

Resistance in Zitkala-Ša's American Indian Stories

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Abstract

Loss of identity is one of the major problems of all time. People who believe that domination destroy their true colors find resistance against the dominant as a result to maintain their identity. Literature is one of ways that best present voices and actions of people. This paper aims to analyze resistance against the domination and resistance strategies in Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*. The text is analyzed within a theoretical framework based on James C. Scott's Theory of Infrapolitics or Everyday Resistance. The study shows that Zitkala-Sa uses her pen as the weapon to resist domination by using disguised and non-disguised strategies. The study demonstrates that domination and resistance coexist together. Resistance can occur at any time and space in any form. Whenever there is an attempt to dominate, there will be resistance.

Keywords: resistance literature, Native Indian, AMERICAN INDIAN STORIES, Zitkala-Sa

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Introduction

Each society comes with unique traditional cultures which are valuable as national or cultural heritages. Those cultural treasures are to be passed down to the later generations. However, after being invaded and colonized, societies and cultures are being transformed into different ways. Identities that co-exist with cultures are at the verge of losing the true colors. The people within the society are responsible for preserving and maintaining their originalities. The Native Americans are one of the people who have experienced colonization and loss of identity. In order to protect and regain their identity, resistance is the ultimate option. Zitkala-Sa, a Native Indian writer, is one of the resisters who present Native resistance through her writings. This study aimed to study resistance in the Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories* (1921). The study is analyzed within Professor James C. Scott's Theory of Infrapolitics or Everyday Resistance.

Theory of Everyday Resistance

According to Scott (2008), "Infrapolitics" or "Everyday Resistance" refers to two main forms of resistance: public (non-disguised) and disguised. He proposes that non-disguised and disguised resistance resist against the power of material, status, and ideology. They resist against domination of materials, profanation of quo and symbols against status domination, and counter-ideologies against the domination of ideas (as cited in Johansson and Vinthagen, 2013, p.5). Non-disguised or public resistance includes demonstration, revolts, strikes, invasions, etc. According to Scott, non-disguised resistance has to be interrelated with the society and sometimes with violence. Non-disguised resistance needs to be directly engaged with the dominants and gain attention. Political protests, strikes, wars, and invasions are examples of non-disguised resistance.

On the other hand, disguised resistance or everyday resistance exists in the society without being disclosed. This kind of resistance does not always need to be engaged directly with the dominants (Scott, 2008). One person can be a disguised resister. A student who breaks simple rules in school can be seen as a resister employing disguised resistance. The act of breaking rules shows that the student does not follow the general rules of the society, or in this case, the school. Disguised resistance does not always need to be acknowledged by the dominants. There are many ways and strategies of resistance. For the Native Indians, literature is one of the tools chosen as a weapon to fight against domination. Zitkala-Sa's writing is a good example of resistance literature.

Resistance in Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*

Zitkala-Sa or Gertrude Simmons Bonnin is a notable Native American writer. Her writing, *American Indian Stories*, was first published in 1921 in a collection with *Old Indians Legends*. The stories are partial based on Zitkala-Sa's childhood experiences and others' around her. She provides readers with hands-on experiences she has faced as a Native child in the mainstream society. By analyzing *American Indian Stories*, it

is seen that Zitkala-Sa resists against colonization and assimilation through the use of language and storytelling.

Before exposing to the outside society, the Natives Indians were educated by leaders, elders, and families of the tribes. The Natives were taught to practice from basic to survival skills such as planting, hunting, and daily routines in the reservations. A proper westernized education was first introduced to them after the western colonists arrived in the areas in the Seventeenth Century. The colonists intended to educate the Natives in order to teach them the ways of a Euro-American life. They believed that by giving education to the Natives, it would draw attention to others and appeal to classes of people from Europe to settle in the area. Marr (2008) explains that education was the way to slowly westernize and assimilate the Natives into the mainstream society, and it was the way to decrease the presence, practice, and the Natives' traditions. In a closer look, education was a tool of colonization. (p.1).

Zitkala-Sa talks about the Native children's schooling experiences in *American Indian Stories*. In the chapter "*The School Days of an Indian Girl*", she presents that education and schooling rip away Natives identity and mentally abuse children. Zitkala-Sa was sent to a Quaker Boarding School at the age of eight. It was a voluntarily wish to go to school and explore the land of the red apples. She wanted to explore the Eastern world that she has heard so much about. During her time in school, she learned that the schooling system has not only given knowledge to the Indian children but it has also taken many things from them. They were forced to give up their cultural practices, clothes, and language. They were forced to live their lives in a western way. They eventually lost their most precious thing, their identity.

The loss of Natives identity occurs from the moment children set feet in the school. Hautgren (1989) states in her work *To Lead and to Serve: American Indian Education at Hampton institute*:

Boarding school administrations "forbade, whether in school or on reservation, tribal singing and dancing, along with the wearing of ceremonial and 'savage' clothes, the practice of native religions, the speaking of tribal languages, the acting out of traditional gender roles" (Hautgren, Molin & Green, 1989, p. 11).

Forbidding children from performing tribal rituals, speaking tribal languages, and wearing traditional clothes is part of assimilation. It is in fact an obvious way to destroy the Natives' cultures from the society. The aims were to assimilate the Natives into the mainstream society and cleanse 'the savage race' (Nelson, 1991, p. 2-3). The cultures that live and give meaning to the Natives' life were being erased from their lives. There are many sudden changes for children in "*The Land of the Red Apples*" which make them scared, uncomfortable, and out of place. When children arrive at school, they are told to take off their traditional beadwork cloth, moccasin shoes, and wear white pajamas like other children. In the next morning, Zitkala-Sa is embarrassed when she fails to follow the morning routine at breakfast

table. She cannot understand and she is unable to adjust to the routines. The biggest situation that occurs during her first days is when her braided hair is cut off.

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. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 22-23).

From this quote, it is clear that the school has ripped away her identity and left her with a scar in her mind. The traditional appearances represent cultures and Natives dignity. For the Natives, shingled hair represents coward people who have no will to fight or protect their cultural identity. Zitkala-Sa cherishes her braids and costume as they remind her who she is, a native daughter. They also remind her home and make her feel safe in such a strange new place. Her spirit is enacted to the last piece of traditional traits she has on her. By cutting off her braids, her soul is also ripped apart from her true self. Similarly to Zitkala-Sa, young children who went to school had to suffer the loss of their identity and to go through hard times adapting themselves into the new cultures.

Zitkala-Sa employs a non-disguised resistance when she runs, hides, and struggles against the cutting of her long hair. According to Professor James C. Scott, non-disguised or public resistance refers to use of harsh force, strikes, revolts, or resistance that can be easily recognized by naked eyes. Zitkala-Sa uses physical forces to maintain her freedom. To her, there is no other way to get away from the situation unless she runs away. Though she and her friends are unable to succeed their goals, they put the best effort to resist against the schooling system that aims to destroy who they are. They seek to protect themselves from having negative influences and becoming the ones who have to change.

Language is another tool of colonization exercised through education on the Native children. Many scholars have defined the importance of language in human life. Neito (2007) states in his article, *The Imperial's New Words: Language and Colonization*, that "Language has such a vital incidence in the human being and is so omnipresent in our lives that we are generally unaware of its influence" (p. 231). It is used consciously and unconsciously in daily life within different social contexts. Zitkala-Sa is one of the children who were oppressed and influenced by the use of English language.

In "*The Land of the Red Apples*", Zitkala-Sa is new to English because she has just arrived in school. Though she slowly learns English as time goes by, it is still insufficient. Zitkala-Sa retraces her first struggle that is related to the incapability of language and communication. When she first set feet into the school, the different atmosphere and people intimidate her. She cried "Oh! I want my mother and my brother Dawee! I want to go to my aunt!" I pleaded; but the ears of the paleface could not hear me" (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 20). No one could understand and give her what she wanted at that time because she was unable to speak English. The Native

language was the only thing that made her feel comfortable but she and other children were forbid from speaking it. Another incident occurs in "*The Snow Episode*". Zitkala and her friends are breaking rules by playing in the snow. One of the Native children, Judewin, informs her and others that the paleface woman, or teacher, is upset and they are to be punished. The only way to survive is to be quiet and reply with the word "no" because Judewin has heard the palefaces saying the word many times (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 23-24). Ironically, Judewin who has better English than other children still lead others into hard situations where they are eventually punished. The inability of language causes them problems many times. Moreover, forbidding children from speaking Native language makes them voiceless. Being voiceless is like being invisible or meaningless in the society. As voices of the Natives cannot be heard, their stories are lost. More importantly, their rights and identity will no longer be existed.

However, English becomes her tool to resist against domination. Hall (2007) implicates in his article in *The Work of Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* that meaning can be negotiated, redefined, and relocated based on audience's cultural conception (p. 12-16). It also has the power to create, convey, and express different meanings to different audience. Therefore, language has the qualities to become one of the great weapons of resistance because it is the best way to express and present arguments of the authors. For many authors, English is not their mother tongue but a language of the colonists or dominants. By writing in English, the authors utilize the powerful language that oppresses them as a tool to fight back. In order to survive the changes, Zitkala took English more seriously and became a fluent English speaker. She won many oration awards and received a scholarship to pursuit a university degree. Thought she could not finish her degree, she became a teacher in a boarding school. After she returned to her home as a recruiter, she saw that education has given both advantages and disadvantages on children by using herself as an example. She has lost herself at the beginning when she went to school and struggled to find her true identity. She felt that she did not belong in the western world but she also did not totally belong in the reservation as well. She had a hard time trying to find the balance in her identity. On the other hand, she has received a standard education which elevated her soul and knowledge. She has found the way to keep and present her Native identity to the world. Therefore, she intended to express her feelings, tell stories, and let the world know the reality she has seen by writing books in English.

Writing books in English is the way that Zitkala-Sa used as resistance against the dominants or the mainstream society. Her words are the sharp blades that plunge through the hearts of readers, even among the white dominants, who share an engagement of emotions. Many of her works remain timeless as examples of the Native resistance literature. Using English as a weapon is considered as a non-violent or disguised resistance. According to Scott (2008), disguised resistance refers to the use of unarmed and non-violent force. It is to counter the domination of materials, ideology, and social status. As English is the primary language that is used to speak of the Natives from the mainstream point of view, assimilate, and discriminate the Natives, Zitkala-Sa employs it in the same way to tell stories from her side. Even

though children were forced to study English and faced with many struggles, English has become a weapon of resistance. By writing her books in English, Zitkala-Sa is able to taunt the dominant ideas, seek revenge, and regain self-dignity. She calls attention to the world through her words to let them see how the Natives are treated. Through education and the use of English, Zitkala-Sa has found the way to utilize her experiences and best resist the dominant power through her works. In order to enhance the meanings of her work to the hearts of readers, Zitkala-Sa utilizes storytelling as another tool of resistance.

Storytelling is one of the distinctions of the Native Americans. Stories of myths, legends, tales, and fables have been playing a great part in lives of the Natives for centuries. Storytelling is first and foremost an oral tradition in tribal languages. The stories are enriched with cultures, tribal traditions, description of landscapes, and experiences of the Natives. At the end of each story, a moral lesson is given to readers. There are various definitions of storytelling. Byrd (2014) states in her work *"The Presence and Use of the Native American and African Oral Trickster Traditions"* that the form of storytelling is universally understandable and that it is used to teach, entertain, explain, and preserve valuable tradition (p. 55). For African American, DuBois (2007) states that storytelling is the way to create and maintain positive images after the main society has misconceived and misinterpreted Native people. The idea is similar to other Native tribes as the Natives have been marked as savages, inferiors, and uncivilized. Smith (2013) quotes Winona LaDuke in her article 'Native Storytellers connect the Past and the Future' that storytelling is a diverse and powerful tool to describe and create images. It also provides background knowledge and understanding Native cultures through history and ideas (as cited in Smith, 2013).

The natives tell stories of their history and traditions. They believe that everything in – lands, people, cultures, languages, and life itself-- is symbiotic. The values of land and life exist together and could never be separated. However, after the colonization, lands and possessions were taken away from the Native Indians and they suffered a great deal of pain and disgrace. Therefore, they tell the stories to the young generations in order to teach them about the ancestors, preserve history, and reflect the life after the colonization. Smith (2013) also states that storytelling is created upon cultural knowledge and references to present true emotions and sincerity of the people. Through their stories, the Native Indians are able pass down traditions and preserve their identity in the eyes of new generation.

Storytelling is considered as one of the powerful tools of resistance. Storytelling is the way to tell and retell the past in the present time for a better future. When elders tell stories to their children, they pass down traditions and valuable lessons to the young. Even storytelling has been developed and adapted into writing, painting, or performance; it still serves the same purpose. It is to preserve cultures from being erased or mistaken by the mainstream society. Storytelling also gives honors to life and reflects memories, and regains power of those who have lived through assimilation and repression. Therefore, Native people have been using oral tradition to preserve their cultures by telling their children. Later generation, such as Zitkala-

Sa, employs the stories she has learnt as a tool of resistance. In *American Indian Stories*, Zitkala-Sa employs storytelling as a tool of resistance.

In the episode “The Legends”, Zitkala presents readers with myths, legends and tales which are told by the elders of the tribe. They also look up to courageous warriors and highly respect those who lived and fought bravely in the past. At young age, Zitkala-Sa found that the most exciting thing of the day was to listen to the elders.

My uncle, whose death my mother ever lamented, was one of our nation’s bravest warriors. His name was on the lips of old men when talking of the proud feats of valor; and it was mentioned by younger men, too, in connection with deeds of gallantry (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 5).

From this quote, it is clear that young Zitkala-Sa is proud to be a Native. She shares the pride of her family with the readers. She learns their stories and respects her ancestors even more. Zitkala-Sa tells readers how she is delighted and entertained while listening to the elders. She also shows that people cherish the warriors which are told in the legends dearly. She interprets and applies those stories to her works and tells the world the stories about her people. Among many famous stories and mythical characters, Iktomi the Spider, a trickster is her most favorite.

In Native cultures, trickster plays a crucial part in storytelling. Radin (1988) describes general characteristics of trickster in his book, *The Trickster*, as a character who disrupts and challenges the quo. He is a complex character whose actions cannot be easily predicted. Trickster can do anything for his own survival and benefit. For the Native cultures, Radin (1988) summarizes that trickster “became and remained everything to everyman—god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer, and creator...what happens to him happens to us” (p. 169). Similarly, Einhorn (2000) describes in his work, *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul*, that trickster can be both a deceptor and a hero. He refers to trickster’s actions as “often cunning and devious... He often surprises and acts in spontaneous and unpredictable ways, warning of the folly of surrendering to limits and human vulnerabilities” (Einhorn, 2000, p. 84).

For Sioux Dakota tribe, Iktomi, though considered as a witty mischievous trickster, is sacred and valued by the people. Doloria (2006) describes Iktomi in *Dakota Text* as a poser who holds no conception of sincerity, and is traditionally thoughtless, impulsive, heartless, and selfish. He presents all possible human behaviors within him (p. 5). Iktomi is the trickster that can disgust, amuse, alternate, disrupt, humiliate or being humiliated by others, at the same time that he is also creative in many ways (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1999). In addition, Seale and Slapin (2006) state in *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* that sometimes Iktomi can be seen as a character that lives to break rules and traditions (p. 239).

Zitkala-Sa also shares a similar conception of Iktomi the Spider. Even though Zitkala tells most of Iktomi’s stories in *Old Indian Legends*, she also speaks of Iktomi in the episode “Impression of an Indian Childhood”. From this episode, readers are able to

see that young Zitkala finds stories of Iktomi intriguing. Zitkala-Sa learns that Iktomi always follows his heart and instinct. He is not set to follow rules and unafraid to take a risk. There are times when Iktomi's curiosity leads him into troubles and embarrassment. She learns that Iktomi is led by his own appetite for forbidden things that will eventually transform his world and that he is a character that wins over difficult situations by using his wits (Rappaport, 1999, p. 14). Zitkala-Sa provides the image and character of Iktomi through her stories in *American Indian Stories*. She aims to show that there is an opportunity to challenge the presumptuous standard of the society and that the society can be changed by those who speak, think, and act differently. She intends to present that there is trickster in American Indians society.

In the episode "The Big Red Apples", Zitkala-Sa tells readers that there is a trickster in the reservation. Zitkala-Sa encounters with the missionaries sent by the government. She first hears the stories of the two missionaries who have 'large hearts' from her friend, Judewin, who is going to the East with the missionaries. Little Zitkala is eager to know more about the missionaries and even curious about the life in the East. She tries to talk to her mother but her mother warns her not to go.

There! I knew you were wishing to go, because Judewin has filled your ears with the white man's lies. Don't believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter. You will cry for me, but they will not even sooth you. Stay with me, my little one! Your brother Dawee says that going East, away from your mother, is too hard an experience for his baby sister (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 16).

Yet, her mother's warning did not stop Zitkala-Sa from wanting to know more about the Eastern land. The next day she and her mother encounter with the missionaries (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 15). Zitkala-Sa hears from Judewin that there are lots of "red apple trees" which she really loves to taste. The young girl wants to know if the children would be able to have red apples when they go to the East. The interpreter tells her that little children can pick as many red apples as they like and that they will travel on the iron horse or the train if they are to go with the missionaries (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 17). As her mother suspected, young Zitkala states her intention to go right after hearing answer from the interpreter. In this sense, the missionaries are tricksters in the stories. They have come to the land and attempt to take little children away to school. They are to disrupt the order of the Native society. They represent the characteristics that Einhorn has described as they can be seen cunning and bad for the Natives. Murray (1999) states in his essay, "The Oral Trickster" that "tricksters personify a hyper consciousness. They are masters of tricky speech and verbal power" (p. 250). With their words, the missionaries are able to accomplish the mission of giving the little children education. They are able to assimilate the Natives into the mainstream western society. They are to disrupt the order of the Native society.

On the other hand, Zitkala-Sa has also become trickster when she was trying to survive the hardship in school. She assimilated herself into the new society in order to live in peace. She entered the mainstream territory and learned how to live as best

as possible. Experiences from school have caused her pain but they also made her strong. The experiences gave her consequences, negative impulses, and scars in her mind. In order to regain herself and firm her identity, Zitkala-Sa studies hard and mingles with the mainstream society as if she has given up her Native identity. However, she becomes an orator who speaks to support and represent the Natives. In the chapter “Four Strange Summers”, she describes her life after she has graduated from the boarding school.

Upon my retreating steps, I was astounded to receive from my fellow-students a large bouquet of roses tied with flowing ribbons. With the lovely flowers I fled from the stage. This friendly token was a rebuke to me for the hard feelings I had borne them (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 3).

From this quote, she shows gladness and happiness after winning a university’s orator competition. She has been weighing her feelings with a heavy heart as she fears that she might be in a wrong place. However, the cheer from her classmates gives her the joy that eases her mind.

Later, the decision of the judges awarded me the first place. Then there was a mad uproar in the hall, where my classmates sang and shouted my name at the top of their lungs; and the disappointed students howled and brayed in fearfully dissonant tin trumpets. congratulations (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p. 32).

This quote shows that even though there are some students who do not agree with her triumph, many students gladly accept her victory and together they celebrate the good occasion. With her victory, Zitkala-Sa shows that she has potential and quality of a trickster. She disrupts the mainstream society by entering a university and winning a competition. She shows the judges that, as a Native young woman, she is a distinct student with outstanding abilities in the society where she does not truly fit in or has a little space for her. Later on, writes collections of essay and books to tell the world of her experience for being a native child in the mainstream culture. Taking a closer look, Zitkala-Sa herself is a trickster. Zitkala assimilated herself into the society only to find a loop and disrupt the society. Therefore she becomes a trickster that urges to make a difference and challenge the norm of the society. She utilizes the language she was forced to study to disrupt the general or stereotypes of the Natives seen by others in the big society. Like Iktomi the trickster, she tricks people by gradually assimilating into the society, living it, and teaching young Natives in school. However, she refuses to remain a victim of the superior society and instead she dares to take her place among them. By doing what she does, Zitkala-Sa proves that she is smarter than some other white people and she is ready to be the voice of her people.

Conclusion

In *American Indian Stories*, readers can see that resistance has long been existed in the American Indian society. Resistance can easily be occurred in any space and time. Once the power is exercised on people, resistance will follow. Zitkala-Sa has presented the Natives' struggles through American Indian Stories. She describes how the Natives lived happily in the past and struggled to survive the changing society after colonization and relocation. She also presented that there are both advantages and disadvantages through the process of colonization and resistance. Zitkala is an example of a person who received both positive and negative effects from colonization. In *American Indian Stories*, Zitkala and other Natives applied both non-disguised and disguised resistance to fight in order to survive in the society. Even though they sometimes failed to accomplish the resistance act and received punishment, they never stopped fighting for their own rights. She implies to readers that that domination and resistance will continue to exist as people will see still see and want the world to be how they wanted. The loop of power and resistance will always go side by side with the other, for if there is power, there is resistance.

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