

Evolving with Resistance: A Study of the Memoirs of Zitkala-Sa

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ABSTRACT

Genocide, extermination or cultural mongrelisation of myriad aboriginal races and the consequent growth of resistance, ever since the amplification of the Colonial rule, have attracted great scholastic attention with the increasing popularity of the term “Fourth World” and the allied discourse. The relentless eradication of the native races in America has reduced the substantial tribal population from over 8 million people to a paltry million. Crushed under the enormous burden of poverty and the emotional pain of being uprooted and re-rooted, those tribes who escaped the onslaught of disease and war, have vented their anger, sometimes through futile rebellions and sometimes through a more potent vindication of their culture, in their art and literature. Zitkala-Sa, an early twentieth-century American Indian writer, critic and activist, was a victim of the European-American missionaries, as she enrolled at a boarding school for the American Indian children. She compiled her personal experiences of encountering the colonisers and serialised them in the Atlantic. This paper focuses on the growth of resistance/consciousness among the American Indian races through a reading of one of their most overt voices, Zitkala-Sa, who registers her protest by upholding the superiority of her native culture against the atrocities in an intensely racist American society.

Key Words: American Indian, Zitkala-Sa, dominance, resistance, vindication, tribal.

The human perception of the surrounding environ has changed with the advancement of civilisation. However, no single event in the history of humanity can claim to have imprinted the world with such ineffaceable impressions as the two World Wars in the first half of Nineteenth Century. Besides its onslaught on human life, property and psyche, the Second World War has altered the way man perceived the world around. One of its long enduring impact is the creation of the three-tier model of the global community: the First World encompassing the Capitalist Euro-American block; the Second World Socialist states; and the then newly independent, non-aligned nations, conveniently termed as the Third World – a term synonymous with the economic backwardness and an enduring struggle to rise above the centuries of Colonial oppression. This three-tier model was extended in the 1970s to include the “ancient nations”, bereft of sovereignty and international acknowledgement, yet endowed with a strong motivation towards the preservation of their unique identity. Shuswap Chief, George Manuel popularised the term and concept of the “Fourth World” in 1974, with the publication of his book *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, where he defined the Fourth World as the “indigenous peoples descended from a country’s aboriginal population and who today are completely or partly deprived of the right to their own territories and its riches.” (Manuel and Posluns, 1974, p. 40)

Manuel’s definition has ever since been challenged by the “Fourth World” critics, analysts or journalists, producing a wide range of definitions for the term, subsequently widening its base to include the unrecognised nations globally.

Indigenous people, either living as hunters and gatherers or partaking completely in the culture of their national society, have retained on a strong sense of their distinct cultures and a deep attachment to their lands. With the augmentation of colonialism – both political and socio-cultural, the propagation of non-indigenous religions and the ruthless stride of development and

reconstruction of the societies on modern lines, the traditional habitat of the indigenous groups have been usurped and their cultural nuances, pushed to the verge extinction. Bereft of their traditional livelihood, land and even identity, the indigenous people, irrespective of their geographical location, have emerged as the most disadvantaged group on Earth. In the words of Dr. Richard Griggs, "The geopolitical force internationally unrecognised nations represent, is totally unaccounted for. These are peoples who through both peaceful and military means are challenging the entire state system" (Griggs, 1992)

Among the hoary tradition of genocide and subsequent extermination or cultural mongrelisation of myriad aboriginal races, this paper focuses on the growth of resistance /consciousness among the American Indian races through a reading of one of its most overt voices, Zitkala-Sa. The hegemonic European-American race has not only enslaved the African-American community, both politically and culturally; but even before it, had made a conscious attempt to annihilate the native tribes of America. Their weapons and their small-pox virus proved lethal for the traditionally secluded tribal communities of America. The relentless eradication of the native races in America has brought down the substantial tribal population from over eight million people, speaking numerous distinct languages to a paltry million, which now forms the American Indian sub-population in North America. Those tribes which escaped the onslaught of disease and war, were displaced from their traditional homes in the East. Crushed under the enormous burden poverty and the emotional pain of uprooting and re-rooting, these communities have vented their anger, sometimes through futile rebellions and sometimes through a more potent vindication of their culture in their art and literature. However, what is here quite appalling is the fact that, the voices of protest have been prevented from coming out through a dual impediment of the oral narrative tradition of the

tribes on one hand and the suppression of the hegemonic European-American culture on the other.

Amidst these socio-cultural as well as literary blockades, a glimmering ray of hope shines in the writings and the persona of Zitkala-Sa, an early twentieth-century American Indian writer, critic and activist. Also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Zitkala-Sa is a member of the Yankton Sioux tribe. Propelled by the vision of a better life shown by the missionaries, she travelled all the way from her home in South Dakota to Wabash, Indiana, in 1888 to attend the White's Manual Institute. Later she compiled her personal experiences of encountering the colonisers and serialised them in the *Atlantic* under the titles: "The Impressions of an Indian Girl", "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians." She has also enriched the Native American literature by collecting and publishing many tribal myths, digging them up from the depth of her memory.

Zitkala-Sa was a victim of the Indian boarding schools, like thousands of other American Indian children. Consequently, her narration is distanced from her native Dakota hinterland, though reverberating with a sonorous racial awareness. The fall of their tribe into the slug of despondency has been present in her conscience right from her formative years, as they were "driven like a herd of buffalo" (Zitkala-Sa, 1999) from their homes where they were happy. The affliction that lay over her mother's face or that was vented in her cousin's words, ever since they were deprived of their lands by the "bad paleface", gradually ignited an anger that burnt silently in her bosom. Migration to the West took away half of her family and she was left only with her mother, a widowed aunt and a cousin. Her conscience developed amidst the legends surrounding her family, the rich oral tradition of her race, the hospitality that they still extended to the needy and the deep sense of brotherhood that bound the tribe so strongly. Her memory is furnished with traditional images of her

tribal life. Soaring as a free bird, amidst the hills and cascades in her much cherished moccasins, embellishing the buckskin with the traditional beadwork, Zitkala-Sa spent her early years childhood.

Any ancient community is inextricably bound with its own rights and rituals, customs and beliefs, myths and legends – some of which later become their badge, a potent symbol through which the community is identified by the outer world. Zitkala's narrative consciously upholds the uniqueness of the Dakotas. One such trait is the hospitality of the tribe, which is well articulated in the little girl's impromptu attempt to make and serve coffee 'over dead ash' to a guest on her mother's absence. The strong belief in superstition is expressed through the lore of the forbidden palms that grew over the grave of the man who loved playing the game of striped plum seeds. The elaborate description of the food preservation for the winter, enlivens another image of the tribal community life. Among her early experiences in the West, Zitkala-Sa recollects her encounter with the Wiyaka-Napbina (Wearer of a Feather Necklace), a vagabond who roamed about the hills aimlessly and visited the huts, only when driven by hunger. Though the scary appearance of the man scared the little girl, her mother's sympathetic words reveal a wretched truth, "Pity the man, my child. I knew him when he was a brave and handsome youth. He was overtaken by a malicious spirit among the hills." (Zitkala-Sa, 1999) Apparently, the man was unable to bear the anxiety of migration, the separation from their cherished land. While many others died owing to its physical exertion, Wiyaka-Napbina, lost his mental stability, unable to bear the trauma of dispersal. Thus Zitkala-Sa's narrative brings forth myriad aspects of the pristine Indian life.

Zitkala-Sa had already been conscious of the gradual modernisation of their community on the Euro-American lines and the arrival of the missionaries to their village marked a new

beginning in her life. She was attracted to their promise of being taken to “a more beautiful country.” (Zitkala-Sa, 1999) Her mother’s cautioning words could not dissuade her from her desire to explore the unknown lands of the East. The mother had to yield to her daughter’s wishes and to the growing pressure of the White way of life, and agreed to send her daughter with the missionaries, bitterly considering, “The palefaces, who owe us a large debt for stolen lands, have begun to pay a tardy justice in offering some education to our children.”

Her arrival at the White’s Manual Labor Institute, a Quaker mission school in Indiana, which she called the land of red apples, was a major shift in her life, a shift from the time when she, “was a wild little girl of seven.... as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer.”, and when she was treated “as a dignified little individual.”(Zitkala-Sa, 1999) to a bitter-cold world which was controlled by the sounding of bells. The narrator’s humorous description of her experience with the bells which rang to guide the girls at each step, reveals the frustration of a free bird in the confines of a cage:

A small bell was tapped, and each of the pupils drew a chair from under the table. Supposing this act meant they were to be seated, I pulled out mine and at once slipped into it from one side. But when I turned my head, I saw that I was the only one seated, and all the rest at our table remained standing. Just as I began to rise, looking shyly around to see how chairs were to be used, a second bell was sounded. All were seated at last, and I had to crawl back into my chair again.... Everyone picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead, for by this time I was afraid to venture anything more. (Zitkala-Sa, 1999)

The images of freedom and life amidst nature gets replaced by the images of chilly vaults and strict authority, once the author starts describing her life in the school. She tries to point out at the transition from a natural way of existence in her tribal community to the artificial and mechanised life of the so called

civilised society. Her fury at the tragic death of the Indian children under the callous authority of the ‘palefaces’, and her apathy to the life bound by the “Iron Routine”, overtly expresses her disapproval to the new standards that the colonisers wanted to impose over simple yet humane existence of the Dakotas. She asserts the superiority of her race by affirming her innate virtues that enabled her to overcome the ‘black days’ of her school life.

But soon after her arrival, Zitkala-Sa, registers her first act of protest, in her own small but significant way. The episode of resisting her hairs being shingled marks the beginning of a new maturity in the life of the little girl who comes out into the big, bad world and dares to challenge its conventions. In the words of Franz Fanon,

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalise, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief. (Fanon, 1967, p. 194)

Thus the Christian missionaries across the globe had started their mission with the ‘core belief’ that the indigenous people are uncivilised, crude and unblessed and it was their noble task to save their souls by negating their ‘ungodly’ ways. The nuns at White’s Manual Labor Institute grossly dismissed the young Indian girl’s sentiments and mercilessly hunted her down to cut her long hair off. It may be read as an attempt of the coloniser to weaken the indigenous culture and to eradicate a scope of resistance, a situation that brings into the memory the more recent instance of the French colonialists attempting to unveil the Muslim women in Algeria. In the politics of acculturation, the body of the colonised becomes a chief object of control, and subsequently a chief object of opposition. Zitkala-Sa expresses her shock at the western attire that the resident Native Indian girls were made to wear, something that she found indecent as

per the standards of her tribe. She offered the most vehement resistance she could have offered from her deprived position, to save her long hair, which became an object of her racial identity, because shingled hair signifies cowardice among her tribe. She resisted this stigmatisation, viewing it as the dismemberment of her identity. When her associates claimed, "We have to submit, because they are strong," she rebelled saying,

"No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!" I answered....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 the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. (Zitkala-Sa, 1999)

Zitkala-Sa's refusal to see herself in the image which her oppressors wanted her to adapt, is followed by a rigorous attempt on her part to reconstruct herself in a way that would not conform to the White standards; while the missionaries continued their attempts to negate her native ways and reconstruct her on Christian lines. The clash between two objective views led to a sort of secret war where the victim attacked her victimiser hiding behind the façade of conformity, covertly flouting the rules. Being saturated in their racial pride, the missionaries failed to realise that in their so called civilising mission, they were taking out the very soul from the body of the free tribal. The Dakota girls continued flouting their rules and regulations that they felt "very needlessly binding." The more they were reprimanded, the more rebellious and fearless they grew. Thereafter, when punishments and physical assaults failed to take away their free spirits, the Christian mythology served handy. The girls were shown fearful picture of the devil and threatened "that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him."

A new crisis awaited her on return to the west, for a vacations, as her mongrelised self found no companion in her

native Dakota prairies. She complains, "Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. This deplorable situation was the effect of my brief course in the East...." She recollects how the tribal gathering of her community became a 'party' where the youth shunned their traditional attire and make-up and adapted a more sophisticated attire as per the dominating European-American tradition, newly acquired at their schools. However she continues her rebellion against the cultural hegemony by reverting to her ethnic identity: "Since my return from school I had thrown away my shoes, and wore again the soft moccasins." (Zitkala-Sa, 1999)

Ultimately Zitkala-Sa emerges not as a rebel who shunned the influence of the dominant group, rather she used her English education as a weapon to subvert their hegemony. She incurred her mother's wrath and pursued her studies in the 'Whiteman's ways' with the intention of mastering it for the benefit of her community. Her victory in the oratorical contest in English, among people who were strongly prejudiced against her race, was a victory of her determination to master the language of the masters, an attempt to establish the superiority of her race that could adapt, only if it wanted to, and in its own terms.

In understanding her rebellious yet compassionate spirit, Zitkala-Sa's attitude to Christianity is equally significant. Christianity, which she calls the white man's religion, is nothing more than superstitious ideas for her and ultimately she rejects the Bible, which failed to offer her any consolation at the moments of crisis. When one of her converted tribes men, who like her mother and many others have been indoctrinated in the gospel of Christ as the only means of salvation, came to her to reprimand her for her 'unbecoming behavior' and turn her steps back to the Church, Zitkala-Sa's comment establishes her high above the petty politics of the coloniser and the colonised, as she recognises humanity as the greatest religion:

I would not forget that the pale-faced missionary and the hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures, though small indeed their own conceptions of Infinite Love. A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan. (Zitkala-Sa, 1999)

Embellishing her literary palette with the colours of the unfamiliar Euro-American culture and the hoary heritage of her tribe, Zitkala-Sa painted the hallowed image of her American-Indian life, in all its vividness. With such a depiction, Zitkala-Sa is able to take her narration outside the confines of her community, and even more importantly, beyond a lingering sense of oppression, to articulate the trauma of confronting the threat of extinction and thereafter emerging as ultimate survivors. Zitkala's account is an alternate voice – a complete contrast to the stereotypical versions of American modernism – which accords her a unique position in American life and literature. The recollection of her childhood days is a tale of growing resistance among her tribe, which simultaneously presents her evolution with resistance. The stronger her resistance became, the stronger she herself evolved and thereafter worked to the evolution of her tribe. When the self-voices its own aspirations to subvert the hegemony of the oppressor, who tries to dictate it or speak over it, resistance blooms; thus Zitkala-Sa registers her protest by upholding the superiority of her native culture against the atrocities in an intensely racist American society.

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