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A Dakota Woman: Zitkala-Ša's Fight for Native Gender Identity

The writings of Dakota author Zitkala-Ša outline her abusive childhood experience in an eastern boarding school in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where she was taught the traditional western rules of femininity in an attempt to dissolve her Native cultural affiliations. Most contemporary scholarship about Native American gender roles has focused on the relationship between racial and gender identity, sometimes specifically exploring the disparity between white and Native feminism. This includes Carol Deven's analysis of the role of girls in the boarding school system and Lisa Udel's exploration of the discrepancy between white and Native motherhood. However, I will seek to show how Zitkala-Ša engages heavily in a conversation about how the rules of white femininity endanger Native gender roles and responsibilities that are important to the function of tribal life. In an effort to push back against the restrictive virtues imbued by the boarding school, Zitkala-Ša includes elements of Native American femininity in many of her original works, but most strikingly in her short story, "A Warrior's Daughter." This tale complements Zitkala-Ša's real-life advocacy for Native women, such as her addition of the main objective of "encouraging Indian women to participate in the activities of American citizens" to the constitution of the National Council of American Indians, a document she reportedly penned herself (3). Rather than simply acknowledging or even exploring how her identities of "woman" and "Dakota" interact with each other, Zitkala-Ša cites specific elements of cultural assimilation directed toward Native girls and argues against such indoctrination. Even as the "palefaces"

sought to initiate within Indian girls an “intellectual and spiritual metamorphosis into Christian citizens” through the process of cultural assimilation, Zitkala-Ša uses the character of Tusee in her short story to denounce such practices and advocate for Native women’s responsibilities as a member of a Native American tribe, as well as a part of a larger American society (Devens 227). These crucial roles are specifically characterized by Zitkala-Ša as those of nurturing and exemplary mother, particularly in regard to the crucial mother-daughter bond. By highlighting these concepts through her description of the main character’s attributes and actions in “A Warrior’s Daughter,” Zitkala-Ša seeks to maintain the sacred identity of Native American women, even as efforts to “whiten” and “Christianize” Native girls pervaded American society. By protecting these vital gender roles that are central to the preservation and diffusion of Native American customs, traditions, and peoples, she thus allows future generations to maintain their tribal ways of life.

Throughout her post-Carlisle Indian School career, Zitkala-Ša advocated for the empowerment of women, and for opportunities for political and social involvement to be afforded them. Perhaps most significantly, she specifically called for women to take a greater societal role in her 1926 Constitution and By-Laws for the National Council of American Indians. The main objective of “encouraging Indian women to participate in the activities of American citizens” is the sixth of eleven key goals of the association, suggesting that Zitkala-Ša saw women as being both literally and figuratively at the center of the effort to preserve Indian culture (3). In addition to highlighting the Native American tradition of giving women the freedom and respect needed to make a difference in their communities, Zitkala-Ša’s direct reference to women in this document draws a sharp distinction with the American Constitution, which does not give women the same consideration. In this way, Zitkala-Ša contrasts the tenants

of Native and white feminism, arguing that Native gender roles offer women more autonomy than those imposed by white society.

Complementing this basic goal of her activism, Zitkala-Ša frequently gave speeches to women's groups around the country, speaking on the need for women to take action and campaigning for the better treatment of Native Americans, especially in regard to gaining American citizenship. During one such address to the Sixth District Federation of Women's Clubs in Illinois, Zitkala-Ša gave the following assertion: "We look to the women of Illinois, which has no Indian reservations, no oil properties, no Indian property of any kind, nothing to interfere with the unselfish plans to promote the cause of our people, to take the lead in the Indian situation" (Towne). By speaking to women about the need for female involvement, Zitkala-Ša shows her interest in advancing the status and set of responsibilities for women. When giving this speech and dozens of others like it to white women across the country, Zitkala-Ša dressed in her traditional Dakota clothing, proving that the source of her resolve is her connection to her Native American identity. By making a point to highlight her Indian heritage, Zitkala-Ša notifies her audience that it was a Native American woman encouraging them to act, thereby showing the wisdom and autonomy she gleaned from her tribal gender roles. With her choice of words and attire at frequent speeches to white women's groups, Zitkala-Ša showed the true power and boldness that adhering to her ethnic identity afforded her.

Emphasizing again the importance of women taking political and civic responsibility in Native communities and rejecting the oppressive virtues instilled in her by the boarding school, Zitkala-Ša offers the character of Tusee in "A Warrior's Daughter," a Dakota woman who exemplifies Zitkala-Ša's reluctance to adhere to white femininity. Zitkala-Ša chooses to use what would be unfeminine descriptors by white standards for Tusee, showing the resolve that comes

through Native women accepting a more traditionally Native form of femininity. Cross-culture language specialist Ruth Spack notes, “by the late nineteenth century, American Indian women’s lives were almost universally seen as an affront to the ‘cult of true womanhood,’ which was characterized by the ‘virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity’” (27). Despite this, Zitkala-Ša gives Tusee ideals that, although contrary to white rules of femininity, eventually lead to her heroics at the end of the story. Aspects of Tusee’s identity as a Dakota woman would be seen as terribly improper for a woman in the eyes of the “palefaces” at the boarding school, yet they are exactly the character traits that lead to Tusee’s amazing amount of strength and resolve. As she sits “proudly mounted” on “her father’s warhorse,” Tusee subverts white readers’ expectations and proves herself to be independent and industrious. It is these characteristics that lead her to seize her responsibility to preserve her lover, and ultimately confront an enemy warrior. Likewise, Tusee pleads with the Great Spirit to grant her her “warrior-father’s heart, strong to slay a foe and mighty to save a friend” (137). This desire to receive the attributes of a Dakota warrior shows that Tusee does not adhere to the rules found in the “cult of true womanhood”, but rather takes on some more masculine qualities. By describing her with these less feminine descriptors, Zitkala-Ša proves that a Native woman does not need to submit to white culture in order to become empowered. Instead, the traits exhibited by Tusee actually allow her to accomplish tasks and take up important tribal responsibilities that would be unavailable to her if she were to stick to the code of white femininity so revered by the boarding school system and remain pure and submissive.

To further refute the oppressive rules of femininity prevalent in Western culture, Zitkala-Ša uses the instance of Tusee preserving the life of her lover as an analogy for the power that women, and especially mothers, have to preserve life and families. By doing this, she argues that

“motherwork,” as professor of English and women’s studies Lisa Udel puts it, is a huge source of autonomy and freedom for Native women, and that altering it diminishes the concept of Native femininity. In her analysis of the sacred role of mother in Native American tribal society, Udel argues that some forms of Native feminism emphasize the “Native traditions of ‘responsibilities’” over more Western ideas of necessary feminine character traits (43). The sacred duty of motherhood is a responsibility that elevates the status of Native women in their tribal communities, though relentless indoctrination of Indian girls sought to bring Native women towards seeing motherhood through a white lens. Tusee, though not a mother herself, acts as a mother-figure in that she defends the life of her lover, the man who will potentially become her family. As the young man “hangs in hopeless despair,” Tusee enters the enemy camp and cuts him free, thereby saving her loved one from an enemy nation in much the same way that Native American women were compelled to do in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (139). By substituting the enemy tribe for white society and Tusee’s lover for a child sent to an Eastern boarding school, Zitkala-Ša likens Tusee’s actions to those of a Native American mother attempting to preserve or reunite her family. Additionally, Zitkala-Ša shows the strength that embracing these traditional gender roles can bring. Lisa Udel writes that “many Native women valorize their ability to procreate and nurture their children,” and that the ability to create life leads Native women to be “‘respected as the center of the nation’” (43). While white culture would see mothers as merely vessels for creating children, Zitkala-Ša argues that Tusee’s ability to nurture her lover, if not her child, is a quality that demands respect. Indeed, Zitkala-Ša specifically remarks that as Tusee leads her lover from the enemy camp, “a mighty power thrills her body” (140). The very act of preserving life and creating a new family gives the girl the strength to carry a full-grown man atop her shoulders and across the open plains. Drawing on her own experience of her family

being separated by the white missionaries when she was just a child, Zitkala-Ša asserts that Native women have an important responsibility to maintain their family units and fight for unity in the face of those “palefaces” who would attempt to separate them. Additionally, through her description of Tusee’s “mighty power,” Zitkala-Ša argues that both physical and mental strength can come from Native mothering practices, thereby rejecting the lessons taught to her during her elementary education.

Zitkala-Ša’s real-life activism and numerous speeches to white women’s groups complements what she teaches in “A Warrior’s Daughter,” particularly in regards to a Native woman’s role in creating and preserving cultural traditions. In the aforementioned speech to the Sixth District Federation of Women’s Clubs in Illinois, Zitkala-Ša relates the Indian legend of a woman who visited her tribe in a vision many years ago. She says that the woman, “instructed them in the rules of life, gave them good advice, told them how to prepare their garments, how to make them beautiful, and as long as they obeyed the rules she gave them, they would be well and happy” (Towne). The fact that the person who created many of the Dakota traditions and practices is female, acting as a mother, shows that Native women, particularly mothers, have the ability to impact their communities in very powerful ways. Embracing Native “motherwork,” though it may not be in line with white ideas of what a mother should be, actually allows an Indian woman to take part in their societies in ways that most white women could not. By sharing this particular story with a group of white women, Zitkala-Ša points out the unique role that Native women have in their tribes, and how their special identity and social standing must be protected if the American Indian way of life is to survive.

Zitkala-Ša also highlights the power of the mother-daughter bond and lobbies for its continuation in the beginning of “A Warrior’s Daughter” with her description of young Tusee’s

interaction with adults. Carol Devens mentions that in order for a young girl to take her place at a boarding school, she would have to forfeit her mother's ability to ensure that she would learn and understand tribal traditions and customs. Instead, these Native girls were overseen by the school teachers who were not able or willing to dedicate time and effort to monitor a girl's personal progression and development (232). In the opening scene of the short story, Tusee emulates her mother by sitting in a similar manner, suggesting that she has been observing and learning from the woman's actions. Zitkala-Ša's choice to use the simple phrase "like her mother" while describing the formative years of Tusee's life suggests that Tusee's mother was a powerful influence for good in the girl's early and later life. As the opening scene is meant to introduce the reader to Tusee and give an idea of her character, citing Tusee's mother's example in this passage gives her credit for the later heroics of the main character. Additionally, Tusee's mother offers a learning experience for the young girl when she gives Tusee the opportunity to choose the gift her father must give. By highlighting this relationship between mother and daughter in the very beginning of the story, Zitkala-Ša gives readers an idea of where Tusee's courage and tenacity were cultivated. It is because of the watchful eye of her mother that Tusee is able to make critical decisions and act in a way that is becoming of a Dakota woman. Just as she was given the opportunity to choose as a child, Tusee seizes the opportunity to assert her independence and take action when her lover is in trouble, because she was taught those principles as a child, thanks to her mother's watchful eye. In this way, the author argues against breaking such an important bond at a young age, all for the sake of a white man's education that will ultimately tear apart a young girl's ethnic identity and efficacy as a member of her native tribe.

A major facet of Zitkala-Ša's boarding school education was the encouragement for

complete assimilation to white ideals and customs, though these principles are wholly rejected by Zitkala-Ša's addition of Tusee proudly identifying herself as a Dakota woman in "A Warrior's Daughter." The elementary reasons for assimilation in the boarding school system is uncovered by women's studies researcher Carol Devens, as she notes, "the [boarding] schools' underlying principle was that Anglo-American history, morality, and health were inherently superior to and should replace those of their students' cultures" (228). This central belief that Native customs and tribal lifestyles were inferior to that of white America fueled many racist and coercive practices in the Carlisle Indian School. As a response to those who would take away her pride in her identity as a Native woman, Zitkala-Ša includes a poignant line of dialogue in "A Warrior's Daughter." Immediately prior to dispatching of her lover's tormenter, Tusee is asked if she is "a woman or an evil spirit." In reply, she pounces "like a panther" and hisses, "I am a Dakota woman!" (139). With this quotation, Zitkala-Ša denounces the effort "to civilize and Christianize young Indian people and so draw them away from tribal identification" so ardently administered during her formative years (Lomawaima 227). While these endeavors acted under the assumption that Native cultures are constitutionally inferior, the zeal with which Zitkala-Ša has Tusee name herself suggests that much of her power and resolve comes from the fact that she has not been drawn away from her tribe, but instead is both keenly aware and incredibly proud of her heritage. After being told for most of her childhood and adolescence not to act or even look like a Dakota woman in an effort to dissolve her tribal identification, Zitkala-Ša informs readers that the mighty Tusee is made mightier through her identity. She thus implies that severing Native children's bonds with their ancestry due to the underlying belief that white culture is superior is a fallacy that diminishes the power and resolve of these future community leaders.

To combat the oppressive assimilation tactics employed by eastern boarding schools,

Zitkala-Ša fights for Native American gender roles with both her political activism and her original writings, including “A Warrior’s Daughter.” Such critics as Lisa Udel and Carol Devens continue to discuss the reconciliation between a Native woman’s racial and gender identity, including comparing Native American and white rules of femininity. While scholars have explored the role of girls in building up the missionary school system and the discrepancy between Native American and white “motherwork,” I argue that Zitkala-Ša is heavily involved in condemning the boarding school system for laying waste to traditional Native ideas of femininity. Her characterization of Tusee in “A Warrior’s Daughter” shows that a woman’s acceptance of central tribal responsibilities and pride in her Native identity are aspects of Native feminism being attacked by white society in an effort to diminish the importance of Indian women. From the obligation to make and keep family relationships to the sacred duty of developing a mother-daughter bond, Zitkala-Ša uses the character of Tusee to fight for Native ways of life being violated by oppressive boarding schools. As Zitkala-Ša favors her Native lifestyle for the power it offers to women, she fights against white femininity that did nothing to empower young Native American girls in the boarding school system. By denouncing the so-called superiority of white culture and fighting for the gender traditions that so many Native communities hold in high regard, she attempts to halt the spread of assimilation tactics employed by boarding schools, and allow Native women the independence and inner-strength that their native traditions are able to offer them. Her engagement in the feminist conversation and advocacy for her people helps to safeguard Native American ways of life, allowing her descendants and their communities to enjoy tribal traditions held dear by American Indian societies.

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