

Tearing into the Web of Lies: Identity Narratives of Zitkala Sa

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ABSTRACT

Twentieth century has witnessed the development of native literature across the world. These literatures are an important endeavor on the part of natives to construct their identity. Constructed identity is important for them because the colonial narratives have maligned their identity and colonial policies have systematically obliterated their culture and history. The maligned identities and obliteration of culture have played havoc with the lives of the Natives. That is why the Native intellectuals are trying to redeem their identity and culture. They are writing narratives that are meant to transform the whites.

Keywords- Identity, Native, Zitkala Sa, White.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is probably the key word that has gained currency during the last few decades of the twentieth century. The people around the globe are trying to assert their identity. The most important thing about the construction of identity is that the key ingredients that formulate the identity are different. For instance, some people identify themselves on the basis of their skin colour and religious affiliation while some identify themselves on the basis of the historical achievements of their people and their culture. Whatever may be the determinants; identity has two dimensions: One how the person perceives himself/herself; and second how the people perceive the person. Identity narratives are concerned with the both.

When one has a look at the Native literature, one realizes that the Native literature seeks to transform the Natives as well as the settlers. Natives have to be transformed because due to centuries of intermingling, intermarrying the physical traits are no longer the distinguishing factors. In addition to these during the centuries of colonization Native languages have been censored, Native traditions debarred and Native religions have been pushed to extinction. The Native children who were raised in colonial institutions have become

nowhere people who must now be instructed in Native culture. On the other hand, the opinion of the Whites about the Natives has been formed by the colonial narratives which were biased against the Natives. These narratives often portrayed the Natives as people who have not been touched by civilization; have remained barbaric and the only human like quality they have acquired is that of speech. The images that were formed by these narratives have remained intact over the centuries and have been transmitted across the generations. In some cases the images have been fostered by the popular culture. The mainstream White people still carry these images in their minds. Stedman quotes an incident where one girl told about the Indians:

I know a lot about the Indians. They wear feathers and put paint on their faces and yell in real high voices when they attack White people and kill them with tomahawks. (3)

This image imprinted on this little girl has been created by cartoons, Hollywood movies and newspapers advertisements. All these things are just an extension of the colonial prejudices against the Natives. The early colonizers did it consciously while the current generation does it unconsciously. This kind of racism has been called "dysconscious racism" (Roppolo 187). This kind of racism is exhibited by people, but they are themselves

unaware of their behaviour because these images have been imprinted on their unconscious.

The Native writers seek to transform these attitudes of the people through their writing. These narratives are a reminder for the Natives who have developed amnesia about their own culture and traditions; and who have forgotten about themselves.

Construction of identity seems to be the focus point of the Native writers. The process started very early with Zitkala Sa who was born in 1876. When one reads her writings, one realizes that her writings are an endeavor to present the truth about her people and to dispel the false images that have been created about the Natives. Her writings seem to convey about the Natives. Her writings seem to convey the truth about her people and at the same time their perceptions about the White man. For instance, Zitkala Sa quotes her mother who tell her: "My little daughter, he is a sham- a sickly sham! The bronzed Dakota is the only real man" (4).

It is clear that Zitkala Sa's mother thinks that "paleface" [White] man is a sham. Zitkala Sa makes clear that her mother's perception of the White man has been formed by her experience of White man. What distinguished the White man from the Natives is the greed of White man. The White man in his greed for land destroyed peaceful communities, massacred people; disbalanced ecosystems and pushed species towards extinction. Zitkala Sa quotes her mother:

We were once very happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away. (4)

The displacement of her people was forced and abrupt, where the Natives did not get a chance to prepare for travel:

Well, it happened on the day we moved camp that your sister and Uncle were both very sick. Many others were ailing, but there seemed to be no help. We travelled many days and nights; not in the grand happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but were driven, my child, driven like a herd of buffalo. (4)

The displacement of the Natives has been a subject of many studies. The displacement of Cherokees is known as "Trail of Tears" because thousands of Cherokees died during displacement. While trying to capture the intensity of tragedy Bowes writes: "And though descriptions of experience remain, word alone will never truly capture the emotional and physical crisis of this event in the history of the Cherokee Nation" (70).

Most of the tribes of the Natives were displaced from their original homelands. No preparations were made for their transport and their food; rather they were left at the mercy of weather and hostile tribes. Louise Erdrich has also written about the displacement of her people in the novel *The Game of Silence* and rest of the novels of *The Birchbark Series*.

The White narratives on the issue do not represent the displacement in this light. When one reads the narratives written by the Whites in those times, one

gets that impression that the Natives were displaced because they were not able use the land in proper manner. The most favoured argument that was the Natives. The Whites argued that one the key ingredients of civilization is the settled life where the people settle at one place and practice agriculture. In the name of the civilization 160 acres of land was allotted to each family of the Natives and 80 acres to each single person over eighteen years and each orphan under eighteen" (Fey & Mc Nickel 74). That is why Zitkala Sa's mother tells her "Both your sister might have been happy with us today, had it not been for the heartless paleface" (5).

Zitkala Sa also contributes to the ever growing debate about who is civilized and who is not? When one looks at the White narratives one realizes that civilization for the Whites means wearing European clothes, living a settled life, adhering to Europeans religious beliefs and governed by a European style government. When one perceives that civilization lies in the outer appearance, one is baffled if the people who behaved like morons could be called civilized. If civilization has to be perceived as something that is contained in outward appearance then it is certainly flawed. The Europeans considered themselves as civilized because they wore special kind of clothes, because they practiced slavery. On the other hand, Natives did not live a settled life; were unaware of the message of Christ; but they valued life and respected all the living things and cared for them. In her writings, Zitkala Sa points out:

They had gone three years to school in the East, and had become civilized. The young men wore the White man's coat and trousers, with bright neckties. The girls wore tight muslin dresses with ribbons at neck and waist. At these gathering they talked English. I could speak English almost as well as my brother, but I was not properly dressed to be taken along. I had no hat, no ribbons, and no close-fitting gown. (29)

These are the reflections of young Zitkala Sa who had not reached the level of maturity to understand that a person does not become civilized by just following the clothing style of the Whites or by speaking English.

In fact, she decided to join a White Residential school against her mother's wishes because she was taken in by White man's lies. In the school, the Whites cut the long hair to make her civilized. This is probably the first time when Zitkala Sa realized that civilization does not mean following the White was blindly. In White culture short hair may mean a civilized outlook, but among the Natives it was totally different:

Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled Warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by Cowards! (22)

When Zitkala Sa's hair were cut by the White Women in the Residential school at that time she realized that her mother has always been right. The 'paleface' is heartless and insensitive. The White man

did not care for cultural differences, his attitude was that of an autocrat who thought that he is always right and the Native Cultures were deviant. Zitkala Sa's anguish was invisible to the Whites who were running the school:

I cried loud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blade of scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken away from my mother I have suffered extreme indignities. People had started at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder. (23)

The episode makes clear the insensitivity of the Whites towards the children. One thing that is important to note is that these institutions were run by the Churches. The people who were associated with the Church were considered paragons of virtue among the Whites, but it seems that these best of human beings also withered when they were given absolute power over the Native children. Of course, the White people were least bothered about the condition of the Native Children. The people who were appointed as the caretakers of the Native Children turned out to be insensitive brutes. Zitkala Sa writes about the horrors they underwent in the institutions. The resident Children were terrified by adapting different strategies. Zitkala Sa writes about how the children were subjected to torture by the use of the figure of Devil:

Out of large book she showed me a picture of a White man's Devil. I looked in horror upon the strong claws that grew out of his fur-covered fingers. His feet were like his hands. Trailing at his heels was a scaly tail tipped with a serpent open jaws. (25)

The Native writers who followed the food steps of Zitkala Sa also wrote about such incidents where the priests used different strategies to oppress the Native Children. The Children were beaten mercilessly to erase Indianness from their personalities. Shirley Sterling wrote about beating of native Children with "a leather strap" (18), while other Native writers like Louise Erdrich have written about the de-culturing impact of the Native Residential schools (LaRose 189).

Zitkala Sa makes clear that Christianity was not only used to torment the Children, but it was also used to break the Native family system and society. In her memoirs, Zitkala Sa makes clear that the system among the Natives was "communitarian" (Tinker XII) Which was opposed to individualism of the Whites. Among the Natives the whole tribe was treated like an extended family. Zitkala Sa's memoir shows that Native took this communitarian system seriously. She writes how the "legends were told" during the evening meals and all "the neighboring old men and women" (5) were invited to eat dinner with them.

The children were treated with respect, even their mistakes were not ridiculed by the old ones. Zitkala Sa narrates an incidence where she made a coffee over a "heap of dead ashes," for an old warrior, but the old man drank it without any complaint. Zitkala Sa narrates the incidence:

But neither she [mother] nor the warrior, whom the law of our custom had compelled to partake of my insipid hospitality, said anything to embarrass me. They treated my best judgement, poor as it was, with the utmost respect. (12)

In this closely knit society, everybody cared for everybody. In her memoir Zitkala Sa writes about how her mother used to care for the people who were sick and made sure that they were provided food (13).

This communitarian/tribal system of living came on the verge of collapsing because of the introduction of Christianity among the people: Zitkala Sa also among those people who alienate from their families.

For the White man's papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. On account of mother's simple view of life and my lack of any, I gave her up, also. I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree I had been uprooted from my mother, nature and God. I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends. The natural coat of bark which had protected my oversensitive nature was scraped off to the very quick. (41)

Zitkala Sa makes clear that the Residential Schools acted as a catalyst in alienating people from their families. The Children were brought into these schools at a very young age. The teachers brainwashed these children at a very young age and taught them to abhor their own traditions and culture (Silko, *Ceremony* 93). Zitkala Sa, of course, was more intelligent than other children that is why she was able to realize the real purpose of these schools:

I slowly comprehended that the large army of White teachers in Indian schools had a larger missionary creed that I had suspected. (40)

This clearly indicated that the identity of the Natives have been obliterated by the Whites. The difference between the Whites and Natives have been accentuated by the Writer. She meticulously constructs the identity of her people. While the White missionaries rejected the traditional beliefs of the Natives and termed them as 'devilish' and reduced the Natives to something less than human beings, the Natives helped them in surviving in the Americas. This attitude of the White have been contrasted with the belief of the Natives who believed "the pale-faced missionary and hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures (45).

In most of the post-colonial text missionaries are presented as the tools of colonialism. The huge army of the invaders invaded and won the territories, but the

missionaries made this invasion long lasting. In her short story "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" she tells that the people of her tribe who entered Christian fold were taught to go for "the soft heart of Christ" (49). In the missionary school, he was told that killing animals was wrong: "At mission school I learned it was wrong to kill. Nine Winters I hunted for the soft heart of Christ, and prayed for the huntsmen who chased the buffalo on the plains" (47). In her novel *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko also point out:

The Indians' worst enemies were missionaries who sent Bibles instead of guns and who preached blessed are the meek. Missionaries were stooges and spies for the government. Missionaries warned the village against the evils of revolution and communism. (514)

This clearly indicated that the missionaries wanted the Natives to become 'meek' and they were indeed made 'meek' through Christianity. This exposes the hypocrisy of the missionaries and the Whites. The Whites who were the followers of Christianity did not follow this non-violent policy of the scriptures. They massacred the Natives and used the most brutal methods to kill them. Many such massacres have been unearthed by the contemporary scholars. David E. Stannard, for instance writes:

The Spaniards cut off the arm of one, the leg or hip of another, and from some heads at one stroke, like butchers cutting up beef and mutton for market. Six hundred, including the cacique, were thus slain like brute beasts.... Vasco ordered forty of them to be torn to pieces by dogs. (qtd. in 83)

Similarly, Thomas King writes about a massacre where "Six to seven hundred Pequot near the Mystic River in Connecticut" (5). Thomas king writes about many such massacres that happened in Native Americas. When one reads about these massacres, one gets the feeling that Whites were the most violent people. Their behaviour was totally opposite to what the missionaries were teaching to the Natives. It seems that Natives were conditioned to become 'meek' to rule out any rebellion against the Whites. In "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," the conditioned son fails even to hunt for his sick father and starts praying for the natives who used to hunt the buffaloes on the plains. This is interesting because the historical accounts tell that Buffaloes were pushed to the verge of extinction by the Whites. This means that the Whites did not follow the scriptures or the missionaries; there is a scenario where these teachings were reserved for the Natives only.

The Whites also debased the Natives for their treatment of women. The colonial narratives are full of description of the Native women as the beast of burden. In some of the narratives the Natives were accused of sexual perversions. However, Zitkala Sa presents a totally different picture of Women in her society. In her short story "A warrior's Daughter," she writes about the story a Dakota girl Tusee Who endangers her life to save

her loved. Zitkala Sa writes: "Tusee lifts him upon her broad shoulders with half-running, triumphant steps she carries him away into the open night" (66). In the story, Zitkala Sa makes clear that role of Women was in no way restricted to the household chores or to rearing of the Children, rather the Native women were strong and participated even in the battles. The Native society was in no way similar to the White society where the roles of genders were clearly demarcated. Where the Women were considered as "The Angel in the House."

The successors of Zitkala Sa have also pointed that woman enjoyed a superior status in society. In fact many of the Native tribes were matriarchal where a woman was he head of the family.

Thus it is clear that the Zitkala Sa was one of the pioneers in writing the identity narratives. She was one of the first writers to assert the Native identity and tear the web of lies that was woven around the Natives. She joined the Residential School against the wishes of her mother, but this proved to be a blessing in disguise because she learnt the invaders language in the institution. Learning of English language allowed her to have a look at what was written about the Natives and subsequently she blasted the lies about the Natives. Her identity narratives are the first one to appear on the literary scene. The foundation laid by her has been used by her Native sisters to take the battle further.

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