

The Role of Zitkala-Ša's Autobiography: Illustrating Native American Life Through a Native American Point of View

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Introduction

Zitkala-Ša (1876-1938) was a Native American woman who was a writer, activist and teacher. Zitkala-Ša is not her original name. Zitkala-Ša gave herself this Native American name which means “red bird” in 1901. Her real name was Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and she was her mother Ellen's third husband's child. That her third's name was Felker who was a Frenchman. However, instead of giving her daughter her real father's name, Ellen chose to give her her second husband's last name: Simmons. Bonnin is Zitkala-Ša's husband's last name.

Zitkala-Ša was born on the Yankton reservation in South Dakota. Her tribe was Sioux. She left the reservation to go to missionary school when she was only eight. This school was a Quaker boarding school called White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. At the missionary school, her Native Americanness was denied because assimilation was compulsory. She wrote about her childhood and school days in three autobiographical essays, originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900, and contained in her book, *American Indian Stories* (1921).

Her book, *American Indian Stories* is composed of her three autobiographical essays, an essay entitled “Why I Am a Pagan (The Great Spirit),” some short stories, and a complaint entitled “America's Indian Problem.” The first essay, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” is a memoir of when Zitkala-Ša was little and lived with her mother. The second essay, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” recounts her life in the missionary school. The third essay, “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” is about the days after she became a teacher. This essay also contains the story about how Zitkala-Ša went back her reservation and learned about her mother's hard life.

Zitkala-Ša's aim for writing these essays was to expand her white audience's knowledge about Native American culture. She wanted non-Native Americans to learn about real Native American life through a Native American woman's point of view. The works about Native Americans that were written by whites sometimes misunderstood Native Americans. White writers also wrote their stories concealing anything unfavorable about white people. Zitkala-Ša wanted to correct these misunderstandings and concealments so she wrote her autobiographical essays which included cruel treatment of Native Americans by whites. Her essays showed racial discrimination toward Native Americans by those in power who were white.

Peaceful Life in "Impressions of an Indian Childhood"

In the first essay, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," Zitkala-Ša wrote about her childhood on the Yankton reservation, and showed us real Native American life. The main characters are Zitkala-Ša, her mother and the elders who lived in neighborhood. Zitkala-Ša learned almost everything from her mother and elders. She described their lives as idyllic and peaceful as follows, "These were my mother's pride, --my wild freedom and over flowing spirits. She taught me no fear save that of intruding myself upon others" (68). On the other hand, she also introduces the complicated relationship between whites and Native Americans, one example being how white Christian missionaries made the originally good relationship between Zitkala-Ša and her mother worse.

While Zitkala-Ša and her mother spent their time together, they talked about many things. Zitkala-Ša learned a lot of things from that time. When Zitkala-Ša asked, "Mother, who is this bad paleface?" her mother answered, "My little daughter, he is a sham, --a sickly sham! The bronzed Dakota is the only real man" (69). A paleface refers to someone who is a white and a Dakota refers to a member of the Native American Dakota tribe which was part of the Sioux Nation. Her mother taught Zitkala-Ša that whites were sly people, and Native Americans were creditable.

When Zitkala-Ša's mother talked about that, she bit her lips. Zitkala-Ša noticed from this look that her mother felt unhappy. Her mother continued to give Zitkala-Ša

a negative opinion of white people: “We were very happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away” (69). From this, her mother taught Zitkala-Ša to understand that white people were bad and negative.

The relationship between Native Americans and white people was very complicated and unfair for Native Americans. Whites wanted to take away Native American land and develop it. To achieve their aim, they killed Native Americans and took their land by force. Tadeusz Lewandowski notes that:

By the time of Gertrude’s birth, the Sioux had been coping with white encroachment for many decades. Under treaties in 1837 and 1857 the easternmost Dakota had given up considerable lands on both sides of the Mississippi, whereas the Lakota had experienced greater success maintaining territorial integrity. (7)

On the other hand, Zitkala-Ša’s mother depended on white men to live. She did not have economic strength, so her family relied on the white men who she married. The relationships between Zitkala-Ša’s family and white men were very complicated. For instance, after the second husband, John Simmons died, Zitkala-Ša’s mother and her family had to go to the Yankton Agency in Greenwood to apply for U.S government rations because they were so poor. They went by foot and after they arrived, Zitkala-Ša’s older sister died. These factors made Zitkala-Ša’s mother hate whites.

Nevertheless, in “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” Zitkala-Ša showed how idyllic life was on the reservation. Her story resembles some Bible stories. Catherine Kuncze notes that “Zitkala-Ša’s retell[s] . . . the Garden of Eden story . . . [by] casting her mother as God, her brother as Adam, the missionaries as the Serpent, and herself as Eve” (73). To describe her reservation life as the Garden of Eden gives a strong and shocking impression to readers. In the original Garden of Eden story, the villain is the serpent, who seduces Eve and makes her eat apples. On the other hand, in Zitkala-Ša’s story, that role falls to the missionaries. In addition, missionaries tried to take Zitkala-Ša to missionary school by tempting her with apples. When Zitkala-Ša whispered to her mother that could she eat

all the apples she wanted, the interpreter answered as follows, “Yes, little girl, the nice red apples are for those who pick them; and you will have a ride on the iron horse [train] if you go with these good people” (85). After Zitkala-Ša heard that, she appealed to her mother to let her go East because she wanted to eat a lot of apples. This temptation was also similar to the Garden of Eden.

To write her reservation life with its similarity with the Bible is effective for readers who are not Native Americans. Zitkala-Ša knew that the readers were almost all non-Native American. That is why Zitkala-Ša did not use Native American religion to tell her story, and described her story using the Christian religion with the Garden of Eden. A lot of non-Native American readers are familiar with that story, so they can understand Zitkala-Ša’s narrative more easily.

Zitkala-Ša described her mother as a kind of god in the Garden of Eden. On the reservation, her mother taught almost everything for Zitkala-Ša such as Native American’s tradition, custom and courtesy. Moreover, her mother did not want Zitkala-Ša to go to missionary school at first. It is similar to God banning Adam and Eve from eating the forbidden fruit.

Zitkala-Ša’s mother taught her a lot of things to develop her independence: daily chores, traditional art crafts and Native American courtesy. In their reservation, the relationship between Zitkala-Ša and her mother was very deep. They spent most of their time together. For example, one daily chore was to draw water from the Missouri river and they went there together. While doing this daily chore, Zitkala-Ša thought that she helped her mother. She wrote, “Returning from the river, I tugged beside my mother, with my hand upon the bucket I believed I was carrying” (69). She thought that when she got older, she could go to the river alone for water for her mother. She enjoyed the daily chore, and it developed her spirit of independence.

Moreover, her mother taught bead work to Zitkala-Ša. In their tribe, bead work was important. It was one way of earning money. In addition, learning the bead work also developed Zitkala-Ša’s spirit of independence. Her mother made many arts and crafts with beads. Zitkala-Ša and her mother made bead work together, her mother let Zitkala-Ša to choose the colors. “In the choice of colors she left me to my own taste. I was pleased with an outline of yellow upon a background of dark blue, or a combination of red and

myrtle-green” (74). It made Zitkala-Ša enjoy bead work, and also it developed her spirit of independence. Making decisions, such as choosing colors, developed a child’s thinking without their parents’ help. Zitkala-Ša’s mother let her daughter to choose colors, Zitkala-Ša could also develop her self-confidence.

In addition, Zitkala-Ša’s mother taught her daughter courtesy. She taught her daughter how to invite elders to dinner, one of the traditions of their tribe. When Zitkala-Ša reached an elder’s house, she had to listen to the talking inside the house. If elders were talking, she did not disturb them. After elders came to Zitkala-Ša’s house, they talked about the legend of their tribe. When elders told her they would come to Zitkala-Ša’s house, she felt happy. She described it “My mission done, I ran back, skipping and jumping with delight” (71). Zitkala-Ša also loved to listen to these stories sitting beside her mother.

There is a story that little Zitkala-Ša tried to treat a guest who came to Zitkala-Ša’s house when her mother was out. Zitkala-Ša offered the guest coffee, but she did not know how to make it, so the guest had to drink just water with coffee grounds. Nevertheless, the guest drank it a little, without blaming her. In addition, when Zitkala-Ša’s mother came home and learned what happened, her mother did not scold her. This treatment satisfied Zitkala-Ša’s feeling of achievement because it nurtured her spirit of independence. This occurrence illustrates the tradition of adults not scolding or embarrassing their children when the children fail in their tribe (77).

Listening to many stories from her mother and the elders, Zitkala-Ša learned a lot of things. Her mother taught her how to make art and crafts, what the “paleface” was, how to invite someone to their house. Zitkala-Ša learned tradition, history and courtesy from her mother. The relationship between Zitkala-Ša and her mother was very deep, so the existence of her mother was very important for Zitkala-Ša. Her mother was her role model and her teacher.

However, though Zitkala-Ša’s mother usually let her daughter make decisions, there was one exception. As I mentioned above, in Zitkala-Ša’s tribe, adults respect their child’s decisions. However, when missionaries came to take Zitkala-Ša to their school, the decision was made by her mother. This was different from their tribe’s tradition, but her mother knew that white people would be hard on Zitkala-Ša. She also knew that the

number of white people was increasing, and English had strong power. If Zitkala-Ša avoided studying English, she would be confused. Finally, her mother decided to let Zitkala-Ša go to missionary school. Zitkala-Ša wanted to go there because of curiosity, but her mother knew about white people's cruel acts and could not say "yes." Zitkala-Ša appealed to her, saying "Mother, I am going East! I like big red apples, and I want to ride on iron horse! Mother, say yes! I pleaded" (85). In spite of her desire, her mother did not say anything. Little Zitkala-Ša could only beg to the Great Spirit "to make my mother willing I should go with the missionaries" (85). Finally her mother decided to let Zitkala-Ša go to missionary school, but she shows readers that her mother did not decide Zitkala-Ša to go to missionary school with full of agreement.

After Zitkala-Ša left the reservation, the relationship between Zitkala-Ša and her mother was not smooth. Zitkala-Ša felt sorry because she went to missionary school and left her mother alone. Moreover, after Zitkala-Ša became an adult, they had legal problems. Kuncce notes that "Zitkala-Ša and her mother later would engage in a legal battle against one another, and [. . .] the two would never reconcile" (77-79). When Zitkala-Ša was little and lived with her mother, they had a deep relationship. However, after Zitkala-Ša "ate the forbidden fruit," she could not go back to "the Garden of Eden" easily. When she was an adult and even though she became ill, Zitkala-Ša did not quit her job and go back home. It is similar to how Eve could not go back to the Garden of Eden. Moreover, because she wrote about her reservation life as idyllic, the next chapter of her life was more shocking to readers. The days in missionary school were hellish.

Hardship in "The School Days of an Indian Girl"

In "The School Days of an Indian Girl," Zitkala-Ša writes about her life at the missionary school. She describes how little Zitkala-Ša acquired English and became westernize in a compulsory way. Moreover, she writes about the oratorical contest which she got first prize. In this essay, Zitkala-Ša illustrates through a Native American perspective the actual condition of the missionary school such as childish treatment and Christianity which was unfamiliar for her.

Just after Zitkala-Ša reached the missionary school, she was confused by how she was treated as follows: “I was tossed high in midair. A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. [. . .] My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter” (88). To treat her as a baby is different from Native American tradition, which respects children. Zitkala-Ša wanted to stand on her own feet, but the white woman could not understand Zitkala-Ša’s desire. The only one who was satisfied was the white woman who treated Zitkala-Ša as a doll.

In addition, Zitkala-Ša was too little to live away from her family. She describes her feelings: “It was very little I could swallow besides my sobs, that evening” (89). On the reservation, Zitkala-Ša always stayed with her mother and kind elders who lived near from her house. To live in a missionary school dormitory meant there were a lot of white people with whom Zitkala-Ša was not familiar. In the dormitory room, there was an older girl who tried to comfort Zitkala-Ša: “I was tucked into bed with one of the tall girls, because she talked to me in my mother tongue and seemed to soothe me” (89). Just after Zitkala-Ša arrived at the missionary school, she was confronted with many problems such as the different culture and her homesickness. Zitkala-Ša was little and she needed her mother, but her mother was not there.

Moreover, Christianity puzzled Zitkala-Ša because she knew only Native American religion. She did not know that they had to pray before eating. Zitkala-Ša describes this unfamiliar ritual:

I heard a man’s voice at one end of the hall, and I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their plates. [. . .] The man ceased his mutterings, and then a third bell was tapped. Every one picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead. (90)

Native Americans do not have such a custom, so Zitkala-Ša was confused. Zitkala-Ša could describe that ritual from a perspective of someone who was not white. It may surprise white readers who are familiar with Christianity. It is because they probably did not consider the Christianity from the viewpoint of someone who is unfamiliar with it.

In addition, when little Zitkala-Ša learned about the devil in school, and she felt

fear. She noted, “I never knew there was an insolent chieftain among the bad spirits, who dared to array his forces against the Great Spirit, until I heard this white man’s legend from a pale face woman” (94). The Great Spirit is what Native Americans believed in. To teach Native American children about the Christian devil was one way for white missionaries to make the children forget their Native American religion. To deny her own religion was hard for little Zitkala-Ša. She had a nightmare of the devil that night, but no one could help her, because her mother and family were far away. Zitkala-Ša illustrates how hard it was for a little girl to live without her native language and family. The unfamiliar culture and religion made her fearful of this new environment.

In missionary school, Zitkala-Ša suffered not only loneliness but also compulsory assimilation. At first, Zitkala-Ša wore traditional clothes, and moccasins and had long braided hair in missionary school. However, her Native Americanness was denied because the missionaries wanted her to look and act like a white child. When she heard the warning from her friend that whites would come to cut our hair. Zitkala-Ša tried to escape from that, but her moccasins were already exchanged for shoes without her notice. Zitkala-Ša ran and hid from her white teachers, but finally she was caught hiding under the bed. Zitkala-Ša describes losing her braids:

I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. (91)

Native American are proud of their hair. Zitkala-Ša explains, “Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!” (90). To lose anything that was precious for her was hard thing for Zitkala-Ša. Moreover, traditional clothes and hair styles are important factors of Native American identity. To lose her identity and make her to wear western style clothes was almost the same as killing little Zitkala-Ša. The whites made these children not only accept their culture, religion and customs, but also deny Native American culture, religions and customs. This was discrimination. To

show the process of compulsory assimilation, Zitkala-Ša wanted non-Native American readers to learn about how cruelly she thought the missionaries treated her and the other children. To live in western culture was not strange for whites, but it was not same for Native Americans. Zitkala-Ša could describe the cruelty of whites because she was a Native American.

On the other hand, Zitkala-Ša found pleasure in learning English. At first, understanding English was hard for Zitkala-Ša. In “The Snow Episode,” Zitkala-Ša and her friends were confused because they could not speak English. One of the words they knew was “No.” When Zitkala-Ša and her friends were scolded by their teacher, they did not know what to say so they said “No” which was not appropriate answer to the teacher’s questions and the teacher scolded them more and more (92-4). The experience of living in a world where she could not understand its language was uneasy and lonely for Zitkala-Ša. Zitkala-Ša felt loneliness from that.

However, after Zitkala-Ša started learning English, her ability developed to the point that she got first prize in the oratorical contest at Earlham College when she was a first year student. Zitkala-Ša delivered the speech “Side by Side.” She describes her satisfaction follows: “And I could not conceal a smile when they wished to escort me in a procession to the students’ parlor, where all were going to calm themselves” (102). After Zitkala-Ša won that prize, she got a feeling of accomplishment. Learning English was hard for Zitkala-Ša. On the other hand, English helped her throughout her lifetime.

Nevertheless, even in the oratorical contest, Zitkala-Ša suffered from racial discrimination. At the Indiana State Oratorical Contest held later, students from other schools said racial slurs and raised a flag with a discriminatory picture and word to taunt her. She describes that as follows:

The slurs against the Indian . . . stained the lips of our opponents . . . But after the orations were delivered a deeper burn awaited me. . . some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed . . . words that ridiculed the college which was presented by a “squaw.” (102)

By using the word “squaw” which refers to Native American women, the other colleges’ students meant to discriminate against her.

Although Zitkala-Ša got second prize at this contest, she was not recognized by whites immediately. However, her autobiographical essays in *Atlantic Monthly* were read and recognized by whites, but that process was tough for Zitkala-Ša.

In “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” Zitkala-Ša shows us the hardship in missionary school, but also she shows that it was not only hardship. As a result, English helped Zitkala-Ša to write her essays and later compose an opera. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley notes that: “Zitkala-Ša is one of the first Native American women writers to write her autobiography without the help of interpreter or ethnographer” (65). To show Native American’s cultures to white readers, English is essential for these writers. Zitkala-Ša wanted white readers to know about the systematic discrimination she faced despite her excelling in school work.

An Identity Crisis in “An Indian Teacher Among Indians”

In “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” Zitkala-Ša does not describe teaching in classroom, but she describes the first day when she arrived at the school where she was to teach. The school was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and she went to teach there in 1897. Zitkala-Ša also wrote about a trip to her reservation and the reason why she decided to quit her job. Zitkala-Ša was confronted with an identity crisis. She studied at a white school and acquired white customs, language and religion. This made her to feel uncomfortable when she returned to the reservation. Zitkala-Ša struggled with her identity, wondering whether she should live in a white world or a Native American one.

In the beginning of this essay, Zitkala-Ša explains why she became a teacher. She writes: “Though an illness left me unable to continue my college course, my pride kept me from returning to my mother” (104). Though Zitkala-Ša felt sorry that she left her mother alone on the reservation, pride made Zitkala-Ša not return to the reservation but begin to work as a teacher. Moreover, she suffered from poverty. She had to work and decided to work as a Native American children’s teacher. However, the administrator told her to go West and gather Native American pupils. As a result, Zitkala-Ša had to go back

to her reservation and there she learned about the situation with which her mother was confronted.

When Zitkala-Ša reached her mother's house, she noticed the poor living conditions of her mother's home. The house's roof leaked, and a breeze came into her house from the wall. Zitkala-Ša asked her mother, "Mother, why is not your house cemented? Do you have no interest in a more comfortable shelter?" and her mother answered, 'You forget, my child, that I am now old, and I do nor work with beads any more. . . . we are left without means to buy even a morsel of food'" (108-9). Zitkala-Ša could not say anything to her mother because she could not find what to say to her mother.

In addition, there was another factor that made them poor. Her mother said, "this village has been these many winters a refuge for white robbers. The Indian cannot complain to the Great Father in Washington without suffering outrage for it here" (109). The Great Father in Washington refers to the president of United States. Zitkala-Ša's mother told her daughter that the president did not want to help Native Americans. After Zitkala-Ša's mother said that, Zitkala-Ša wanted to say something but it was interrupted by her mother. Her mother said, "There is only one source of justice, and I have been praying steadfastly to the Great Spirit to avenge our wrongs" (109). Zitkala-Ša realized how helpless her mother was. Zitkala-Ša cried, "Mother, don't pray again! The Great Spirit does not care if we live or die!" (109). Zitkala-Ša learned about Christianity and was negative about it, so she knew that it was meaningless to pray to the Great Spirit as well. Moreover, when Zitkala-Ša and her mother sat alone and watched the caves dug where white settlers lived, her mother cursed the white settlers. Zitkala-Ša and her mother could not understand each other because of cultural differences. Zitkala-Ša learned Christianity and western culture, but her mother never had. They wanted to be in sympathy with each other, but it was hard for them.

While Zitkala-Ša stayed on the reservation with her mother, Zitkala-Ša learned about the dire situation which confronted Native Americans. In this essay about her trip to the reservation, Zitkala-Ša shows readers how Native Americans were poor and helpless. She describes white settlers who robbed Native Americans of their lands, foods and jobs by force. On the other hand, the only thing Native Americans could do was to curse white settlers. That gap makes readers feel sympathy for Native Americans.

In the last section of “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” Zitkala-Ša writes about why she decided to quit teaching. Zitkala-Ša notes that “For the white man’s papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. . . . On account of my mother’s simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up, also” (112). Zitkala-Ša realized that she lost her Native American beliefs and thought as well as her connection to her mother. She notes, “At last, one weary day in the school room, a new idea presented itself to me. It was a new way of solving the problem of my inner self. I liked it” (112). Zitkala-Ša wanted to keep her Native American beliefs and thought in herself. To solve the problem, she decided to be a writer and preserve Native American beliefs, tradition and culture. It was one of the reasons that she wrote these essays about her life.

Zitkala-Ša struggled with her identity: was she white or Native American? She learned English and western culture, and it puzzled her. Dexter Fisher notes that:

The cultural clashes experienced at the school during the painful time she was learning English and trying accommodate to American customs seemed insignificant in comparison to the alienation she felt upon returning to her mother’s house. (232)

To adapt to western culture and learn English was hard for Zitkala-Ša. However, after she adapted to western culture, she felt alienation in her native place.

Zitkala-Ša realized that Native Americans education had some problems. She described the way whites visitors watched the Native American students she taught:

Examining the neatly figured pages, and gazing upon the Indian girls and boys bending over their books, the white visitors walked out of the schoolhouse well satisfied: they were educating the children of the red man! They were paying a liberal fee to the government employees. (112-3)

Zitkala-Ša shows us the whites visitors’ snobbish attitudes. They did not have any knowledge about Native American culture, but they compelled children to study western culture. Whites were satisfied to see that situation, but it was not appropriate for Native

American children, as Zitkala-Ša herself illustrated in “The School Days of an Indian Girl.”

In “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” Zitkala-Ša tried to show readers about how poor the Native Americans were, and how the education for Native Americans have some problems. Moreover, Zitkala-Ša wrote about how she felt alienated on the reservation. Similar to the other essays, Zitkala-Ša wrote her essay effectively so that readers not only learn about the situation of Native American but also they can feel sympathy for them.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed Zitkala-Ša’s three autobiographical essays. Through these three memoirs, Zitkala-Ša describes real Native American life from a Native American’s point of view to white readers.

Zitkala-Ša’s essays were published as a book, which included a letter from one of her fans, Helen Keller. She admired Zitkala-Ša’s previous book, *Old Indian Legends* and wrote: “This Book should be in every home.” Keller noted that “You have translated them [Indian legends] into our language in a way that will keep them alive in the hearts of men” (Dominguez 196). Zitkala-Ša’s skillful technique in writing about her life moved many readers’ hearts and a lot of readers read and accepted her work, including Helen Keller.

Through Zitkala-Ša’s three autobiographical essays, readers learned how hard her life was. By using many methods, Zitkala-Ša succeeded in making white readers understand and accept her story. Patricia, Monaghan wrote in her review of *American Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*: “[Zitkala-Ša] could have been a mere exotic, but she found a way to capture the interest of non-Indian readers, who preferred the romanticized noble savage to the often-sad reality of Indian life, and to give voice to her threatened culture” (1260-61).

As a result, her works were published as a book, and more and more people could read them. These works captured a lot of reader’s hearts, and they could learn about Native Americans real life, culture and tradition through Native American’s point of

view. Zitkala-Ša's attempt to teach readers, white or otherwise, about Native Americans was a success.

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