

“BREAKING THE WALL”: THE REPRESENTATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN AS WARRIORS IN ZITKALA-SA’S *A WARRIOR’S DAUGHTER*

Olga Rorintulus

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta

olgarorintulus@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study seeks to reveal the representation of Native American women as warriors in their traditional narrative, Zitkala-Sa’s short story, before Native Americans were assimilated into the mainstream of American society in the nineteenth century. The story is titled *A Warrior’s Daughter*. In the story, Zitkala-Sa challenges the stereotype of Native American women in the mainstream society of America whose roles are pictured as inferior. This study is a qualitative research that applies interdisciplinary approach, a distinctive feature of American Studies which involves other fields of study such as culture, history and society. The data analysis is conducted by applying a feminist literary approach. This study shows that before assimilated into American white society in the nineteenth century, Native American women had enjoyed gender equality in their traditional society. In this case, Zitkala-Sa shows that Native American women had autonomy and power as men did. They could be warriors like men and their role as such were highly respected.

Keywords: stereotype, gender equality, Native American women, complimentary relation.

INTRODUCTION

This writing examines Zitkala-Sa’s *A Warrior’s Daughter* (1921) in order to reveal the representation of Native women as warriors in Native American society before the assimilation program in the late nineteenth century America. The representation of Native women in American society today should be comprehended in connection to their background that had been socially constructed in the era of colonization in America. Shoemaker (1995) claimed that the marginalization of Native women in American society had a relation to the wrong perception of white people concerning Native women’s role in their traditional society in the past. Furthermore, Weist in Spack (1997) stated that Native women were considered inferior and they were perceived as “slaves”, “brutes”, “degraded”, and “savage.” Those degrading terms could mean that Native American women were powerless in Native American traditional society in relation to Native American males. Moreover, Powers (1988) mentions that “....the squaws are squatty, yellow, ugly, and greasy looking. Hard work disfigures them, for their lazy brutes of sons, husbands and brothers who do not work, and the unfortunate women are as so many pack mules.” In other words, from White people’s perspective, native women were under the control of their men.

Bartens (2001) mentions that a literary work reflects the social issues in a certain society. In this case, the story reflects the representation of Native American women as warriors. Bartens (2001) states that “*The first type of feminist criticism asks questions of the following kind. What sort of roles did female character play?*” This also means that feminist literary approach is used to reveal women’s role being constructed in a certain society as seen in a literary work. The study is built on the assumption that Zitkala-Sa (1921) challenged the wrong perception of Native women in white society through her short story, *The Warrior’s Daughter*, and showed the power of Native American women in their traditional society as warriors. Based on the previous assumption, the writer formulates the question as follows: How was the representation of Native women as warrior in Zitkala-Sa’s *The Warrior’s Daughter* ?

METHOD

This study is written under the discipline of American Studies which emphasizes interdisciplinary studies and focuses on revealing American culture (Sykes, 1968). This study is conducted by using qualitative method. Creswell (1994) asserts that a qualitative research is done in order to understand certain social conditions, roles, or interactions. The study makes use of library research in collecting data concerning the social, cultural, and historical background of Zitkala-Sa’s short stories, *The Warrior’s Daughter*. The analysis of this research is done using feminist literary approach and findings are presented in a descriptive way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Zitkala-Sa was one of Native American writers in 19th century who challenged the stereotype of Native American women in white American society (Dyke, 2005). Through her short story, *The Warrior's Daughter* (1921), she refused the wrong perception of Native women as inferior in traditional life of Native American society and educated white American society concerning the significant role of women in Native American society, specifically as female warriors before Native American were assimilated in American society in 19th century.

In her short story, *A Warrior's Daughter* (1921), Zitkala-Sa presents Tusee as the daughter of a warrior who is the chief in his Native American tribe. Tusee is a beautiful girl, but she is brave as her father. Further, when there is a war, her lover is captured by the enemies of the tribe. Then, without permission of her father, in the night, Tusee goes to the place of their enemies to rescue her lover.

Her right hand rests on a long knife in her belt....With a panther's tread and pace she climbs the high ridge beyond the low ravine. From thence she spies the enemy's camp-fires. Tusee beckons the stars to witness. With impassioned voice and uplifted face she pleads: "Great Spirits, speed me to my lover's rescue! All- Powerful Spirit, grant me my warrior-father's heart, strong to slay a foe and mighty to save a friend!" (Zitkala-Sa, 1921).

Moreover, Zitkala-Sa mentions that brave women go to the war together with male warriors in order to defeat their enemies.

At early dawn the round camp-ground awakes into song. Men and women sing of bravery and triumph. They inspire the swelling breasts of the painted warriors mounted on prancing ponies bedecked with the green branches of trees....All having made the circuit, the singing war party gallops away southward. Astride their ponies laden with food and deerskins, brave elderly women follow after their warriors. Among the foremost rides a young woman in elaborately beaded buckskin dress. Proudly mounted, she curbs with the single rawhide loop a wild-eyed pony. It is Tusee on her father's warhorse. Thus, the war party of the Indian men and their faithful women vanish beyond the southern skyline (Zitkala-Sa, 1921).

Based on the previous statements, Zitkala-Sa asserts that women have important roles in a war and their power and ability as warriors were respected by their tribal society. In this case, Zitkala-Sa rejects white people's perceptions that native American women's roles are inferior in their traditional society.

Zitkala-Sa points out that women could be warriors in Native American society. This means that Native American women have a freedom to empower themselves to be warriors which are considered as male's role by White American society. Gagnon (2011) gives an example that in Sioux society, women could be warriors. They were honored like male warriors. In addition, Buchanan (1986) claims that other tribes of Native American society also respect women as warriors. For instance, in Apache tribe, Losen was honored because of her deed in the war. "*Strong as a man, braver than most, and cunning in strategy, Lozen is a shield to her people*". Lajimodi (2011) states that "Women were not only leaders but also, in many tribes, warriors. The most notable of these women were found among Crow, Blackfeet, Sioux Nation (Dakota, Lakota, Nakota), Chippewa, and Cheyenne." In other words, in traditional Native American society, the role of men and female were appreciated equally. Native American Women have enjoyed gender equality in their traditional society. This concept of gender equality exists in Native American society, but this point could not be understood by White people who see from White people's belief of gender role in white patriarchal society.

The construction of gender roles between Native American society is different from White American society. Traditionally, Native American society has different perspective of gender from white American people. Bonvillain (2007) states that in nineteenth century America, the role of male and female were not respected equally, since women's role in domestic sphere was inferior in white patriarchy. On the contrary, Hollrah (2004) asserts that in Native American society, the role of women and men were appreciated equally in complimentary gender relation for the survival of their society and women could participate in many aspects of life in Native American society besides their roles as mothers. Thus, the writer could assert that for White American people, women's role was submissive and they were not able to participate in public domain in 19th century America. On the other hand, Native American society perceived women's role highly. However, colonialization has changed the equal gender relation in Native American society. As Guerrero (2003) states that: "As a result of US colonialism and patriarchal structure, the traditional authority of Native American women has been disempowered up to the present."

CONCLUSIONS

Zitkala-Sa breaks the wall of a wrong perception of Native American women's role in White American society who consider that native American women were powerless in their traditional society. She points out that Native American women had power and could be warriors who were highly honored and respected in their traditional society and claims that Native American women had enjoyed gender equality in their traditional society before White people came to destroy their culture, in this case, the culture of complimentary gender relation between male and female in Native American society.

(This study is a part of a doctoral research. The writer thanks her advisors, Prof. Dr. Heddy Shri-Ahimsa Putra, M.A., M.Phil., and Dr. Nur Saktiningrum, M.Hum.).

REFERENCES

- Buchanan, K. M. (1986). *Apache women warriors*. Austin, Texas: Texas Western Press.
- Bonvillain, N. (2007). *Women and men: Cultural constructs of gender*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Bartens, H. (2001). *Literary theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design*. London: Sage Ltd.
- Dyke, A. V. (2005). Women writers and gender issues. In J. Porter and K. M. Roemer (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to native American literature* (pp. 85-102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gagnon, G. (2011). *Culture and customs of the Sioux Indians*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Guerrero, M. A. J. (2003). "Patriarchal colonialism" and indigenism: Implications for native feminist spirituality and native womanism, *Hypatia*, 18(2), 58-69.
- Hollrah, P. E. M. (2004). *"The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell": The power of women in native American literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Lajimodiere, D. K. (2011). Ogimah Ikwe: Native women and their path to leadership. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 26(2), 57-82.
- Powers, N. M. (1988). New perspective on American Indian women. *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, 38(1), 350-357.
- Shoemaker, N. (1995). Native American women in history. *OAH Magazine of History*, 9(4), 10-14.
- Spack, R. (1997). Re-visioning Sioux women: Zitkala-Sa's revolutionary American Indian stories. *Legacy*, 14(1), 25-42.
- Sykes, R. E. (1968). American Studies and the concept of culture: A theory and method. In R. Merideth (Ed.), *American Studies: Essays on theory and method* (pp. 78-79). Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
- Zitkala-Sa. (1921). *American Indian stories*. Washington: Hayworth Publishing House.