



Colonizing the Mind: A Dialectic Approach to Education and Language in Zitkala-Ša's American Indian Stories

Adisa Ahmetpahić, MA

University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

ahmetpahicadisa1@gmail.com

Abstract: *Mind colonization has been a burning issue in the last few decades in the fields of science and humanities. It is argued that mind colonization of the indigenous populations has been conducted via education and language in the mission of 'civilizing' since education and language carry culture specific sets of meaning, including knowledge and truth which condition our perception of the world. Zitkala-Ša is one of the earliest Native American authors and activists who sought to subvert the epistemological hierarchy imposed through mind colonization. Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical collection of short stories titled American Indian Stories (1921) documents her boarding school experience and the acquisition of the colonizer's education and language. The present paper seeks to address mind colonization through language and education on the example of Zitkala-Ša's American Indian Stories relying on a number of theories and approaches. The paper also reflects on the importance of Zitkala-Ša mastery of the colonizer's language.*

Keywords: *Native American, mind colonization, education, language, boarding schools*

Article History

Submitted: 3 November 2020

Accepted: 28 December 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

Native American self-determination and activism officially began with the formation of the Red Power Movement in the 1960s. The Red Power Movement emerged when the US Congress sought to abolish tribal organization by relocating Native American communities off the reservations, thus enticing assimilation. Cross-country protests, the seizure of Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee occupation were all part of Native American appeal for self-government and self-redefinition caused by “the political and economic threats to indigenous people, land, and sovereignty” (Coulombe, 2001, p. 34-35). Writers and scholars, such as Vine Deloria Jr. with his book *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), also partook in the movement for the Native American cause. Nevertheless, Native American activism had begun in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries as evident in the speeches by Native American chiefs who advocated Native American right to sovereignty¹.

Although frequently overlooked and neglected, the personage of Zitkala-Ša (original name: Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), a Yankton Sioux, is illustrious both for her literary oeuvre and ardent activism which sought to promote the rights of the Native American population and resist colonial binarities. Zitkala-Ša graduated from Quaker boarding school in Wabash, Indiana and Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. She obtained a diploma in teaching and afterwards worked at the Pennsylvania Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Fisher, 1979, pp. v-xii).

As noted by Tadeusz Lewandowski in his study of Zitkala-Ša’s luminary titled *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* (2016), Gertrude Simmons Bonnin’s embracement of the name Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird) and her zealous nature adumbrated the pan-Indian solidarity and the formation of Red Power groups. Zitkala-Ša’s essays, public speeches, and establishment of the National Council of American Indians in 1926 make her a predecessor to the mid-twentieth century Native American (female) activism (Lewandowski, 2016, p. 14). In a similar vein, Mary A. Stout describes Zitkala-Ša’s literary opus as follows: “Although she wrote as an American Indian and a female at a time when few similar voices were being heard, she did not flinch, nor did she moderate her voice” (303). Much of Zitkala-Ša’s life is known from her autobiographical stories and essays collectively known as *American Indian Stories* (1921). This particular work is deemed to be one of the earliest examples of unaided autobiographical writing, i.e. without any mediators such as interpreters or editors. The stories and essays are concerned with her Native American childhood, teenage years spent at the boarding school in Carlisle, and her subsequent life and work (Fisher, 1979, pp. v-vi).

American Indian Stories has been a frequent topic in the analyses of Zitkala-Ša’s and Native American biculturality and double consciousness as well as boarding school experience. However, little attention has been paid to education and language in *American Indian Stories* and no attention to education and language as a mind colonizing weapon on the example of this short story

collection. The present paper argues that education and language are some of the most powerful armory in mind colonization. *American Indian Stories* shows that both education and language carry culture specific sets of meaning, including knowledge and truth which condition our perception of the world. Another notable aspect of this short story collection is its discussion on how resettlement and mind colonization work together towards the erasure of the colonized. It can be inferred that Zitkala-Ša is one of the earliest Native American authors and activists who sought to subvert the epistemological hierarchy imposed through mind colonization. The paper takes a dialectic approach in its analysis, relying on a number of differing theories and studies, including those by Homi Bhabha, Michel Foucault, and Abdul JanMohamed, which speak of power/knowledge relations in the (post-) colonial context and the reversal of these relations. The contrariety of the theories is not discussed due to space constraints and the thematic preoccupation of the paper. Therefore, the working of the theories toward the idea of mind colonization is paid more heed.

2. COLONIZING THE MIND: EDUCATION AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN AMERICAN INDIAN STORIES

Boarding schools are considered to be only one among a plethora of the assimilation policies imposed upon the Native American population. The inception of boarding schools is traced to 1860s when the Bureau of Indian Affairs founded the first boarding school on the Yakima reservation. "Kill the Indian Save the Man", coined by Richard Henry Pratt who established Carlisle Indian School, was the boarding schools' raison d'être ("History and Culture", n.d.). Pratt's motto is evocative of the Manichean understanding of the world as a series of antagonistic structures, e.g. good-bad, light-dark. In the (post-) colonial context, the term was used by JanMohamed in *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983) to denote the colonial relations in terms of conflicting categories between the colonizer ('good', 'civilized') and the colonized ('bad', 'degenerate'):

The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (as cited in JanMohamed, 1983, p. 4)

Such understanding of the world endorses the legitimacy of colonial claims for the usurpation of the land as well as the usurpation of the mind conducted through boarding schools. However, both types of usurpation are

tightly linked as argued by Teresa L. McCarty. Based on the US legal documents, McCarty concludes that there is a link between education and land balkanization. In 1887, Senator Henry Dawes formulated a policy known as The General Allotment Act, or Dawes Act. The policy presented an appeal for the partition “of reservation lands into 160 acre family parcels, with the surplus to be sold to the whites.” (McCarty, 2013, pp. 51-52). Concurrently, a law requiring education for all Native American children was passed. Parents who did not abide by this law were imprisoned. In other words, sequential physical and mental larceny would ensure a faster erasure of Native American cultures (McCarty, 2013, pp. 51-52).

According to John McLeod, “[c]olonialism uses educational institutions to augment the perceived legitimacy and propriety of itself, as well as providing the means by which colonial power can be maintained” (2000, p.140). Perceived legitimacy of the colonizer originates from the perceived epistemological hierarchy. According to Foucault, epistemological hierarchy is engendered by power/knowledge relations, especially disciplinary power as the one practiced at boarding schools, whereby power shapes knowledge to hew the purposes of those who possess the power. Foucault further suggests that if knowledge signifies and/or produces the truth and if knowledge is conditioned by power, it follows that truth also is a protean notion conditioned by power:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (Foucault, 1980, p.133)

Manifest Destiny is a fitting example of the above-mentioned interpretation of truth as a concept strongly attached to “the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (Foucault, 1980, p.133). Apart from having been a justification for imperial and colonial expansion, Manifest Destiny was a firm belief that the English nation was chosen by God, on account of its supremacy in all aspects of life, to eradicate what they deemed to be savage customs in the indigenous population. In the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, the colonizers attempted to change “the mental universe of the colonized” (1986, p.16) and to succumb the colonized to their version of truth. As mentioned previously, education, which implies the acquisition of the colonizer’s language in this context, is one of the methods of mind colonization. The recruitment of Native American children for boarding schools was mostly performed by Christian missionaries.

In 1632, Gabriel Sagard, a missionary, informed that Native American languages are “defective in words for many things...like Trinity, Glory, paradise, Hell, Church etc.” (as cited in Irwin,2002, p. 106). Sagard’s words reflect the Eurocentric view of the world and Foucauldian notion of truth. Sagard as a member of the colonizer’s race was able to postulate his knowledge of the world

as a fact. Zitkala-Ša's first contact with the missionaries confirms Sagard's previously mentioned words. The missionaries seized the imagination of Native American children by telling them stories of "a more beautiful country than [Native American]" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 39), and a country

where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat. I had never seen apples. I had never tasted more than a dozen red apples in my life; and when I heard of the orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them. (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, pp. 41-41)

The excerpts point to a patronizing perspective that compares worldviews and favors one over the other as a fixed idea of truth which, as Foucault states, "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p.119). The missionaries' presentations of the country induced pleasure in the minds of Zitkala-Ša and other Native American children since they pleaded with their mothers to let them go with the missionaries. Simultaneously, the missionaries formed knowledge and presented definite truths that places where Native Americans resided were not beautiful, thus instilling epistemological hierarchy in their minds and ultimately the genesis of the inferiority complex as well as the prosperity of the superiority complex. JanMohamed argues that "[s]uch claims, designed to rationalize and perpetuate the colonizer's dominant position, are not accurate appraisals of reality but rather projections of the settler's own anxieties and negative self-images" (1983, p. 3).

As presented further in the narrative, the children were subjected to strict educational and dietary regimes. Upon their arrival, they had their clothes taken away and soon after their hair cut. In the story titled "The Cutting of My Long Hair", Zitkala-Ša recounts the moment when her braids, cultural markers, were cut off. Zitkala-Ša realized the gravity of the situation because "[their] mothers had taught [them] 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" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 54). Without her braids, she would also be considered a coward defeated in a different type of battle. Along with the loss of hair, she felt the loss of her spirit which was invested in the Native American system of beliefs.

The above-mentioned practices of haircutting and the imposition of the colonizer's attire would prove viable in the process of mind colonization. As an adult Zitkala-Ša reflects back on Native American education in the light of the attitude that such cruel treatment is a method of 'civilizing':

In this fashion many have passed idly through the Indian schools during the last decade, afterward to boast of their charity to the North American Indian. But few there are who have paused to question whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization. (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 99)

Zitkala-Ša's words speaking about death, a long-lasting one, hint at genocide though a cultural one. George E. Tinker maintains that cultural genocide

involves the destruction of those cultural structures of existence that give people a sense of holistic and communal integrity. [...] Finally, it erodes a people's self-image as a whole people by attacking or belittling every aspect of native culture. (1993, p. 6)

In addition to clothingⁱⁱ, which, in Tinker's terms, constitutes cultural practices, language is another structure that provides people with identity and a structure frequently used in cultural genocide. For wa Thiong'o, language is the most straightforward method of mind colonization since language carries cultures and histories which in turn carry "the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (1986, p. 16). On a similar note, Foucault perceives knowledge and language as inextricable concepts of the mind: "It is in one and the same movement that the mind speaks and knows. [...] Hence the possibility of writing a history of freedom and slavery based upon languages" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 95-97). When translated into the world of colonialism, Foucault's argument would indicate that if the colonizer's language is imposed then the colonizer's truth is imposed through it.

Rules against speaking Native American languages at boarding schools were strict and punishments were severe. One of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs, Hiram Price, explains the "No Indian Talk" rule: "The Indian child ... must be compelled to adopt the English language." (as cited in McCarty, 2013, pp. 52-53). John D.C. Atkins, another Commissioner, expounds the same: "There is not an Indian pupil ... who is permitted to study any other language than our own" (as cited in McCarty, 2013, pp. 52-53).

The above-referenced insistence upon the acquisition of the English language by the indigenous population has several interpretations. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Dunbar's study *Indigenous Children's Education as Linguistic Genocide and a Crime Against Humanity? A Global View* (2010) highlights linguicism, "linguistically argued racism", as one of the leading arguments for English language learning and a more subtle method of subduing minority groups (p. 41). According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar, linguicism leads to linguisticide, the genocidal campaign against indigenous languages (2010, p. 40), which concurs well with cultural genocide mentioned above. However, there is a political dimension to it which argues for the augmentation of dominance. Bill Ashcroft et al's definition of language in the process of colonization is rooted in the main tenets of power/knowledge relations introduced by Foucault as outlined earlier in the paper. Ashcroft et al argue that language is "the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (2002, p. 7).

Zitkala-Ša reverts the idea of power by excelling in the colonizer's language. Zitkala-Ša's objective can be traced to her schooldays. It is mentioned in the story collection that a series of language misunderstandings occurred at school. The confusions resulted in severe beatings of the children and ignited young Zitkala-Ša contempt of such an education: "Within a year I was able to express myself somewhat in broken English. As soon as I comprehended a part of what was said and done, a mischievous spirit of revenge possessed me" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 59). Soon after, she began attending oratory competitions as the college representative. In one of the competitions, Zitkala-Ša faced blatant racism when

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 in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college that was represented by "squaw". (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 79)

The rest of story has it that she won the competition and that "[t]he he evil spirit laughed within [her] when the white flag dropped out of sight, and the hands which hurled it hung limp in defeat" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, 80). Despite her momentary feelings of triumph, Zitkala-Ša is aware of how the education at boarding schools altered her identity, as presented in "The Four Strage Summers" story:

During this time I seemed to hang in the hearts of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid. My brother, being almost ten years my senior, did not quite understand my feelings. My mother had never gone inside of a school house and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. 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, and the unsatisfactory "teenth" in a girl's years. (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 69)

Zitkala-Ša's feelings of (un)belonging or the state of in-betweenness are ascribed to her partial immersion into both cultures precipitated by her education as a Native American at the boarding school. JanMohamed problematizes the position of the colonized after colonial education as a double bind position that is unable to espouse any of the two polarities:

if he chooses conservatively and remains loyal to his indigenous culture, then he opts to stay in a calcified society whose developmental momentum has been checked by colonization. If, however, the colonized person chooses assimilation, then he is trapped in a form of historical catalepsy because colonial education severs him from his own past. (1983, p. 5)

Zitkala-Ša's Native American community, represented by her mother, shunned the education of the colonizer for its goals and methods, which she speaks of in the story "Incurring My Mother's Displeasure:" "Her few words hinted that I had better give up my slow attempt to learn the white man's ways" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 76). It is revealed throughout the stories that Zitkala-Ša's mother held a grudge against her decision to go to college for a long period of time since her mother perceived the act as something that would deepen the chasm of acculturation. As outlined in the above-quoted section, Zitkala-Ša felt she did not belong fully to her Native American community any longer. Similarly, the white community did not see her as an equal, even after she had attained their education and started working as a teacher at Carlisle, evident when her employer told her the following: "'I am going to turn you loose to pasture!' He was sending me West to gather Indian pupils for the school, and this was his way of expressing it" (Zitkala-Ša, 1979, p. 85). He is assuming a condescending attitude and categorizing her as if she were a chained animal that would be given freedom by those who possess the power over it.

Bhabha defines the double bind position mentioned previously as Third Space. For Bhabha, the friction between antagonistic/manichean cultures, which have opposing truths, assists the emanation of new identities. According to Bhabha, although dangerous, this position need not necessarily be unfavorable since the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Hence, Bhabha's theory might be beneficial in analyzing Zitkala-Ša's ability to appropriate education and language as a power reversal strategy that would benefit her in spreading the Native American cause in the language of the colonizer. It seems as if Zitkala-Ša followed Ema LaRocque's formulation: "I have sought to master this language so that it would no longer master me" (as cited in McLeod, 2000, p. 125). Ashcroft et al argue that writing in English would prove high-yielding for many Native Americans since the language enabled them "to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers" (2007, p. 16).

The significance of Zitkala-Ša's boarding schools experience and mastery of the English language could be paralleled to Diane Glancy's (Cherokee) chronicle of events at Fort Marion prison titled *Fort Marion Prisoners and The Trauma of Native Education* (2014). According to Glancy's study, about seventy-two Plains Indian warriors were captured and imprisoned after the Red River War (1874-1875). A rigorous regime was installed in the prison. The prisoners were stripped off their clothes and their hair was cut. They were also taught English and given ledger books to produce paintings and drawings for profit. Glancy provides a number of these drawings which, surprisingly, portray Native American battles, implying that a new, although unintentional, mode of Native American cultural continuity was created in spite of the epistemological hierarchy that was foisted upon the indigenous population.

3. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate the link between education and language and mind colonization on the example of Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*. The analysis was supported by a number of theories and studies and as such provided an overview of different aspects closely related to education and language in the process of colonization. Although the theories used in the paper are somewhat differing and from different domains, they meet at the point of the same inference: education and language are less aggressive methods of colonization, in a physical sense, yet most dangerous. For example, Foucault's theories on power/knowledge relations help understand the mindset of the colonizer and ultimately its propensity in transferring that particular mindset onto those who are in a less favorable position. On the other hand, theories of Homi Bhabha reveal the position of the colonized, namely Zitkala-Ša, after they have been immersed into the education and language of the colonizer as well as her ability to speak up.

It is plausible that a number of limitations could have influenced the analysis of the paper given that relatively little publications have dealt with the importance of Zitkala-Ša and no publications, to the best of my knowledge, have discussed education and language in this story collection. However, this analysis might be valuable in understanding the methods and outcomes of mind colonization, eventually creating a link between the past, the present, and the future. In addition, Native American literary tradition is rich in narratives that speak of mind (de)colonization and the reinvention of Native American identity in the contemporary world of the United States where they are enrolled as legal citizens yet marginalized. Hence, Zitkala-Ša's subversion of colonial modes of dominance can be considered a forerunner to such matters. Overall, this study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of the benefits and hindrances of education and language for the indigenous population in the US. Further work needs to be performed to establish the use of religion in mind colonization as well as gender aspects in the same process based on *American Indian Stories*.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*, (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Coulombe, J. (2001). *Reading Native American literature*. Routledge.
- Fisher, D. (1979). Foreword. In *American Indian stories* (pp. v-xx). University of Nebraska Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2005). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- History and culture: Boarding schools. (n.d.). Retrieved October 31, 2020, from http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools
- Irwin L. (2002). Native American spirituality: History. In Deloria, P., & Salisbury, N. (Eds.), *A companion to American Indian history* (pp. 103–120). Blackwell.
- JanMohamed, A. (1983). *Manichean aesthetics: The politics of literature in colonial Africa*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Lewandowski, T. (2016). *Red bird, red power: The life and legacy of Zitkala-Ša*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- McCarty, T. (2013). *Language planning and policy in Native America: History, theory, praxis*. Multilingual Matters.
- McLeod, J. (2000). *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Dunbar, R. (2010). *Indigenous children's education as linguistic genocide and a crime against humanity? A global view* (Vol. 1). GálduČála – Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights.
<https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education2/indigenousschoolseducation.pdf>.
- Stout, Mary A. (2012). Zitkala Ša. In Wiget, P. (Ed.), *Native American literature* (pp. 303-307). Routledge.
- Tinker, G. (1993). *Missionary conquest: The gospel and Native American cultural genocide*. Augsburg Fortress.
- wa Thiong'o, N. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey Ltd.
- Zitkala-Ša. (1979). *American Indian stories*. University of Nebraska Press.

ⁱ For more information see Bob Blaisdell's *Great Speeches by Native Americans* (2012).

ⁱⁱIt should be noted here that it is not my intention to contribute to the stereotyped portrayal of Native Americans.