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## The Indigenous Alienation in “The School Days of an Indian Girl” by Zitkala-Sa

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### Article history:

Submitted: February 17, 2025

Revised: March 17, 2025

Accepted: April 3, 2025

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### Keywords:

Alienation, Zitkala-Sa,  
assimilation, identity crisis,  
white boarding schools

### Mots clés :

Aliénation, Zitkala-Sa,  
assimilation, crise d'identité,  
internats blancs.

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### Abstract

This article deals with the alienation of the Indigenous population by the white American policies as it is reflected in Zitkala-Sa's “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” The contact of Native Americans with the Western settlers has negatively impacted their lives. Ranging from identity crisis to psychological disorders, the Indigenous experienced a profound sense of emptiness since their initial contact with Western culture. The ongoing study argues that the white boarding schools were well established structures that aimed to wipe out native Indians' civilization through assimilation. By convincing young children to despise their own identity, the system brought many predicaments among the young generation. The study first looks at the system as a disconnection from home which causes trauma, and then judges the white assimilation as the death of native Indians' identity.

### Résumé :

Cet article traite de l'aliénation de la population indigène par la politique blanche américaine, telle que décrite dans « The School Days of an Indian Girl » de Zitkala-Sa. Le contact des Amérindiens avec les colons occidentaux a eu un impact négatif sur leur vie. De la crise d'identité aux problèmes psychologiques, les indigènes ont éprouvé un sentiment de vide depuis leur contact avec la culture occidentale. Cette étude soutient que les internats blancs étaient des structures bien établies qui visaient à anéantir la civilisation des Amérindiens par l'assimilation. En convainquant les jeunes enfants de mépriser leur propre identité, le système a engendré de nombreuses difficultés parmi la jeune génération. L'étude considère d'abord le système comme une déconnexion du foyer qui provoque des traumatismes, puis juge l'assimilation blanche comme la mort de l'identité amérindienne.

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## Introduction

The European domination over the rest of the world had been possible due to the technical and scientific advancement since the XVth century. The invention of several tools made easier movements across oceans and vast lands. The European spirit of conquering the world brought them to assimilate indigenous populations to their cultural standards, transforming them into culturally hybrid individuals. The context of European colonization and its outcome has been and continues to be a great subject of debate whether on public sphere or in the academia. Among many examples stands the case of Native Americans who were much affected by the Western contact. The effects of European imperialism range from social predicament to ecological disaster and much literature have been produced to highlight this historical event. Many indigenous writers greatly penned this European intrusion in their cultural ecosystem with an impression of bitterness. The creative literature, as evolving from social expressions, has offered a large ground for criticism on the white settlement. One of these native writers was Zitkala-Sa, whose literary and political commitment to Indigenous' cause made her a referential figure in the Native American history.

Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938) also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin was a Native American writer, activist and reformer, who strove for the indigenous population's welfare under the European colonization. In her "The School Days of an Indian Girl" she highlights the negative effects of white assimilation on indigenous children's identity formation. Zitkala-Sa's narrative offers the venue to discuss the alienative effect of white assimilation on native Indians' children. From her story, the reader learns how children have been changed names upon their arrival at the boarding schools. Their ancestral beliefs were challenged and replaced by the Western teachings, and their long hair were cut. The subjugated indigenous population has been step by step alienated from childhood by the European well-structured educational system. Especially in the Native American context, the European boarding schools were devastating:

Boarding schools not only separated students from their homes and families, but also placed them in an environment which they could not comprehend, let alone navigate. Boarding schools required children to learn a foreign culture and fundamentally alter their identities in ways

that ranged from language to economics to religion. To make matters worse, children suffered malnutrition in unsanitary conditions that were rife with physical and verbal abuse. Whatever the intention of boarding schools, they had many negative effects, resulting in the personal and social trauma of many indigenous peoples. (Keating 6-7) Jessica Keating is pointing out the well thought project of white boarding schools to strip Natives of their identity. These schools' motto was to "kill the Indian and save the man," (Smith 90) in other words, the schools were brainwashing Natives from childhood, by making them reject their culture in favor of the Western standards.

Monica Patterson in her Masters thesis entitled *"Kill the Indian, Save the Man": Historical and Generational Trauma Associated with the Indian Boarding Schools (2023)* investigates in the trauma caused by the white boarding schools on former students across many generations. Patterson argues that, "The Indian boarding schools have left a legacy that carries on impacting Native American families and communities. The loss of cultural identity and self-identity has resulted in cycles of family violence, high rates of substance abuse, and disproportionate rates of suicide" (3). Obviously, a culturally uprooted individual is likely to suffer from psychological disorder that may lead him to commit suicide.

The white boarding schools greatly instilled the American individualistic character in native students and by so doing killed the spirit of collectiveness in them (Adam 22). As a result, the pursuit of personal interests over the whole tribe's welfare impacted the survival of many clans. The white educational project for Native Americans was to disconnect them from their culture and remove their sacred reverence to nature, by instilling in them a commodified view of the universe.

The reading of Zitkala-Sa's "The School Days of an Indian Girl" clearly shows the Natives' cultural alienation right from childhood. Through white educational system, native children have been brainwashed, disconnected from their domestic environment and hence making them fragile and disoriented individuals. The objective of this study is to demonstrate that, the reading of Zitkala-sa's narrative offers grounded examples to argue that, the white boarding schools were some of the strategies used by the colonizer to dominate the indigenous population through cultural alienation. From this purpose, the study first investigates in the author's description of the life on

boarding schools which is seen as a sojourn of brainwashing and after discusses the white assimilation as the death of the Indigenous' identity. The work is conducted from Eurocentric critical approach, which offers a venue to scrutinize and question the domination of the world by the Western viewpoint. Richard Tarnas argues:

The western mind's overriding compulsion to impose some form of totalizing reason--theological, scientific, economic---on every aspect of life is accused of being not only self-deceptive but destructive .... Disenchanted eyes are now cast onto ... its destruction of indigenous societies throughout the world, its arrogant insensitivity to other cultural traditions and values, its cruel abuse of other forms of life, its blind ravaging of virtually the entire planet. (400)

Tarnas accurately points out the danger of the Eurocentrism to impose to its ideology to the whole world and its failure to accept differences as part of human existence. The analysis of Zitkala-Sa's "The School Days of an Indian Girl" will highlight the wrongs resulted in Eurocentric domination over other cultural entities. The study basically ponders on the purpose of forcing the indigenous children to attend white boarding schools.

### 1- The Author and her Work

Yumiko Yoshida introduces Zitkala-Ša in his article entitled: "The Role of Zitkala-Ša's Autobiography: Illustrating Native American Life through a Native American Point of View." He affirms that "Zitkala-Ša (1876-1938) was a Native American woman who was a writer, activist and teacher. Zitkala-Ša is not her original name. Zitkala-Ša gave herself this Native American name which means "red bird" in 1901. Her real name was Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and she was her mother Ellen's third husband's child" (35). From Yoshida's assertion, Zitkala-Ša is a name that she gave to herself and which means "red bird." She was born on the Yankton reservation in South Dakota from a Sioux tribe. At the age of eight, she was sent to White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana (Yoshida 35). After her stay at the white boarding school, Zitkala-Ša acquired white lifestyle and was confronted to an identity crisis, wondering if she should live as an alienated native woman or adopt white lifestyle. Zitkala-Ša wrote many books among which autobiographies and articles that dealt with the Native American life. In 1901, she published *Old*

*Indian Legends*, a book of stories from Lakota tradition. A year before, she “gained recognition for a series of semi-autobiographical exposés on Indian boarding schools for the *Atlantic Monthly* (1900), which she signed Zitkála-Šá (Red Bird, in Lakota)” (Lewandowski 7). In 1921, Hayworth Publishing House released *American Indian Stories*, a book of ten stories that range from the author’s childhood, passing by her teaching career to the general assessment of the Natives’ problems. The same year, she published *Americanize the First American*, a pamphlet that drew strategies to Native American self-determination.

The story that makes the subject matter of this study is derived from *American Indian Stories*, and is entitled “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” This narrative is divided into seven parts, each describing a specific episode of the narrator’s stay at the white boarding school. The story depicts in detail, the stay of the narrator and other children in “Red Apple Country” (Zitkala-Sa 47). It begins with the protagonist and other children’s heading East on a train to the missionary school when leaving their families behind. Her primary excitement to move there, gave way to sadness when she discovered the unfamiliar environment of the white school. The protagonist is thought white manners and this made her an outsider in her own tribe. The issue is so poignant that, the protagonist suffered identity crisis since her stay at the white boarding school: she was no more fully native Indian nor a white character through assimilation. Tadeusz Lewandowski in his work “Gertrude Bonnin on Sexual Morality” chronicles Zitkala-Ša’s educational course:

Gertrude was around eight when she left her mother’s tepee for White’s Manual Labor Institute, a government-funded, Quaker-run boarding school in Wabash, Indiana. There, from 1884 to 1895, she completed two terms of schooling that resulted in a profound cultural alienation from her mother and her old life at Yankton. In 1895, she was accepted to another Quaker institution, Earlham College, in Richmond, Indiana, where she studied music and excelled in oratory, even placing second in the Indiana State Oratorical Competition in 1896. (7)

Zitkala-Ša becomes a referential figure of the backdrops of white Christian boarding schools on Native American youth. Especially for her, it was so challenging since: “At the missionary school, her native Americanness was denied because assimilation was compulsory” (Yoshida 35). The white

boarding schools' project actually uprooted the young generation by making them lose their cultural habits in favour of the Western standards. The issue of assimilation is so poignant in the context of this study, because the writer herself greatly suffered from the psychological burden of living as an alien on her own land. The coming section discusses how the disconnection of indigenous children from their homes has degraded their psychological welfare by leaving on them traumatizing circumstances.

## **2- The White Boarding School: A Disconnection from Home and Cause of Trauma**

Leslie Marmon Silko, one of the notorious Native American female writers from Pueblo Laguna tradition has alerted on the disconnecting effects of the boarding schools on the native children. She opines that, the native children who were interned in boarding schools were totally dependent on white food, and “after all those years away at the school, they had forgotten how to set nets in the river and where to hunt seals in the fall” (Silko 22). Silko is a former boarding school girl and she also experimented this feeling of disconnection with her Laguna environment. Especially in *Zitkala-Sa's* narrative, the separation of the narrator from home was traumatizing:

Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared 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 own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder. (Zitkala-Sa 56)

The vivid depiction of the narrator's plight on the white missionary school recalls the image of a little baby snatched from her mother's breast. It is nearly impossible to cope with this feeling of loss and meaninglessness. The very first sentence of the narrative seems a kidnapping-like: “There were eight in our party of bronzed children who were going East with the missionaries” (Zitkala-Sa 47). Children need home education to efficiently achieve socialization. When they are forced out of the family sphere, and relocated in a context radically different from their former environment, the channel of handing knowledge from generation to generation is broken. David Adams opines that

the policies of the white boarding schools have been well planned by the American Congress which allowed “to make and enforce by proper means such rules and regulations as will secure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at schools established and maintained for their benefit” (63). The policies of the white boarding schools have been enforced in the process of Natives’ cultural assimilation, without consideration of any potential damages to their cultural environment. As consequences, many interned native children lost their cultural roots. To highlight the issue, Monica Patterson explains that,

With the loss of their language, it also meant that grandchildren could not talk to or understand their grandparents, and this prevented grandparents being able to pass on traditions and beliefs, resulting in a loss of cultural and traditional knowledge. Children continued to feel culturally disconnected as they were taught at the schools that their culture and traditions were wrong. (42)

It is obvious that, when far away from the cultural cradle, an individual is disoriented and much influenced by the mainstream culture. In the context of this study, the indigenous children are cut away from the Native American realities and habits, so they are like the branches of a tree that have been removed with no sap to keep them alive. A forced displacement causes traumatizing reactions and this is the case of the protagonist and her friends during their stay at the boarding school with the white missionaries.

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines trauma as a “deeply distressing experience, or a stressful event causing an emotional shock” (Soanes and Stevenson 1534). Srividya Ramasubramanian and Emily Riewestahl on their side opine that, “trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physical or emotional harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, societal, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (2). For Zitkala-Sa’s protagonist, the shock of is much impactful since she is only a small girl who was accustomed to the family routine. Now that she is removed from home, the effects of trauma seem unbearable. This passage outlines the young girl’s fear, “I had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies, but I was not happy, as I had thought I should be. My long travel and the bewildering sights had exhausted me. I fell asleep, heaving deep, tired sobs. My tears were left to dry themselves in streaks,



because neither my aunt nor my mother was near to wipe them away” (Zitkala-Sa 51). The protagonist’s traumatizing experience started when she realized that, her new environment is no more home, but a relocation, far away from all that makes sense to her. This kidnapping-like event is similar to the Natives’ confinement into Reservations by the white colonizer since his arrival in the New World. Monica Carolan Patterson argues that “The Indian boarding schools are just a small part of Native American history, but it has caused a significant amount of trauma to their communities” (5). Obviously, the trauma grew from individual level to the collective one, as students after their return from the boarding schools are no more recognizable by their communities.

The shock resides in the brutal removal of the narrator from her family. One of the older girls in the white boarding school whispered to her, when the latter was weeping because of the separation with her family ““Wait until you are alone in the night”” (Zitkala-Sa 50). The older girl’s warning increases the protagonist’s fear about being alone at night. Loneliness and the darkness of the night are elements that help understand the protagonist’s psychological predicament. Her young age makes it difficult to bear her new conditions, just like an infant removed from breastfeeding. The inhospitable place makes her plead ““Oh, I want my mother and my brother Dawee! I want to go to my aunt!” I pleaded; but the ears of the palefaces could not hear me” (Zitkala-Sa 51). Actually, no one can rescue the protagonist from her cultural prison cell. For the white man, the best way to tame these savages is to kill their Indianness by strategies of assimilation and impose them Western standards. The next section of this study argues that, by assimilating the indigenous population through the project of the boarding schools, the white colonizer has successfully killed the Indian identity.

### **3- White Assimilation and the Death of Indigenous Identity**

The ultimate reason of Natives’ assimilation resides in the Europeans’ project of disconnecting them from their cultural heritage, and teach them Western lifestyle. This project is sustained by the view that: “According to the Enlightenment ideal of progress that characterized the 19th century, many white Americans believed that Native peoples were not only capable of radically changing their cultures and lifestyles, but that Native people would even view assimilative measures of advancement as preferable over their own



culture” (Keating 4). Departing from the hypothesis that all cultures are valid, it becomes so pernicious to radically assimilate the indigenous population to the extent of significantly affecting their identity. The narrator in “The School Days of an Indian Girl” describes how her three years at the boarding school left her unrecognizable. For the narrator and her friends, the school pretended to civilize them, but actually it killed their Indian identity. The scene of the cutting of the narrator’s hair marks the death of her Indian identity:

Late in the morning, my friend Judewin gave me a terrible warning. Judewin knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. 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! (Zitkala-Sa 54)

By cutting their hair, the white missionaries wanted the Indian girls to believe that, actually they were to some extent captured and cowards, and then, they deserved this treatment. Not only the narrator and her friends suffered from this terrible shift of identity, but they were caught in a system they could not fight. The white assimilation through the system of boarding school inevitably engendered an identity crisis among the Indigenous population. Marya Schechtman opines that “the self is constituted through an accurate, linear, and coherent narrative that incorporates the values, preferences, and the moral commitments of any given individual, and identity is maintained through time if the narrative remains accurate, linear, and coherent. An inability to maintain such a narrative may result in an identity crisis” (37). Schechtman argues that, by the time the protagonist of “The School Days of an Indian Girl” cannot coherently apprehend her own self because of the influence of her new environment, she suffers an identity crisis, which seems as a kind of death. The great objective of killing the Indian to save the man seems to find its achievement in this context. The Indian identity is all that makes the protagonist and her kidnapped friends different from other characters in the story. The white female missionaries are referred in the narrative as “the palefaces” (Zitkala-Sa 51). Their white skin color makes them different from the Natives. The white racial features have been used in a twisted way to convince the native children to drop their ancestral beliefs in favor of the Western cultural standards. In a nutshell, “The boarding schools attacked

Indigenous notions of community identity and property. Curriculum and pedagogy were not only designed to replace Indian cultures, they could also be intellectually and emotionally deadening” (Reyhner 64). Of course, it did not take much effort to kill the Indian identity in the boarding school attendants. The system was well worked out to this end, since native children “were told by white educators that, in order to be successful, they would have to forget their language and culture and adopt American ways” (Alvord and Van Pelt 86). This brainwashing among native children at white boarding schools left indelible marks as far as identity construction is concerned. One incident in the narrator’s life is disobedience to her mother, who wished to see her daughter back home after graduating from white boarding school. The narrator expresses the event in the following lines:

At the close of this second term of three years I was the proud owner of my first diploma. The following autumn I ventured upon a college career against my mother’s will. I had written for her approval, but in her reply I found no encouragement. She called my notice to her neighbors’ children, who had completed their education in three years. They had returned to their homes, and were then talking English with the frontier settlers. Her few words hinted that I had better give up my slow attempt to learn the white man’s ways, and be content to roam over the prairies and find my living upon wild roots. I silenced her by deliberate disobedience. Thus, homeless and heavy-hearted, I began anew my life among strangers. (Zitkala-Sa 75-76)

Motherhood is central to Native American culture, and much of the traditional heritage is handed down from generation to generation through the matrimonial care. So, by opposing her mother’s wish, the narrator seems to express her ego, which is a typical Western behaviour she may have acquired at the white boarding school. The last sentence of the quotation is the outcome of her disobedience, and it looks like a curse from her people. There is a law among Native American tribes that forces an offender to exile when he/she transgresses a tribal law. From her disobedience, she is naturally evicted from home, and since then, she became homeless. She lives now among strangers with whom she cannot identify herself, because she is a blending of two cultures. The narrator’s stepping away from her Indian culture is an example of the harmful effects of the Western contact with the indigenous population,

just like alcohol consumption, the lack of respect for elders, the rejection of stories and storytelling, the reverence to traditional beliefs.

Especially, cutting away students from their ancestral religion was the boarding schools' primary objective. David Adam argues that, "the schools had an aggressive Christianization campaign," and that "schools cut these students off from traditional religious experiences as they were not permitted to go home during the autumn, winter, and spring. By tradition, these were the times of the year that certain religious ceremonies were performed" (187). From Adam's view, it is obvious that, if the schools worked hard to remove the Indian religious spirit from the students. This is a spiritual death which started with the Christianization of students by forcing them to negate their cultural legacy. In a nutshell, the white boarding schools, not only killed native children's Indian identity, they made them aliens on their own land. Zitkala-Sa acknowledges that

My mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, 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 "tenth" in a girl's years. (Zitkala-Sa 47)

The protagonist's confession strengthens the idea of emptiness and meaninglessness in her existence. She does no longer know who exactly she is, and she finally concludes that, her metamorphosis from an Indian girl to a complex character was due to her passage at the boarding school.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing work has demonstrated that the white boarding schools have alienated the Native American children. The project of the white boarding schools for Native American youth was well thought by the colonial policies in order to culturally uproot them and make them hybrid individuals. Derived from her own experience as an interned school girl, Zitkala-Sa has successfully described the plight of Native American children in the white boarding schools. The work has first discovered that, the leaving of children from the family sphere is the starting point of their plight which ultimately causes trauma. In fact, the removal of children from their families has created a cultural gap which could not be filled since their new environment aimed at

erasing their memories from all that they have been thought about their tradition. The narrator of the story has well depicted her traumatizing experience through the expression of homesick, loneliness, the harshness of life and the meaninglessness of the new environment.

The study has secondly demonstrated that, by forcing children to reject their traditional beliefs and instilling in them Western standards, the white boarding schools were then killing their Indian identity. This has been shown through the protagonist's cutting of her hair and the change of her name. The native children were forbidden to play in the snow as they used to do at home, they were equally punished whenever they failed to comply with the school's requirements. Not only the white boarding schools psychologically harmed native children, they metamorphosed them into aliens on their own lands. From this study, an alternative in the policies of white assimilation was possible apart from the project of the boarding schools, which radically altered the Natives' cultural heritage. This forced assimilation was part of the large project of Natives' extinction undertaken by the white colonizer since his arrival on their land. Driven by his ego, the white colonizer has hunted the Indigenous population in various ways among which the cultural alienation, which undeniably gave way to self-denial and identity crisis. At the end of this work, the ultimate transformation of the protagonist is the goading issue. How many children have been devoid from their ancestral tradition through the project of assimilation in boarding schools? How do these children strive to cope with their new hybrid identity? How do they view themselves: victims of Western hegemony or betrayers of their ancestral tradition? These are some interrogations that stem from this study and which require new research projects.

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#### How to cite this article/Comment citer cet article:

**MLA:** Awesso, Kpatcha Essobozou. "The Indigenous Alienation in 'The School Days of an Indian Girl' by Zitkala-Sa." *Uirtus*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2025, pp. 9-21, <https://doi.org/10.59384/SOPN8493>.