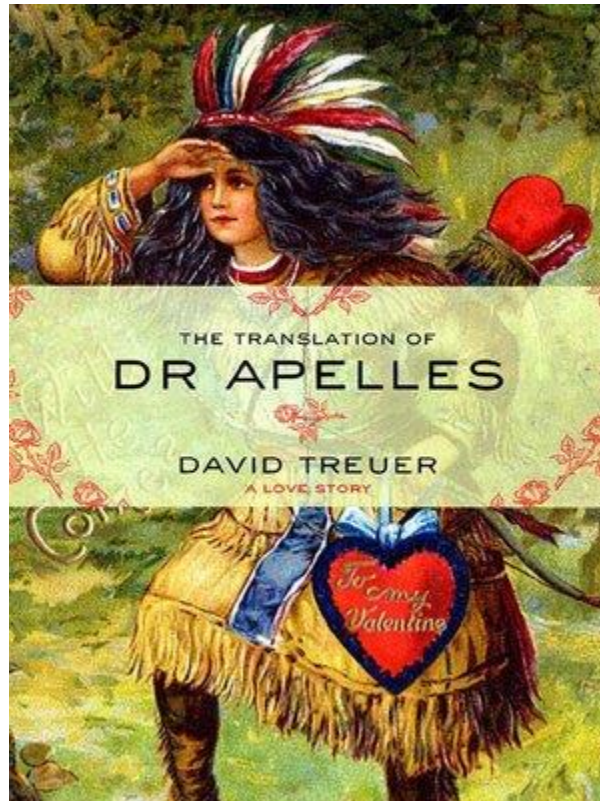


**A Study of Ethnocentric Elements in David Treuer's
*The Translation of Dr. Apelles***

S. Sindhu and Dr. V. David Arputha Raj



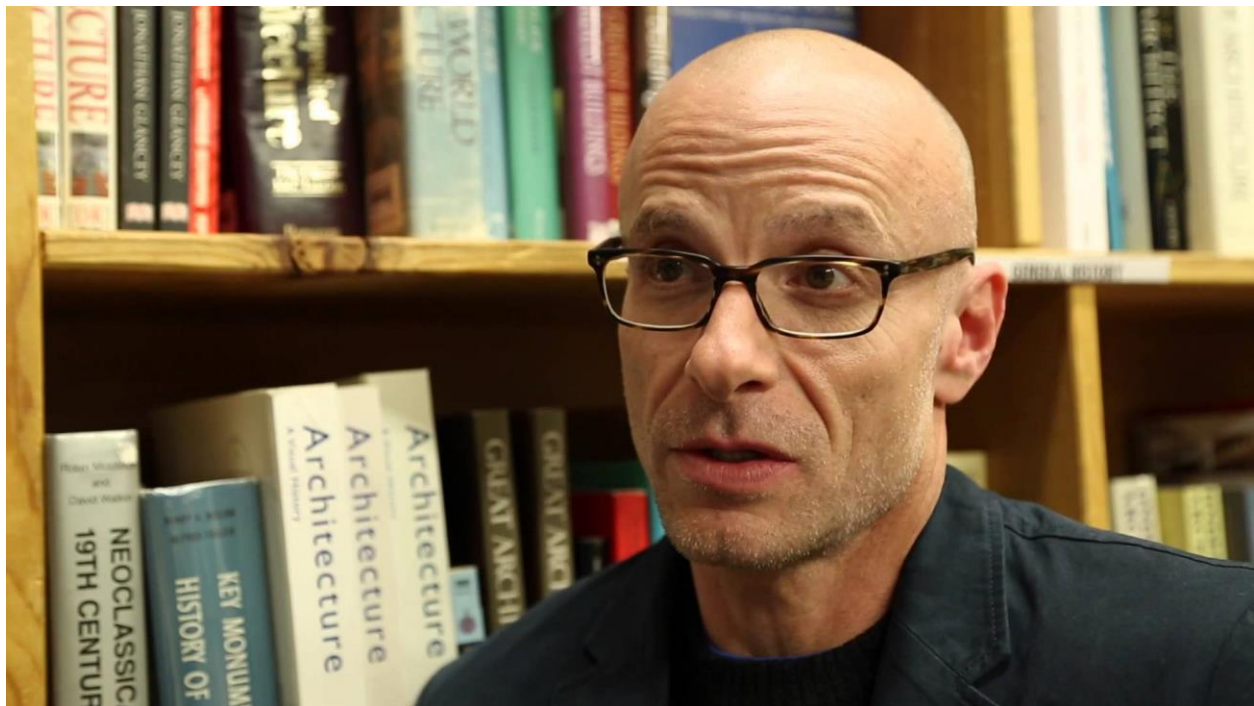
Abstract

A society consists of a group of people who live in a territory, interact and identify themselves with one another. The people of the same society and territory share certain common aspects, such as religion, language, ethics and behaviour, etc. Culture is a defining element of society (people). The problem arises when different cultures of diverse nature live together in a society. Practicing some common aspects of one culture will inevitably offend or contradict the values of other cultures in the society. This may lead to misunderstandings, biases and judgments between different cultures in the society. The attitude of making judgments based on the criteria

of one cultural group by applying those criteria in judging the behaviours and beliefs of people who may be from different cultural backgrounds is called ethnocentrism. This paper attempts to analyze in detail the ethnocentric attitudes, traits, causes and effects with reference to the Native American novel *The Translation of Dr. Apelles* by David Treuer, where the protagonist Dr. Apelles shows ethnocentric attitudes and suffers because of it. The paper also tries to find a solution through the character of the novel.

Key words: ethnocentrism, indigenous writing, culture, language

Ethnocentrism: Perception of Right and Wrong



David Treuer

Courtesy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlzY3d2pIU0>

People perceive the world based on their cultural patterns that already exist in their minds and they tend to think and evaluate 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 in another culture and 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 other's motivations is known as 'ethnocentrism'. Ethnocentrism refers to the wide-ranging

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belief in the cultural superiority of one's own ethnic group or an unusually high regard for one's own ethnic, religious, cultural group. This method of using one's own culture superior to all other cultures is called ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is of two types: Low ethnocentrism that serves as the basis for nationalistic pride and patriotism and High ethnocentrism, an abnormal feeling, where an individual or country becomes aggressive towards other cultures or countries. Though it is a common behaviour among people, it leads to some consequences.

Some Consequences of Ethnocentrism

According to Gudykunst (2003), Harris and Jonson (2007) and Jandt (2004), (qtd. in Mekonnen Hailemariam Zikargae: 131) the consequences are mentioned below:

- Hindrance in understanding and adapting with the people of the other culture and at the same time, creating deep understanding with the people and customs of their own culture.
- Bringing about negative affective reactions to out-groups such as distrust, hostility and contempt.
- Leading to a rejection of the richness and knowledge of other cultures. Furthermore, it impedes communication and blocks the exchange of ideas and skills among people.
- Intolerance towards the out-groups and use of abusive language or mistreatment of people in the other groups.

The Translation of Dr. Apelles

The above characteristics are found in the novel *The Translation of Dr. Apelles* by David Treuer. The novel is about a translator of the Native American texts, Dr. Apelles, who, by chance, happens to find a document that seems to be in a language only he can speak and understand. He feels that he alone is capable of translating the same into English. As he begins translating it, he becomes one with the story in the original document and realizes suddenly that he has never been in love with anyone. As such, the novel comprises quest of sorts, quest to translate the document and quest to fall in love.

At the surface level, the novel may seem to have less cultural relevancy and more emotional relevancy but while delving deep into it, it is found that the novel is wrapped with exhaustive cultural aspects. The novel glimpses over the life of Dr. Apelles in the Reservation in

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his childhood, his pains and discomforts undergone mentally in an American city and his passion for his profession, i.e., translator, and especially towards his Native American languages. All such aspects contribute to the better understanding of ethnocentrism in this novel.

Native American Novels

Native American novels are rich in cultural aspects because the Native Americans are very traditional and unique. A novel that has cultural aspects will evidently represent some characteristics of ethnocentrism because ethnocentrism is present in every individual in various degrees.

An author brings forward his cultural elements in his writings mainly because of the ethnocentric nature that he has got within himself for his own culture. However, positive ethnocentrism is a controlled emotion and when it goes uncontrolled, it leads to terrorism, racism and so on. As such, the controlled ethnocentric nature is presented through such native literatures. By presenting their cultural values and tradition, every ethnocentric writer attempts and achieves in presenting to the world the uniqueness of their culture.

Protagonist Dr. Apelles

In the novel, the protagonist Dr. Apelles is shown as an ethnocentric person because he has so much attachment and passion towards his tribe, culture, language and place. It is exposed in the novel by his constant thoughts and references to his tribe, life in Reservation and his tribal languages. He ponders over the good old days that he spent during his childhood with his parents and tribal people in his place, even the days at Reservation area (the least maintained land in the country with no basic facilities for survival). Dr. Apelles lived quite a happy life which he remembers all the time and he does not experience that happy and contented life in the American city. He does not feel comfortable in socializing with the people or place or culture.

One of the consequences of ethnocentrism is hindrance in understanding and adapting to the people of other culture and at the same time, creating deep understanding with the people and customs of their own culture. This is well shown by the character Dr. Apelles. He has very strong bonding towards his tribe Anishinaabe, his place at Reservation and his family members. At a point, when he has to leave the Reservation area and move to the city, he cries literally and he starts crying when he contemplates about his past life at Reservation area. While translating the Native American manuscript he is reminded of his childhood and adolescent period that he has spent with his tribal

community and family members at the reservation area. As he repeatedly ponders over his past life, he does not have any interest in his present life in the city. He does not try to associate himself with his co-workers, his neighbours, and the new culture in which he lives at present. He likes to live his life in solitude.

Negative Affective Reactions

Another outcome of ethnocentrism is the negative affective reaction about other groups such as distrust, hostility and contempt and this is well shown through the same character Dr. Apelles by his extreme distrust towards the out-groups (out-group refers to groups of people from different culture, religion and language). In the novel, he develops distaste and hatred towards the White people, their culture and especially, their language. That is the reason he did not even try to mingle with other people in his present life in American city for years.

Attachment towards His Language

Like his attachment towards his tribe and place, he has so much attachment towards his language too. As a translator, he takes more interest and concern while translating the documents from the Native American languages into English than translating documents into other languages. The reason for his involvement in translating this Native American manuscript is that it was written in his own tribal language, which he claims that he alone could translate in the world. The love for his ethnic language is expressed by the author while introducing the character. The following lines from the novel convey his love for his tribal languages. “When he occasionally meets with the Indians from his tribe, or other tribes, he can bring those beautiful languages to the front of his mind. So special are they to him. . . .”(TA 35)

Rejection of the Richness and Knowledge of Other Cultures

The third consequence of ethnocentrism is leading to a rejection of the richness and knowledge of other cultures. Such rejection impedes communication and blocks the exchange of ideas and skills among people and this is shown by Dr. Apelles’ rejection of the richness and knowledge of the other culture. Furthermore, ethnocentrism impedes communication and blocks the exchange of ideas and skills among people, which is again portrayed through the character of Dr. Apelles. Though he lives and works in an American city, he did not want to know about the city culture. He is fixed and contented to know only about his culture, which, according to him,

is the best. As a result, he rejects the other culture (city culture) and does not socialize with anyone at RECAP. He never shares his views, opinions, feelings and emotions to anyone. He prefers to be alone and away from the present atmosphere. He does not even exchange his thoughts and ideas related to his work at his work place. The complete rejection of the city culture in which he resides is seen obvious in his solitary life in the city.

Intolerance towards Other Cultures

The fourth and final consequence of ethnocentrism is intolerance towards other cultures and use of abusive languages or mistreatment of people in the other group. Dr. Apelles does not mistreat any person or people from the out-group but he highly distrusts people of other groups and the intolerance resulted in abusive words against White Americans. He refers to White Americans as “‘a little ghost in living colors,’ robbed of his own reality” (TA 205). The hatred he has for White Americans who robbed the identity of the Native Americans is evidently seen all through the novel. This final consequence of ethnocentrism is not only found in Apelles in the novel but also in White Americans and their government. The intolerance of White Americans towards the Native Americans grew very strong and that resulted in the mistreatment of them. Taking away all the lands and houses from the Native Americans, sending them to the reservation area, and eradicating the tribal groups and languages from the country are all the extreme consequences of ethnocentrism found in the novel. The inefficiency of the tribal government to take any step for the betterment of Native Americans by giving the basic needs for their people and taking steps against White Americans for their mistreatment of Native Americans are experienced by Dr. Apelles in the novel.

Love as a Solution

All these traits of ethnocentrism are discussed with the reference to the incidents in the novel but in a subtle way, because the ethnocentric attitudes have not resulted in the destructive way in the novel. Though Dr. Apelles is an ethnocentric person, he has control over him and that protects him from doing any harm to the people living there in America. To conclude Treuer has literally transformed his ethnocentric outlooks in the novel in a different way without the common aspects of the Native American novels and through the novel he has recorded his Native American culture and his feeling of ethnocentrism towards his culture to the world. Finally the author has given love as a solution to this ethnocentric attitude of Dr. Apelles by

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making him fall in love with his co-worker Campaspe, who is a White American. The author has given a positive ending by making him accept this love and mingle with his co-workers in RECAP.

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