

# Hunger of memory

Business



The autobiographical book, *Hunger of Memory*, published by Richard Rodriguez is an interesting account of his education. It narrates the experience of a young Spanish boy being assimilated from his native Spanish culture and eventually adopting the American culture, seemingly by default. *Hunger of Memory* narrates the privileges enjoyed by Richard, a Spanish minority, and the impact it had on his attitude and his perspective. This book is about the effect of language, education, and the environment on Richard's transition from childhood to adulthood. The story is centred on Richard Rodriguez, a young man who is privileged to have an education as opposed to his unlearned Spanish counterparts. In order to acquire an education and fit into a school, he had to become a part of the American public society especially by convert understanding (Rodriguez, 2004).

He begins his story by recounting his first couple of months in school. His first few days are awkward and lonely. He is afraid to speak because he knows very little English but is eloquent in his native language Spanish. He, however, realizes how important it is for him to learn English in order to fit into the American education system and benefit from it. The nuns at his school realize the boy's dilemma and request his parents to start speaking English at home.

This of course goes a long way in assisting little Richard learn and speak English. Richard notes that learning English and being eloquent is a valuable and necessary assimilation into the American culture. Keeping in mind that language is an important component of culture, it is clear that Richard's assimilation into the American culture begins at a tender age without him necessary noticing it. At that point it appears to be necessary that he learn

English if he is to benefit from an education. It is clearly his first step towards a different culture from his native one.

Integration of cultures cannot succeed if parties involved cannot communicate. Usually, the immigrant culture is forced by circumstances to adopt the host culture. As the narrative progresses, Richard recounts his experience growing up and transitioning to manhood. He explains the role of the church he is exposed to, the Catholic Church, the role played by family, and the nature of family ties. However, his main purpose in narrating the story is to explain the impact of education on his transition from childhood to manhood.

In the beginning of the narrative, Richard explains how language created a distinctive boundary between his private and public life. Growing up, he spoke Spanish primarily. And this he related to his private life. He was withdrawn during the first few months in school when he could not speak English. Learning English, however, thrust him into public life.

English so far had been a language he heard outside his private life and family life. It was the language he associated with strangers and outsiders in general. He learnt English nonetheless, and it steered him towards a public life. Rodriguez expresses some frustration with having to learn a new language. This is especially evident when the nuns from his Catholic elementary school visit his parents and express concern over Rodriguez' poor performance.

They advise his parents to speak English at home in order to help their children learn how to speak English faster. Rodriguez explains that this <https://assignbuster.com/hunger-of-memory/>

changes a lot in his home. This hastens his assimilation to the American culture. In fact, he eventually becomes comfortable speaking English at home and is confident enough to answer a question in class. This assures him that he finally belongs to the public. This, in his view, is the first step for him and his family toward becoming Americanized.

Rodriguez admits that something was lost when he and his family switched from Spanish to English. However, he is quick to point out that he gained important things. Two of the most important ones were maturity and a public identity. He clearly appreciates the change that lingual change brought about and as a result he does not support bilingual education. He refutes the claims made by bilingual education activists who claim that failure to teach children in their native language will cause them to lose their individuality. He asserts that lingual assimilation is a valuable and necessary adoption.

Rodriguez asserts that education played a very major role in shaping his life and his success. He explains that education separated him from the life he had and led to the successful one he has. According to him assimilation into the American culture through an education saved him from a substandard life and actually gave him a successful lifestyle. Rodriguez repeatedly refers to himself as the scholarship boy in Richard Hogart's book, *Uses of literacy*. Rodriguez relates to the scholarship boy, as expressed by Hogart, and this helps him understand and come to terms with his experiences. He especially relates to the scholarship boy in the sense that he worked for good grades in school and was keen on learning everything he could.

He, however, like the scholarship boy did not form his own opinions. He memorized a lot of information but never bothered analyzing it and forming his own opinion. The scholarship boy, like Rodriguez, also memorized a lot of information without necessarily forming his own opinion. He pursued academic success and lived in denial of his past. Rodriguez's narrative sparked a lot of criticism from the public.

Some criticized his negative attitude towards affirmative action yet he claimed to have benefited from the same. Critics consider it paradoxical that he should claim that the system is unfair to the underprivileged yet admit that it is the reason he is successful. Some Hispanics view it as a betrayal of the Spanish culture. He mentions in his work that he could not bring himself to consent that he was of Mexican ancestry. His work has been considered controversial by many analysts.

In "Aria", the first chapter, Rodriguez recounts how in a bid to learn English and to be a part of the public society, his family loses the Spanish language, which to him signified his private intimate life with family. In a sense, learning English and being part of the public society was traded for the private and native world of Spanish and its culture. The second chapter, "The Achievement of Desire", focuses on the impact of education on his living standard. Rodriguez attributes his success to education and asserts that he would not enjoy his successful lifestyle if he had not acquired an education. In this chapter, he explains his quest for education and its effect on his attitude and character.

Rodriguez is keen on obtaining information and learning as much as he can from books. This clearly sets him apart from his uneducated Spanish counterparts, and his family, and native friends. He shows how education has changed his perspective and view of everyday issues so much so that there is an obvious difference between his attitude and that of his native counterparts. His alienation, in addition to being attributed to education, is also attributed to his religion. He attests to being a Mexican Catholic, and this actually is what sets the confessional tone for his narrative.

He also attributes his alienation from the Mexican identity to the fact that he is a catholic. In complexion, Rodriguez admits that in spite of his assimilation to the American culture, he does not entirely lose sight of his roots. He says that his dark complexion and Indian looking features are a constant reminder of his ethnicity. They remind him that his assimilation does not really change who he is physically, and even though he manages to fit into the public society, he is still Spanish, and his ethnicity remains the same in spite of his assimilation to the American culture. They are a constant reminder of what he tries everyday to escape, his Spanish ethnicity. He is offered a teaching position at Yale, but he turns it down because he is convinced that the position has resulted from policies that marginalize and discriminate him as a less deserving candidate, therefore less qualified.

This is illustrated in the chapter “ Profession”, whereby he shows his negative attitude towards affirmative action. Rodriguez is careful to explain that the basis of the story is not ethnicity but his transition from childhood to manhood and the role played by education in the building of his character and beliefs. He exhibits dissatisfaction with his native ethnic roots and views

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his new self as having erased his ethnic past and replaced it with a more American lifestyle and culture. *Hunger of Memory* is written in a confessional tone, in which he acknowledges that he has lost something in the quest to fit into the public society. It is almost like he needs to do some self inquiry and acknowledges his alienated service-hood.

He confesses that learning English alienated him from his native Spanish culture, by taking away the Spanish language. In his account, it appears that he had to trade his native private ethnicity for the public life of the American culture. Rodriguez attributes his growth from a lower class Spanish minority to a middle class American to education. He also shows that it is not possible for one to be assimilated and still retain their native language and culture. He clearly shows that adopting the host language and culture is a necessary part of any integration. According to Rodriguez, it is not possible to assimilate if one is not ready to drop their culture and adopt the host culture.

Rodriguez is convinced that the Spanish language acts as an obstacle to assimilation for many Mexican Americans. The mastery of the English language acts as an empowering tool for Rodriguez. It liberates him from a confined native and private world to the public society of the American culture. His English is what propels him to the public American society and also helps him understand the American culture. It appears that he makes light of the fact other cultures are also rich and fun.

Diversity in his case is not an option if there is to be assimilation. It is clear that Rodriguez understands that assimilation to the American culture requires that one trades it off with some important aspect of their native

culture. In *Hunger for Memory*, Rodriguez does not appear to mind trading his traditions and belief. He struggles with the unfair treatment he perceives as extended towards minorities in America and does not support affirmative action. He also struggles with the constant physical reminder of his ethnicity and the reaction it spurs in people regardless of his educational achievement.