A Warrior Heart: Hypermasculinity, Feminine Role and the Warrior Trope in Zitkala-Ša’s “A Warrior’s Daughter”

In Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian*, he describes the Hollywood Indian as “the familiar character who rode around wagon trains, burned settlers’ cabins to the ground, bashed babies against trees, and trapped cowboys and soldiers in box canyons” (34). Although the traits of this “Hollywood Warrior” are most recognizable in 20th century filmmaking, variations on this stereotype are easily recognizable as far back as the 1600s (Adarre 21). Sam McKeaney and other scholars of indigenous studies have recently discussed the dangerous hypermasculine expectations this warrior trope causes by overemphasizing the role of a male warrior in Native cultures and removing Native manhood from the context of the family. However, this discussion rarely presents alternate models of warriorhood and only loosely connects the warrior role to Native American femininity. Zitkala-Ša perfectly addresses this stereotype in her 1902 short story “A Warrior’s Daughter”. Through explorations of different types of warriors in the story, Zitkala-Ša recenters warriorhood in several ways. First, “A Warrior’s Daughter” places Native Warriors in a context of kinship. This emphasizes a warrior as a protector rather than an aggressor. Second, Zitkala-Ša undermines Native hypermasculinity by portraying the failure of Tusee’s lover as acceptable instead of dishonorable. Finally, Tusee’s portrayal as a warrior creates a female space within warriorhood. As she opens the space for non-traditional female warriors in her writing, Zitkala-Ša also prepares the way to her work with female activists in the rest of her life.

One way that Zitkala-Ša redefines the concept of a warrior is by placing warriorhood in the context of tribe and family. Indigenous professor Taiaiake Alfred conveyed the continuing importance of family to Native American manhood by saying that “the way to … recover
something meaningful for Natives is to put the image of the Native male back into its proper context, which is in the family” (Alfred and McKegney 79). He later goes on to speak of the family as both the nuclear family we think of in western culture and the greater community of one’s tribe. This belief that all members of one’s tribe were family is crucial to many Native Americans, including Zitkala-Ša. In “Heart to Heart”, an article directed at Native Americans in California, Zitkala-Ša said that “an Indian tribe is really a big family circle. Either by marriage, by blood, or by adoption every member of the tribe bore some relationship to the rest” (262). This understanding of tribal kinship is vital in “A Warrior’s Daughter” as it allows warriors to have a beneficial influence as protectors and providers instead of being a purely destructive force.

Kinship shapes all of the characters in “A Warrior’s Daughter”, but is especially vital in understanding Tusee’s father. Of all the characters in “A Warrior’s Daughter”, Zitkala-Ša shows him as most like the Hollywood Warrior stereotype, but he differs from western portrayals in his commitment and generosity to his family and his mutually loyal relationship with his former captive. The first thing the reader learns about him is that he “was the chieftain’s bravest warrior [who] never wearied of rehearsing nightly his own brave deeds” (132). This description paints her father as being well-honored for his heroism and bravery. He is given a prominent place in the camp and characterized by the term “warrior.” Through his challenge to Tusee’s lover, Zitkala-Ša shows that unlike many characters in the story, the father sees feats in battle as a standard for masculinity. His characterizations as brave, powerful, and skilled in battle are all in line with the warrior depictions in western culture. However, Zitkala-Ša gives him added complexity that undermines the simplicity of the stereotype. In addition to being honored for his bravery, Zitkala-Ša tells us that he was also “one of the most generous gift givers to the toothless
old people” (132) and had a strong love for his daughter. Through these additions, Zitkala-Ša shows that even the most powerful warriors must be viewed through the proper familial lens. Within the context of a family—both blood and cultural—that must be protected and cared for, the actions of a warrior become more familiar and understandable.

This characterization of Tusee’s warrior father can be further deconstructed by using his former captive as a foil to illuminate the way nonviolent traits contribute to manhood. Zitkala-Ša explains that “the unusual qualities of the slave had won the Sioux warrior’s heart,” (133) and that after he gained his freedom, he had chosen to remain with their family instead of returning to his birth tribe. Because Zitkala-Ša depicts the tribe’s greatest warrior as the most respected member of society, one might assume that a man who had been captured in battle and enslaved long years would be considered weak and worthless. Indigenous studies scholar Sam McKegney countered this idea by saying “to be masculine is to be strong [but] to create scenarios in which vulnerability is actually a sign of strength is a really difficult thing to do” (Boyden and McKegney, 170). Zitkala-Ša uses her understanding of this relationship to show that the years of captivity are a badge of strength for the former captive. There are many signs that show that the former captive was highly regarded by Tusee and her family. After he is given his freedom he is essentially adopted into their family. Tusee calls him “uncle”, and she even learns words and phrases in his native tongue. This communication in his native tongue is especially significant because it shows that there is a two-way interchange of culture associated with his freedom. While as a captive he was shamed, Zitkala-Ša writes that after his liberation “he was made a real man again” (133). His close relationship to Tusee’s family and Zitkala-Ša’s affirmation of his masculinity show that Sioux society did not base masculinity or greatness solely on success in battle. Although Zitkala-Ša never explicitly states what qualities specifically won Tusee’s father...
over, his decision to stay with their family and the clear love they have for one another shows a strong bond of loyalty that goes beyond shared blood or common culture. This bond is vital to understanding the underlying meanings of “A Warrior’s Daughter” because it goes against the initial picture of bravery in battle being the primary measure of greatness and instead shows that loyalty is sometimes of equal if not greater importance. Their mutual familial loyalty allows Zitkala-Ša to further center Native American warriors as loyal members of a community rather than bloodthirsty savages.

“A Warrior’s Daughter” not only puts Native warriors in the context of the family, but also questions violence as a tool for measuring manhood. As established above, her father is one of the most important members of their society in part because of his bravery in battle, and in Hollywood stereotype, masculinity is often equated with a warrior proving himself in battle. However, Zitkala-Ša recalls and then undermines this value in the main episode of the story through the father’s challenge to Tusee’s lover. As related by the lover, when he asks for Tusee’s hand her father declares that “naught but an enemy’s scalp-lock, plucked fresh with your own hand, will buy Tusee” (135). This request of a scalp as a bride price reinforces the trope that Indian Warriors gain their respect and societal place through prowess in battle. Such a request is dangerous and difficult, as it is rare to kill an enemy in battle—Zitkala-Ša later says that the raid in question led to only two deaths. This shows the reader that the task her lover is meant to accomplish is no small feat of heroism. The father’s intent to use battle prowess as a determiner of status is reinforced by Tusee’s explanation that “he would know if you are brave and true” (135), suggesting a belief that scalping an enemy would reveal his character. When her lover is eventually captured, however, it introduces a tension of values.
Because of the original assertion that triumph over an enemy will prove her lover worthy, Tusee must choose between her love and the values her father taught. Ultimately, through Tusee’s successful rescue mission, Zitkala-Ša shows that it is the measure of worth that is flawed and not Tusee’s lover.

Through this rescue mission, Zitkala-Ša is able to not only show the continued worth of Tusee’s lover, but also offer an alternative view of the purpose of a warrior. Zitkala-Ša establishes that masculinity can be given by stating that the former captive “was made real man again” after he was freed (133). This shows that masculinity is something that society gives, not something defined by adherence to any one trait. When the war party suffers a thorough defeat, they prepare to leave as quickly as possible, despite her lover’s continued survival. No other warrior or woman discusses the possibility of rescue and it is clear they plan to leave him to his captivity. Like her father’s former captive, he would likely have been enslaved for many years if not life. Through their indifference to the capture of Tusee’s lover, Zitkala-Ša shows the disadvantages in judging a warrior by success in battle. While the tribe honors successful warriors, failure in battle leads to shame and abandonment. In contrast, as Tusee rescues her lover, she puts greater value on loyalty than success and creates a space where failure is acceptable. When Tusee finally reaches the enemy camp, she sees her lover “haggard with shame and sorrow” (137). The shame he feels is never removed through the lover’s own actions—in fact, his captivity weakens him until he cannot even walk when she frees him. Instead, “the sight of his weakness makes [Tusee] strong” (140). This strength that fills Tusee suggests that his weakness does not make him inherently worthless; instead, it gives her an opportunity to grow in strength. As Tusee “carries him away into the open night” (140), Zitkala-Ša shows that her strength and bravery is only important because of the weakness of those whom
she protects. Hollywood Indians, removed from their kinship bonds, are characterized in large part by the way they attack white settlers. By showing the relationships that prompt warriors to attack and defend, Zitkala-Ša is able to effectively show the shallowness of the stereotype and assert that success as a warrior does not equate to masculinity or worth in society.

Zitkala-Ša’s separation of masculinity from warriorhood opens a possibility for a female warrior in Tusee. Before she rescues her lover, Zitkala-Ša prepares us for a feminine warrior and divorces warriorhood from maleness through Tusee’s characterization from the beginning of the story. Although warriors are traditionally male, it was not uncommon for unmarried women to take on male behaviors, including as warriors and war-chiefs. Speaking of the fluidity of roles in many Native American societies, Patrice Hollrah writes that “the important aspects of men’s and women’s roles is that they complemented each other, and they were equally valued for the contributions they brought to the community … often, females could also perform tasks that normally would be considered male behaviors” (3). Zitkala-Ša shows her understanding of this flexibility through the way she shows Tusee’s inheritance of roles from both parents. At the beginning of the second episode of “A Warrior’s Daughter”, Zitkala-Ša characterizes her by saying that “Like her mother, Tusee has finely pencilled eyebrows and slightly extended nostrils; but in her sturdiness of form she resembles her father. A loyal daughter, she sits within her tepee making beaded deerskins” (134). This description establishes her duality of appearance, but it also reveals Tusee’s character. By emphasizing that she is fine-featured like her mother but also sturdy like her warrior father, Zitkala-Ša foreshadows that Tusee will fulfil both roles. Tusee is a loyal daughter, completing all her daily duties. But the “sturdiness” she inherits from her father is an inner fortitude that goes beyond mere physical build. Tusee has always been a daughter, but when she leaves the raiding party, she begins to assume the mantle of warrior also.
As Zitkala-Ša begins to build Tusee as a female warrior, she contrasts her actions with those of the male warriors of the raiding party. For example, Zitkala-Ša illustrates the differences between a community-motivated warrior and the bloodthirsty warrior trope through their relationships with the Great Spirit. As the warriors prepare to raid, each warrior “swears to avenge a former wrong, … calling on the Great Spirit to hear his vow” (135). In contrast, in Tusee’s prayer she requests, “grant me my warrior father’s heart, strong to slay a foe and mighty to save a friend!” (137). These prayers show an important difference in motivation between Tusee and the warriors of the raiding party. The warriors are motivated only by vengeance as they recall their former wrongs. This vengeance is not entirely absent from Tusee’s prayer—she expresses the desire to slay her enemies and is later filled with a hot anger toward her lover’s captor. However, unlike the other warriors, her prayer also contains a plea for help in rescuing her captive friend, placing her vengeance secondary to her desire to save her lover.

Zitkala-Ša shows her approval of Tusee’s desires by using the Great Spirit as determinant of success or failure. The raiding party’s declarations of vengeance appear to fall on deaf ears as they return dejected and beaten. In contrast, when Tusee kills her lover’s captor, Zitkala-Ša states explicitly that the “Great Spirit heard Tusee’s prayer on the hilltop. He gave her a warrior’s strong heart to lessen the foe by one” (139). This granting of prayer indicates that her success is a judgement of character, not simply a plot device or indicator of skill or luck. The connection of warriorhood to the heart is especially significant. By tying Tusee’s warriorhood to her heart, Zitkala-Ša links the role of a warrior not to gender, masculine success, or even to killing, but to love. This motive brings her desires for a warrior’s strength and bravery into balance by recentering her role as a warrior onto her relationship with her love.
As Zitkala-Ša opens up space for female warriors and expands the definition of warrior into someone who protects and strengthens tribe members, she also creates space for her own activism and the work of men and women around her. Just as Tusee is assumes both the obedient role of a daughter and the rebellious role of a warrior, Zitkala-Ša deftly manipulated her identity as both a obedient and westernized graduate of boarding schools and a proud Dakota woman. Her femininity allowed her to have connections as an activist that male Native Americans did not. Throughout her career, Zitkala-Ša frequently spoke to women’s clubs—sometimes in western dress and sometimes in traditional clothing—and reinforced the power that women had to be a force for change and protection (“Spirit of Sioux”). Her careful choices in the way she represented herself show her awareness of the importance of perceived role and identity in her activism.

In addition, Zitkala-Ša’s knowledge of the importance of the role of women in the world of political activism becomes clear as we view warriorhood in a “Warrior’s Daughter” as parallel to Zitkala-Ša’s later activism. Although “A Warrior’s Daughter” was written near the beginning of Zitkala-Ša’s career, the principles of courage, strength, kinship and protection espoused in it are constants throughout her later work. In a letter to fellow activist Stella Atwood, Zitkala-Ša said that “[female activists] have done a great thing, indeed, appreciated most by those of us who have become acquainted with the complicated interwoven powers-that-be”. This letter shows the high regard that Zitkala-Ša had for the influence of dedicated women. In “A Warrior’s Daughter”, Zitkala-Ša shows that the work of female Native warriors can rescue and free other Natives from captivity. Through the literal captivity of Tusee’s lover, Zitkala-Ša shows a model for how all native women can be a part in standing against oppressive government policies and
programs toward Native Americans, such as issues of Native assimilation, exploitation, and citizenship.

Through a Warrior’s daughter, Zitkala-Ša recenters Native American warriors in order to create a space for Native women to take the role of political activist and social rescuer in their communities. Through Tusee’s quest to rescue her lover, Zitkala-Ša creates a space for femininity in warriorhood and shows the power that comes from rewriting Native American warriors as protectors and rescuers. She repeatedly shows the complexity of Sioux and other native cultures in order to go beyond the Western stereotypes of savagery and bloodthirstiness. She uses the challenge issued by Tusee’s father to illustrate the pitfalls of using war as a test for masculinity, but she also characterizes Tusee’s father as a generous family man who can see greatness even in a disgraced captive. In “A Warrior’s Daughter” Zitkala-Ša shows clear examples of the ways in which family relationships are vital to Native American communities and individuals. She reimagines the role of a warrior as one of protection and power that comes from a strong and loving heart.
Works Cited


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