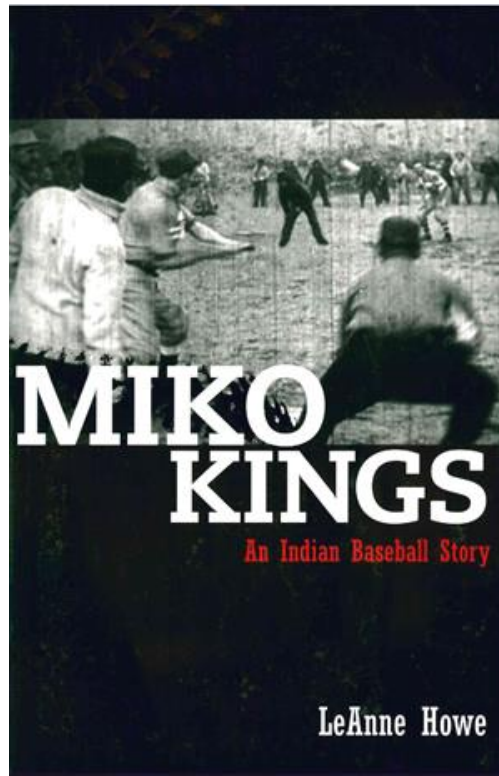


A Study of the Ethnocentric Elements in
Leanne Howe's *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*

Dr. V. David Arputha Raj and S. Sindhu



Abstract

There are many diverse cultures in the world. Each culture has numerous ethnic groups within it. An ethnic group is a socially defined category of people who identify with each other based on common ancestry, social and cultural practices, homeland, religion, dialect, mythology and physical appearances. Each ethnic group has different traditions, behaviours, habits and habitat. When all these differences meet at a same place called society or country, there begins misunderstandings and hatreds among different societies or countries in the world. This hatred and misunderstanding arise primarily due to ethnocentric attitude. Ethnocentrism is the tendency of understanding the world only from the viewpoint of one's own affiliation and assessing others

strictly based on the terms of their own ethnicity. This paper attempts to analyse in detail ethnocentrism, its characteristics, types, causes and effects, through the Native American novel *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* by LeAnne Howe, which talks about Native American culture, its people, habits, habitats in detail and also the suppression of the Native Americans by the White Americans, in addition to highlighting the causes for all the problems with reference to selected novel.

Key words: ethnocentrism, LeAnne Howe, *Miko Kings*, indigenous writing, culture studies

Perceiving Cultural Patterns - Ethnocentrism

People perceive the world based on the cultural patterns that already exist in their minds and they tend to think and evaluate the rest of the world in the same way that they perceive. What people in one culture find to be natural and normal is found absurd by people of other cultures and at times, even disgusting. Moreover, these ideas, of what is right and wrong or good and bad, change over time and over cultures. This tendency to draw on one's own personal experiences to understand others' motivations is known as 'ethnocentrism'. Ethnocentrism refers to the wide-ranging belief in the cultural superiority of one's own ethnic group or an unusually high regard for one's own ethnic, religious or cultural group. This method of using one's own culture superior to all other cultures is called ethnocentrism. The term 'ethnocentrism' is derived from Greek words, viz. 'ethnos', which means for people or nation, and 'kentrikos', which means relating to the centre. From the origin of the term, it can be defined as the tendency to understand the world only from the point of one's own unit of affiliation and evaluating all others strictly based on one's own group. The term ethnocentrism was first coined by an American sociologist William Graham Sumner in 1906, to describe the view that one's own culture can be considered as the central, while other cultures or religious traditions can be reduced to less prominent roles. In *Folkways*, Sumner defines ethnocentrism as "the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference with their own culture" (13).

Categories of Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is broadly categorised into two types, namely Low Ethnocentrism, which serves as the basis for nationalistic pride and patriotism, and High Ethnocentrism, which is an

abnormal feeling where an individual or country becomes aggressive towards other cultures or countries. Ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon, inherited by every human in the world, because every human is more devoted towards their own culture than other cultures. Some of the consequences of ethnocentrism, according to Gudykunst (2003), Harris and Jonson (2007) and Jandt (2004), are as follows:

- It leads to an almost complete misunderstanding of values, intentions, statements and actions of people of the out-groups.
- It accepts in-groups norms, values and behaviours as moral, good and proper where as those of the out-groups as immoral, wrong and improper.
- It leads people to exaggerate group differences. Ethnocentric cultural group see themselves as superior to other groups, which are treated as inferior.
- It brings out negative reactions on out-groups such as distrust, hostility and contempt.
- It leads to intolerance of other cultures and is used to justify the mistreatment on out-groups. (qtd. in Mekonnen Hailemariam Zikargae: 131)

Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story



LeAnne Howe

Courtesy: <https://mikokings.wordpress.com/leanne-howe/>

These factors are seen in plenty in the novel *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* by LeAnne Howe, a Native American writer. *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*, published in 2007, is the story of Miko Kings, an Indian (Native Americans) baseball team from Ada, Oklahoma, who are playing the Twin Territories series of baseball against the United States Seventh Cavalry Team in the final match of the series. Miko Kings team is a mixture of players from the tribes of Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw and mixed blood players who are competing against various baseball teams during the 1907 season, the year of Oklahoma Statehood.

The story of the novel, *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*, predominantly weaves around ethnocentrism, with numerous symbols and characters to represent ethnocentrism, which is discussed elaborately in the following lines. In the novel, White Americans exhibit extreme ethnocentric attitude. As discussed earlier, when ethnocentrism goes beyond the control of an individual and affects another group or ethnicity, it results in racism, terrorism, cultural imperialism, etc. When the White Americans wanted to establish their identity, power and politics over the Native Americans, it resulted in the White Americans occupying all the places of the Native Americans and the Native Americans being sent to the reservation areas in mass. The children of the Native Americans were detached from their parents and were sent to boarding schools. Moreover, those children were forcibly taught English language, as an attempt to replace their tribal languages.

Love for Our Own Ethnicity

The extreme side of ethnocentrism, an extreme love for their own ethnicity, is seen in the players and representatives of the Seventh Cavalry baseball team. The ethnocentrism of the Miko Kings was in winning the game in the finals and establishing their identity in the society, which in turn will help them to regain whatever they had lost on the grounds of racial differences, and this can be considered as low ethnocentrism found common in all human beings. On the other hand, the representatives of the Seventh Cavalry Team wanted to destroy the entire Native American race, by means of overpowering them by winning the game. In other words, the ethnocentrism of the Native Americans is to regain their lost identity, whereas the ethnocentrism of the White Americans is to destroy the identity of the Native Americans. Being the representatives of high ethnocentrism in the novel, the White Americans took unethical means to

win the game over the Native Americans. They even changed the rules of the game in favour of them. It is well seen in the conversation, When questioned, “Mister, the rules are the game in baseball” (MK 91), the answer was: “No they aren’t,” he says. “Baseball is a game with no limits!” (MK 91).

Misunderstanding Caused by Ethnocentric Attitudes

The high level ethnocentric attitudes of the White Americans resulted in many consequences like complete misunderstanding of intentions and actions of the people of the out-group, which is an important ethnocentric trait as expressed here. The White Americans completely misunderstood the intention of the baseball game, the Native American team and their intention of winning the Twin Territory Series and they also mistook all the actions done by the Native Americans. The game was invented by the Native Americans to construct good relationships between various tribes in the continent and showcase their talents. Their purpose of winning the series is to get back their lost identity and their rights. But the White Americans did not even try to understand the intentions of the Native Americans because of their high ethnocentrism. The primary goal of inventing baseball game was destroyed with the intervention of the White Americans, for they saw this game as a medium to subjugate the Native Americans. For the White Americans, during the game, betting on Indians is like betting on horses. Bobbitt says, in the novel, “They are both commodities” (MK 32).

The Trait of Negative Reaction

The ethnocentric trait of showing negative reaction on the out-groups such as hostility and contempt is expressed here. The White Americans always had hatred and enmity towards the Native Americans and it is mirrored in the novel by Howe. They disliked whatever the Native Americans did. This is the reason why the White Americans could not accept a tribal baseball team Miko Kings in the game and their fame and victory in the series that is why they bribed the star player of the Miko Kings team, Hope. The crooks tempt him stating that if he wishes to achieve the love of Justina, his girlfriend, and to have a happy life further, it is better to receive the amount offered by the Seventh Cavalry team rather than winning the game. They entice, stating “Justina’s done went home. After the Klan showed up at your house she was scared out of her mind. Said if you had any gumption you’d take the money we’re offering so the two of you

can make a fresh start. Five thousand dollars will go a long way these days” (MK 194). After winning the series, the White Americans did not think of sparing even a single Native American. Winning the game gave the White Americans the unquestionable rights to destroy the Native American society.

The Trait of Intolerance

The traits of intolerance towards other cultures and the reasons used to justify the mistreatment on out-groups are manifested here. The novel details every nuclear form of suppression levied by the White Americans over the Natives. “White Southerners hated the Fifteenth Amendment because it prevented a state from denying the vote to any person because of their race” (MK 75). The Whites taking the lands of the tribal communities illegally; vehemently sending them to the Reservation area; forcefully taking the children away from their parents; sending them to boarding schools; and finally killing every last one of them are presented in the novel with plenty of evidences. All these unlawful activities of the Native Americans are the outcome of high ethnocentrism towards their culture and race. The White Americans even today do not feel guilty for their illegal and unjustly behaviour against the Native Americans but they justify their every act.

Ethnocentric Attitudes among Native Americans

Ethnocentric attitudes are not only found among the White Americans, it is there among the Native Americans also. The only difference is that the White Americans harm the other races because of their extreme ethnocentrism in them, whereas the Native Americans have low ethnocentrism, and they do not bother to offend the other races but are very patriotic and loyal towards their race and culture. They had control over their ethnocentrism. Though ethnocentric attitude is one of the universal behaviours, it has to be controlled by the individual. Once it is left out of control, it leads to all destruction to the people, society and country.

Cultivate Cultural Tolerance and Cultural Reativism

In the present scenario all over the world, violence in the name of race, religion, sex and other discriminations is very commonly seen. Through this research, it is observed that it is because of the ethnocentric attitude of the individuals of different ethnicities. It is suggested that

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Dr. V. David Arputha Raj and S. Sindhu

9

A Study of the Ethnocentric Elements in Leanne Howe’s *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*

those individuals should be made aware of cultural tolerance, cultural relativism and so on. They should be taught the fact that every human is unique in his own ways. When this tolerance arises in the minds and hearts of every individual, the world will become a place for peaceful dwelling.

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10

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