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Ethnocentrism in Slumdog Millionaire

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Conflict in the world is often caused by people's differences. Some people think that they are superior and others think that they are inferior. These assumptions often bring much harm to society, and it has led some people to create artistic portrayals of ethnocentrism in society, to increase awareness and to perhaps even extinguish it. One such creative work is Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. This award-winning Indian film shows how ethnocentrism can ruin lives and why many of our personal beliefs and biases are wrong.

Ethnocentrism is the belief that a certain ethnic or cultural group is more important than others. Usually it is one's own group, but it can also refer to the belief that other groups are better than one's own. They base this judgment on criteria such as religion, customs, language and behavior. These distinctions serve to define their cultural identity (Anderson & Taylor, 2006). William Sumner (1906) coined the term ethnocentrism after observing how people differentiate between the ingroup and others. He thinks that it leads to contempt of outsiders and pride or vanity toward one's own culture. While this may be generally true for Whites, other cultures such as some Indians may actually think that their culture is inferior to others, such as the Yellows or the Whites. Both cases are still considered however to be ethnocentric.

Both cases are portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*. The story is set in impoverished but booming Mumbai, India. Jamal and his brother Salim are Muslims, but many Indians are Hindu. Conservative religious groups or fundamentalists tend to think that their religion is the only true religion and everyone else will suffer eternal damnation for being in the wrong religion. Consequently, riots between Muslims and Hindus often take place in India, killing hundreds of people. As shown in the film, Jamal and Salim's mother was killed and they were forced to wander the streets as homeless children.

As children they also studied English, since it is the language of choice internationally. In one scene in the film, the teacher, who was lecturing them about *The Three Musketeers*, hit Jamal on the head for not being able to answer a question about the book. In India, teachers, especially those from the Brahmin caste, are considered superior to others. To disrespect them in any way may lead to harm or punishment.

The effect of the caste system is also portrayed in the film. Jamal later worked as a tea server in a multinational call center, and serving tea there is usually reserved for the "untouchables" or the low castes in India. Jamal also later joined the Indian version of the television game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and when the host of the show asked him what kind of work he did, the audience simply laughed at him after he revealed his occupation. The host also became suspicious of him when he kept

answering the questions correctly; for he couldn't believe that a tea server could have such knowledge. He was simply too ethnocentric, so he called the police to investigate the matter. The police arrested him with no evidence of any crime, and they tortured him through electrocution to admit or confess his modus operandi. But being an honest person, he simply told the truth, while his mouth drooled with blood, and he shared the tragic story of his life whereby he learned all the answers that he needed for the show through the School of Hard Knocks.

The call center that Jamal worked for is also ethnocentric. They are not allowed to speak in other languages. English is the only language allowed because the call center is outsourced for Western countries. The customers in those countries are of course, ethnocentric too; so if they hear the operators or representatives speaking in another language, they might think of them as incompetent. And even if they speak in English, if the customer notices a foreign accent, they may also become irate. This was shown in the movie when a call center rep had to excuse himself from his cubicle; he asked Jamal to substitute for him and answer some calls even if Jamal were not trained for it while the rep went out. Jamal eventually received a call from an English woman, but she became suspicious and irate. She asked where he was located, and he gave a bogus location in England to cover up his real outfit.

Furthermore, when Jamal was younger, he thought of Bollywood stars like superior beings. Indians tend to think of Hollywood as the best in the movie industry, and their ethnocentricity leads them to copy it and call their local movie industry Bollywood. When a Bollywood star visited their slum via helicopter, Jamal was using the public "toilet," which was a make-shift outfit where human waste simply dropped several feet below it to a trash dump. Someone outside the outfit locked him in while he saw the helicopter pass by through a roof-less outfit. Not wanting to miss the opportunity of getting the Bollywood star's autograph, he dived through the hole at the bottom of the outfit and became immersed in human manure. Then he quickly ran, smelly and filthy all over, toward the movie star with a picture of him held in his hand. Fortunately, after all that effort, the Bollywood star signed it and gave it back to him.

In the end, ethnocentrism just ruins people's lives in so many ways, and *Slumdog Millionaire* gives many good examples of why people suffer in society because of it. If only people think of themselves more equally, then the world would be a better place.

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