

Native American Culture through an Unconventional Feminist Lens

Yankton Sioux author Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* illustrates the complexities of the shift in Native American identity due to forceful and violent white integration institutions and the toll they have on family relationships, as illustrated through the author's autobiographical account of her relationship with her mother. The author's personal memories, thoughts, and emotions from an early childhood emphasize the harsh, cruel nature of such establishments and the flawed justification behind them. These integration institutions alter who Zitkala-Ša is as a writer and as a Native American, a prime example of modern colonialism. Such colonialism also forces a feminist view onto the intellectual production of indigenous women; as scholar of Native American literature Nancy Marie Mithlo asserts, "Native women's lives and bodies have historically been incorporated into the Western feminist movement as an expedient means of advancing predetermined theoretical aims, but not often as a viable alternative dimension of gender analysis" (Mithlo 8). Mithlo's statement defends the idea that feminism, in its contemporary form, is not native to Indian culture, however, it continues to provide insight into the critical conversation surrounding the movement. Native women, especially in the early 20th century, didn't describe themselves as particularly feminist, but there are instances where Native American culture collides with feminist values and affect the movement as a whole. One such instance is the work of Yankton Sioux author Zitkala-Ša.

Specifically within the scope of her writings in *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, Zitkala-Ša's writing style transforms, mirroring the structure of the feminist movement, which existed outside her native culture. Zitkala-Ša demonstrates the undeniable feminine power that stems from her culture and upbringing and comes into practice in her career and national

influence. In this paper I draw the connection between Zitkala-Ša's writing and the existing critical conversation around Native American feminism. Along with her autobiographical texts, Zitkala-Ša's correspondance with women's organizations in her professional life demonstrate the influence of her own feminine strength. While a feminist criticism of indigenous work may not be the obvious choice, critics suggest that although we refer to American colonization of natives as part of our historical past, the issue prevails today in the structure in the dynamic between the two parties. Thinking about this imperialist structure through a 20th century-contemporary feminine lens helps modernize the issue. The author's record of pivotal moments in her upbringing, viewed through a feminist perspective, guides the reader toward discovering an awareness of the harm of bias and the role ignorant members of society have played and continue to play in perpetuating such detrimental mentalities.

In this paper I argue three main points. One, Zitkala-Ša's relationship with her mother evolves going from a close, obedient, reverent dynamic to something more critical and skeptical. Second, her writing style changes along with this relationship, going from naturally, culturally, and familially oriented into a style that reflects traditional American values such as independence. Third, this change exhibits essential aspects of the feminist movement such as independent thought and action. In my discussion of indigenous feminism I will address maternal feminism as well as contemporary feminism, which literary critic Maile Arvin claims is a product of U.S. colonialism. While aspects of these feminisms clearly exist within Native literature, my focus remains on Zitkala-Ša's unique interpretation of such feminisms and part of the influence it has on ideas of bias and discrimination inherent in American culture.

In Zitkala-Ša's *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, the author records aesthetically rich images of her memories growing up in Native American culture. A key element of this culture is the familial bond within their community, exemplified through Zitkala-Ša's relationship with her mother. She paints a clear image of her lifestyle: simplistic, organic, and full of love. "The distant howling of a pack of wolves or the hooting of an owl in the river frightened me, and I nestled into my mother's lap" (Zitkala-Ša 72). Most American, non Native readers, find Zitkala-Ša's recollections of nature's prominent role in her childhood unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity enforces the image of the antiquated ideal Indian. While this description enforces the colonized Indian in the reader's understanding, it also functions to describe family relationships that exist throughout cultures, inviting a more sympathetic reader response. The emphasis Zitkala-Ša places on her mother's role in her upbringing dually represents the strength of feminine Native American culture and inadvertently comments on the flawed concepts of gender in white US society. Literary critic Margot Reynolds states that her "gynocentric framework interrogate[s] and expose[s] the imperialist social practices and policies of the U.S. government. Her attention to Native women's domesticity represents a powerful gynocentric framework through which she critiques imperial patriarchy, records her people's history, and preserves traditional values" (Reynolds 172). Reynolds argues that Zitkala-Ša's memories of her mother empower her later fight against governmental injustice towards Native Americans. She claims that the feminism inherent within Native American culture, the deep respect and reverence toward women, dichotomizes the U.S. patriarchal structure. The maternal structure of Zitkala-Ša's Native upbringing parallels feminine empowerment without conforming to the "bra

burning” contemporary attitudes in modern culture. It contributes a fresh perspective to the feminist cause through a unique cultural lens.

The strength and independence of the Native women from Zitkala-Ša’s childhood, such as her mother and aunt, is remarkable in contrast to the oppressive society built by U.S. imperialists. Zitkala-Ša’s mother raises a family on her own and teaches her daughter that she is free to live how she feels led. “I was a wild little girl of seven . . . I was as free as the wind, and no less spirited than a bounding deer. These were my mother’s pride, my freedom, and overflowing spirits” (Zitkala-Ša 70) This fortitude of spirit, nourished by her mother, frees Zitkala-Ša from the constraints of living as a discriminated against minority in the United States, much like the freedom women across cultures find in the contemporary feminist movement. Zitkala-Ša also employs artistic language, in this case a simile, to describe the admiration she holds for her mother and the traditional role she plays in their family. “[M]y mother spread upon a mat beside her bunches of colored beads, just as an artist arranges the paints upon his palette With a proud, beaming face, I watched her work” (Zitkala-Ša 73). This romantic image of a daughter’s ideal for her mother illustrates the innocent faith and admiration Zitkala-Ša held in her mother’s identity. Zitkala-Ša’s deep respect for her mother and her gendered role within Native American culture demonstrates the concept of maternal feminism: the belief that women contribute to society equal to men in importance, yet different in practice. This concept reveres a mother’s role in raising children and contributing through work in the home.

While Zitkala-Ša’s Yankton Sioux culture generally doesn’t foster a gendered society or gendered individualism, colonialism altered this tradition, making feminism more prominent,

according to Nancy Marie Mithlo (Mithlo 1). The system of assimilation institutions in effect during Zitkala-Ša's childhood exemplify this modern colonialism, and Zitkala-Ša's experiences in the institution reveal her feminine upbringing. As Zitkala-Ša leaves her home for boarding school, her dynamic with her mother shifts from diligent obedience and complete trust to wariness and slight rebellion: familiar aspects of adolescence. Similarly, her writing demonstrates a feminist thirst for independence and autonomy. This autonomy, specific to gender, is, according to Mithlo, a product of colonialism, or the forcing of American societal trends on indigenous culture. Stylistically, Zitkala-Ša hasn't transitioned into an educated style yet, but is more individual and self focused, reflecting traditional American values of independence and individuality versus tradition and familial values of Native American communities. On this drastic culture shock, Zitkala-Ša writes, "I was in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own opinions" (Zitkala-Ša 86). This forced culture exemplifies the very colonialism which encourages feminist ideology projected on Native American women.

Although people refer to American colonization of natives as part of our U.S. historical past, the issue prevails today in the structure in the dynamic between the two parties. Thinking about this structure through a feminine lens helps modernize the continuing problem of government interference in Native society (Arvin). Through her later work with women's organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Zitkala-Ša contributes an inseparable Native American voice to the feminist conversation. Her place in this conversation doesn't mirror the radical feminism of bra burnings and the idea of female superiority, especially in this movement's modern progression to current feminist representation. As a less

conventional feminist, Zitkala-Ša instead advocates for both gender and race, using her feminist associations to institute change in the fight for Native rights, such as her establishment of the Indian Welfare Committee. Through her position as a feminist figure in an early 20th century modern societal movement, she works with the US government to resolve issues initiated in early colonialism, which continue to affect Native society. She modernizes the issue of public perception of Native issues as antiquated or already resolved through government support. A letter I found from Rhys G. Thackwell of the Ladies Home Journal petitions Zitkala-Ša to participate in an article for the journal specifically regarding her career story and her work in D.C.. Thackwell also corresponds with a woman named Thackery in other matters, writing that “both sides, Indian and White, must learn something more in the School of Life. The Indian must insist upon his proper place in American opportunities and the dominant White race must recognize the human rights of the Indian”. Thackwell’s shared ideas demonstrate that not only was Zitkala-Ša advocating for Indian rights, she was doing so alongside other empowered, passionate women.

Zitkala-Ša demonstrates consistency of character despite the intensity of her experiences. Even after her identity shift from purely Native American to a more culturally aware and diverse individual, she still values tradition and her matriarchal native culture. Her sophistication in writing promotes female education, while her later political success promotes female leadership. Zitkala-Ša’s writing demonstrates feminism in a new light, as something that doesn’t require advocacy for women’s rights in particular. Instead, her feminism asserts confidence in identity and demands respect from discriminatory forces. Malie Arvin boldly argues that “allying one's self with feminism should not require consenting to inclusion within a

larger agenda of whiteness... we believe that Native feminist theories demonstrate that feminisms, when allied with other key causes, hold a unique potential to decolonize the ascendancy of whiteness” (Arvin 10-11). Thus, Zitkala-Ša’s upbringing and education can fuse together, forming a unique, American Indian tradition based yet secularly educated element of literature, which threatens the imperialism of the U.S. against Native Americans, encouraging Arvin’s “decolonization”. While the author’s identity may have undergone a shift, her revolutionary character perseveres.

Zitkala-Ša’s writing style in her recollections of her *Indian Childhood* demonstrates her growth as an individual and an iconic cultural representative of her gender. When analyzed through a feminist lens, this growth exposes the rising independence of Zitkala-Ša as an author and individual despite the inconsistencies of her native versus colonized identity. The strength of the author as a feminist in a patriarchal culture empowers historically and modernly discriminated against native peoples. Her writing exposes and challenges bias against both Native Americans and women, which she also actively battles in her political career. The shift in her writing mirrors the shift in the feminist movement from subdued to unignorable. Zitkala-Ša subverts traditional feminism through a more subtle argument that advocates for strength in identity and equality despite the forces of discrimination and imperialism which threaten this. Through Zitkala-Ša’s unique feminist style and female example, readers observe the modern Indian in a different light, as someone highly individualistic who cannot be lumped together with just anyone from a similar cultural background.

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