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The Other Side of Biculturalism:

Native American Symbolism in the Writings of Zitkala-Ša

The United States is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation. For those of ethnic backgrounds, trying to live in the United States and maintain their culture and identity is a common issue. As they adapt to life in the United States and accept American culture, a middle ground is created, and they find themselves halfway between their own culture and that of the dominant United States culture. Native American author Zitkala-Ša is an example of such a person. In her essays “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “The School Days of an Indian Girl”, Zitkala-Ša tells of her experiences growing up in the Yankton Sioux tribe, her time in a “paleface” boarding school, and her experience living between these two cultures. Many critics, such as Ron Carpenter, have written about her bicultural identity. However, when examining the cultural beliefs and symbolism that influences her writing, a majority of critics examine Christian beliefs, such as Catherine Kuncz does in her essay “Fires of Eden: Zitkala-Ša’s Bitter Apple.” By only examining her Anglo and Christian influences, they exclude Zitkala-Ša’s Native American culture and upbringing and how it influences her written works. Here, I claim that Native American symbolism is present in Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical essays “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “The School Days of an Indian Girl”, as well as *The Sun Dance Opera*. Through her use of Native American symbolism of seasonal setting, colors, and unity of opposites, Zitkala-Ša affirms the Native American side of her bicultural identity and legitimizes the voice of minority authors in the United States.

As critic Ron Carpenter defines it, bicultural in the context of Zitkala-Ša's writings means that, "she signs in a context that is inseparably Anglo and Yankton; a context in which she is irreducible to either culture and alienated from each" (1). As demonstrated in *Four Strange Summers*, after her first few years at school, Zitkala-Ša felt alienated from her people. However, she felt just as alienated when she returned to school. She writes, "Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone west, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice. During the fall and winter seasons I scarcely had a real friend" (76). Zitkala-Ša found herself in a middle ground, not fitting in with either group. Because of her Euro-American education and exposure to their culture, Zitkala-Ša became a new person. Her change is evident in the essay "Four Strange Summers." Here, Zitkala-Ša returns home and experiences discomfort and restlessness because "[her] brother, being almost ten years [her] senior, did not quite understand her feelings. [Her] mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write" (69). Her new identity makes it hard for her to be a part of the Yankton-Sioux culture, and her identity becomes that of bicultural. Zitkala-Ša cannot define herself as wholly Yankton-Sioux, nor wholly Euro-American. Despite this conflict, she imbeds Native American symbolism in her essays to show that her Native heritage still influences her identity. One such symbol is that of the different seasons in the settings of her essays.

The distinction of the seasons is significant because of the importance of seasons in Native American conception of time. As Jerry H. Gill explains in *Native American Worldviews*: "Central to the Native American Understanding of time is the concept of continuous renewal or regeneration. This idea plays a key role both in community life and in individual lives. In the former the notion of renewal is connected to the cycle of the season, while in the latter it turns on

the stages and passages of a person's development as a man and woman." (Gill 90) This is evident in the time of the year that Zitkala-Ša's essays are set in. Her identity changes and develops with the seasons. She is a part of her tribe's culture during the summer season. In "Impressions of an Indian Childhood", Zitkala-Ša recounts various events from her childhood. She remembers fondly listening to legends told by the tribe's elders (15), learning beadwork from her mother (19), and playing with other children in the hills (21). These happy memories occurred during the summer, most often on a "bright clear [summer] day" (18). It is in the autumn when Anglo American missionaries come to her tribe and convince Zitkala-Ša to leave her home and go to the boarding school. This is apparent because Zitkala-Ša leaves wrapped in a warm blanket (44). Autumn, the time of transition between summer and winter serves as a transition for Zitkala-Ša from her Native American culture to the Anglo Culture impose upon both her and her peers in the boarding school.

Contrastingly, the events in "The School Days of an Indian Girl" occur mainly in the wintertime. Zitkala-Ša intentionally excludes events from the summers or autumns at the boarding school, and only writes about her experiences from the wintertime. Her time in the boarding school is a period of great change. First, a teacher strips her of her Native American identity by cutting her long hair. (56) Then, Zitkala-Ša and her peers are forced to speak English or face punishment, as shown in "The Snow episode" (57). They are taught to fear the devil, despite the fact that they were "taught to fear them [demons] no more than those who stalked about in material guise" (63) by their tribal elders. All of these events occur in the cold of winter, which has a significant meaning in Native American traditions.

In many Native American traditions, the different seasons each have specific purposes in the lives of the Native Americans. Summer is for hunting and gathering; winter is more

ceremonial. The Kwakiutl of the American Northwest coastal region, for example, describe it thus: “The Kwakiutl see the seasons almost as opposites, yet as interdependent. During the winter, the entire order of human existence is reversed. The winter is actually not a time at all, in the sense of a succession of new moments, but rather a reenactment of that timeless era before and during which creation took place” (Hill 93). While Zitkala-Ša was part of the Yankton-Sioux tribe and not the Kwakiutl, her writings reflect the idea that the winter is a series of new moments and a recreation, symbolic for a time of change and the creation of a new identity.

Her essays are evidence that she came to terms with her dual identity. As shown earlier, each culture is separated by its assigned season: The Yankton-Sioux with summer, Anglo American with winter. Summer and winter are polar opposites. By using the seasons to represent the two parts of her identity, Zitkala-Ša recognizes the differences of the two cultures. But as quoted from Hill earlier in the essay, the two seasons can be seen as interdependent. The ritualistic religious practices that occur in the winter can influence the success of hunting and farming in the summer. Equally, the two parts of Zitkala-Ša’s identity influence each other and become one identity in her writings.

For example, when read as a coming of age story, the seasons play a key role in the blending of these two identities in Zitkala-Ša’s essays. Without her education and exposure to Euro-American culture, Zitkala-Ša would not have known the typical elements of a coming of age story. However, she makes a very distinct change to those elements. Typically, in traditional Euro-American writings, coming of age or great change occurs during the spring. Zitkala-Ša, however, sets her time of change in the winter because in Native American tradition, the winter is a representation of the time between creation period and better suits the formation of her identity between Native American and Euro-American. By setting a traditional coming of age

narrative in the winter, Zitkala-Ša demonstrates that while her formal education was Euro-American, she chooses to keep her Native American culture a part of her writing. This is further evident by the use of color and their symbolic meanings in her essay's settings.

The colors used in the settings of Zitkala-Ša's essay can also be interpreted per Native American beliefs. Barbara Adams, a famous warrior and medicine woman of the Oglala Sioux, explains in "Prayers of Smoke" that in Makaha Tribal culture, the four directions of the compass have associated colors: black with the West, white with the North, red with the East, and Yellow with the South. (74) In Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays, these colors are used in association with the setting. In the essay, "The Big Red Apples", a Peer tells Zitkala-Ša "of the great tree where grew, red, red apples" (Zitkala-Ša, Stories 41) and these become a symbol of the East for her. In Makaha culture, the color red symbolizes peace and light, birth and blood. (Adams 75) For Zitkala-Ša as a child, this is what she hoped for by going east with the missionaries: enlightenment through education and a new birth into a new light. She is excited at the prospect of becoming independent as evident in the essay when she and her peers "showed one another [their] new beaded Moccasins and the width of the belts that girded [their] new dresses" (Zitkala-Ša 44). This phrase shows the peace of the girls who would be going east, and the beginning of their new lives as adolescents independent of their parents.

Unfortunately, this understanding of symbolism and its association with the east is not what Zitkala-Ša experienced. Zitkala-Ša portrays her time in the North during the wintertime, in the white winter snow. Her depiction of the school is more akin to the Makaha symbolism for the North: "White is the color of the North. As winter cleanses the earth of the weak, white and the north teach a person endurance and courage. White is the color of wisdom, which comes from encounters with the hard things of life. The north sends tests" (Adams 74). Zitkala-Ša

learned endurance and courage at the hands of her instructors, who as previously mentioned, were forceful and punishing towards Zitkala-Ša and her peers.

In another example, Zitkala-Ša writes of an experience she had while in college, when she delivered a speech at an inter-collegiate competition in the State Capitol:

“After the orations were delivered a deeper burn awaited me. There, before that vast ocean of eyes, some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it...While we waited for the verdict of the judges, I gleamed fiercely upon the throngs of palefaces. My teeth were hard set, as I saw the white flag still floating insolently in the air.” (Stories, 79)

The main imagery in this paragraph are all white objects: the white flag, the pale, white faces of the other students, and Zitkala-Ša’s hard set teeth. Each of these objects challenges Zitkala-Ša to endure trials. The white flag mocks her identity as a Native American as do the palefaces, and her white teeth challenge her not to speak out about the rude words of those mocking her. Everything that challenges her Native American identity is white. In traditional Euro-American symbolism, the color white signifies purity, cleanliness, and peace. By using white objects in this essay to symbolize oppositions and tests, Zitkala-Ša shows that she is using Native American symbolism in her writing. This way, the Native American aspect of her bicultural identity is further solidified. In this instance, the Euro American is her enemy; its opposition taught her to have courage and endure the taunts, and she ultimately passes the test which the white north brought upon her when her speech wins a prize and the white flag is lowered in defeat (79-80). While this instance shows conflict between Zitkala-Ša and Euro-Americans, she would later work with Euro-Americans to help expose her culture to a larger audience.

Zitkala-Ša collaborated with William F. Hanson to write and stage “The Sun Dance Opera” at a time when “the Bureau of Indian Affairs banned all dancing at the Southern Ute Agency and, specifically, forbade the Sun Dance...at Uintah Ouray” (Hafen 105). The work is a combination of the “costuming singing, dancing, storytelling aspects of plains culture” and “an orchestral accompaniment and dramatic plot,” which are elements common to western entertainment (Hafen 103). It is made up of both Yankton Sioux tradition and the Sun Dance Religion of the Ute Native Americans. This includes traditional Sioux Songs played on the violin, transitioned “from vocal to instrumental and into a foreign medium of orchestrated drama” (Hafen 104) and the traditional Sun Dance rituals, songs, and dances (105). *The Sun Dance Opera* is a collaboration of not only two different artists, but also two different cultures.

While many of the Native American traditions are apparent in the work, *The Sun Dance Opera* becomes more powerful when the main ideology of the Sun Dance tradition is taken into consideration. Says Joseph G. Jorgenson in a study of the Sun Dance Tradition, “The key symbol in Sun Dance ideology is the dichotomy of ‘dry-hot’: ‘water-cool’...The ideology of power, then, is an ideology of opposing but compatible forces. One can only gain power by synthesizing the opposites” (Jorgenson 207). Essentially, by bringing together two seemingly opposite things, a more powerful whole is created; just as two seemingly opposing cultures were brought together to create *The Sun Dance Opera*.

The dialogue of *The Sun Dance Opera* further reveals a synthesis of opposites. Although written in English, the text describes traditional belief. For instance, the Chieftain prays for a vision to help him determine which of two men would be the best husband for his daughter, saying, “Great Eagle... pray hover o’er the bravest one whom deeds make worthy to be my son...and win Winona my daughter dear” (Zitkala-Ša Dreams 146). The prayer takes the form of

a verse of poetry, with a distinct meter. The use of English poetry to express the beliefs of spirit visions and guidance from spirit animals is a fusion of two opposing cultures: Euro-American and Native American. By doing this, Zitkala-Ša expresses not only the beliefs shared directly in the text, such as that a brave shouldn't speak of his mother-in-law (134), or the meaning of the Sun Call (149) but shows that the main symbolism of the Plains Sun Dance informs the Sun Dance Opera.

While the aspects of Native tradition are abundant in the Sun Dance opera, the main symbolism of the Sun Dance is not as clear to readers who are unfamiliar with the tradition. An understanding of this key belief informs readers of how crucial both aspects of Zitkala-Ša's identity are. Without her education and knowledge of Euro-American arts and culture, she would not have had the opportunity to collaborate with Hansen to create this work. Similarly, her knowledge of the traditions and beliefs of various Native American tribes greatly informed the play and allowed the work to be authentic in not only word or sound, but also in the overarching themes of the Sun Dance tradition. The Native beliefs become the center of the work and not accessories when the audience understands the key symbolism of the Sun Dance. This helps to legitimize Zitkala-Ša's native heritage and makes the Sun Dance Opera a work of Native Traditions in English, rather than an English work about Native Traditions. Because the traditions are presented in a way that is familiar to Euro-Americans, the tradition can be seen not as a sideshow or a cultural oddity, but can be respected for what they are as if they had been presented in their original form. In this and in many other aspects, *The Sun Dance Opera* embodies the key symbolism of synthesizing opposites and is an accurate representation of Zitkala-Ša's bicultural identity.

Zitkala-Ša has a unique identity as a writer because of her life's experience. Because of her bicultural identity, he is able to pass on traditional stories and beliefs to other Euro Americans. She does this by incorporating traditional Native American Symbolism in her work. This is evident in her essays through the seasons and color in the setting of her autobiographical essays and the overarching themes of the Sun Dance Opera. These symbols are not obvious to those who have not studied Native American beliefs. Critics and historians should be responsible for identifying the aspects of Zitkala-Ša's writing that are linked to Native American beliefs and traditions. Without them, her identity, while still bicultural, seems to be more Euro-American than Yankton Sioux, and the rich meaning of Zitkala-Ša's texts could be lost.

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