Disney character that sang songs to animals while she braided her hair,” (07-08). Linn expresses the impact cultural stereotypes can have on a person and how white skin and green eyes may not match one’s perception of Indian. Growing up with many First Nation stereotypes surrounding her, Linn felt the pressure to represent her Meskwaki tribe. Linn creates an impactful image of how discriminatory comments affected her as a child: “It is people like him who made me walk across shards of glass as a child so I could cut my feet so badly that I could finally leave red footprints. Look Ma, no white,” (59-61). It was not enough for Linn to wear her aboriginal moccasins but instead she wanted her skin colour to match her ancestors. The profound assumptions that all aboriginals should look the same has contributed to the challenge of individuals finding their identity. Linn exclaims, “To insult me accurately he should’ve at least picked the right race, since Pocahontas was Pohatan and I am Meskwaki, but I knew he wouldn’t know the difference,” (03-06). Linn illustrate the Pocahontas stereotype to be deceitful towards all First Nations and tribes throughout North America, acknowledging that all aboriginal tribes, have different cultural traditions, languages and identities.

When faced with inequality due to stereotypes defining one’s identity, people may feel the need to prove themselves beyond the stereotypes to be seen as an equal. In *King* Minhaj has the desire to prove to America that he is worthy of living in the country. Minhaj explains, “As immigrants we always have to put on these press releases to prove our patriotism. We’re always auditioning. ‘We love thing country, please believe me,’” (Storer, 30:33-30:40). Minhaj has worked hard to prove his patriotism and worth to the country, although negative stereotypes about his culture made him feel shame, he was able to overcome the stereotypes and find his true identity. Similarly to *King,* Linn from “Knock Off” feels the need to prove herself to her culture. Linn’s appearance does not stereotypically reflect what an indigenous person looks like; however, she no longer feels shame for her appearance. Linn’s confidence and pride for her indigenous background has destructed all insecurities she once had. Both Minhaj and Linn came from a feeling of shame for their culture but have chosen to stand taller than the stereotypes and gain confidence in finding their true cultural identity.

In conclusion, both performances illustrated personal experiences of discrimination against their culture, causing them to feel shame and desire to change identity. Minhaj has had to continuously prove his patriotism to America; whereas, Linn felt the need to prove her ethnic background. The pressure of constantly having to prove one’s self may cause many insecurities and self-doubt. As a country, Canada should be excepting to all First Nations and immigrants without dispensing stereotypes before meeting an individual.

*References*

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