

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 8: MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD



MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

~Summary~

THE CUTTING OF MY LONG HAIR

-by Zitkala-Sa

First Day at School

The writer recalls that her first day in the land of apples was bitterly cold, with snow covering the surroundings. Besides, her first experience at the school, where she was admitted with other Native American boys and girls, was equally unpleasant. The noise made by the breakfast bell crashed into her ears. The clatter of shoes and the constant clash of harsh noises were pretty annoying. Zitkala-Sa longed for freedom, but it was useless to think of it.

The Embarrassment

A white woman placed them in the line of girls who were marching into the dining room. The narrator noticed that they were Native American girls, who wore closely clinging dresses and stiff shoes. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and had shingled hair. She was feeling very uncomfortable in the school dress. Besides, her blanket had been taken off from her shoulders, making her feel all the more embarrassed. She found other Native girls more immodestly dressed than her, in their tightly fitting clothes. She also saw boys come in from the opposite door. A small bell was tapped and every student pulled out a chair from under the table. The narrator also pulled out a chair and sat down. But she was surprised to find that she was the only one sitting.

Just as she began to rise, a second bell was rung. All sat down and she had to crawl back into her chair again. She heard a man at one end of the hall and he was praying. The other students sat with their heads hung over their plates.

As the narrator was glancing at the surroundings, she caught the eyes of a paleface (white) woman upon her. She wondered why the woman was looking at her so keenly. After the man ceased his mutterings, a third bell was tapped and everybody started eating with a knife and fork. Zitkala-Sa instead started crying. She probably had never eaten using knives and forks. All the new changes were too much for her to take.

The Terrible Warning

The eating-by-formula was not the end of her woes. Her friend Judewin knew some English, and she had overheard the white woman talk about cutting their long and heavy hair. The thought of having her hair cut was unacceptable to the narrator. Her mother had taught her that only skilled warriors who became prisoners in war had their hair shingled (cut) by the enemy. In their society, short hair was worn by mourners and shingled hair by cowards.

The Narrator's Protest

Judewin thought that the school people were strong and they would all have to allow their hair to be cut, but Zitkala-Sa was ready to put up a fight. She told her friend that she would struggle first, and not submit willingly before the oppressors.

When she got the chance to escape, she crept upstairs unnoticed. She entered a large room. It was dark, as the curtains were drawn. Zitkala-Sa crawled under the bed farthest from the door. After some time, people started searching for her. She heard Judewin call her name, but she didn't answer.

The Cutting of Zitkala-Sa's Hair

Finally, the women and girls who were looking for Zitkala-Sa entered the room in which she was hiding. She held her breath while the others searched the room. The next thing she remembered was being dragged out. She was resisting, kicking and scratching wildly. She was carried downstairs and tied to a chair. At last she felt a cold scissor blade against her neck gnaw off one of her thick braids. This was the end of her resistance. She lost her spirit.

She was reminded of all the humiliations she went through since the day she parted with her mother. She was deeply sad and nobody comforted her. She missed her mother and felt like an animal driven by a herder.

The Entertaining Walk Home

This is the second part of the unit. The narrator takes us back to her childhood when she was a carefree child studying in the third class. The walk from school to home was hardly of 10 minutes. But it would take her half an hour to one hour to cover the distance. The entertaining sights would tie her legs and stop her from going home.

The performing monkey, the snake charmer, the cyclist who kept pedalling for many days, the Maariyaata temple and the pongal offering being cooked outside it were just some of the interesting sights. And then there were other things going on in the market like a political procession, puppet shows and stunt performances. The market was full of seasonal fruits and stalls. The narrator felt spellbound by all the variety.

Encounter with Untouchability

One day, when the narrator was returning home, she saw a threshing-floor set up on her street. A landlord was watching over the proceedings. The people of her caste were driving the cattle. Just then, she noticed an elder of her street. He was carrying a small packet, holding it with a string. It contained some vadai and the packet had become wet. The narrator thought to herself that the packet might come undone, but still the elder was not touching it. The way he walked made Bama shriek with laughter. The elder crouched while handing over the packet to the landlord.

Laughter Turns to Sadness

The narrator returned home and told her elder brother Annan about the incident. She was laughing uncontrollably, but Annan didn't seem to be amused. Annan told her that the elder and they were considered low caste. The landlord belonged to the upper caste. The upper caste people thought that if low caste people touched them or anything that belonged to them, they or it would be polluted'. That's why the elder was carrying the packet by its string. After hearing this, the narrator didn't want to laugh anymore. She felt infuriated and provoked. She wondered how these fellows thought so much of themselves. She felt compelled to touch the wretched vadais herself.

Annan's Advice

Annan told Bama that because they were born into a low caste community, they were never given any honour or dignity or respect. He advised her to study hard and learn all that she could, because only education could help them throw off all the indignities.

These words made a deep impression on Bama. She studied hard. As Annan had urged, she stood first in her class and because of that, many people became her friends.

WE TOO ARE HUMAN BEINGS

-by Bama

The story is written by Bama who is one of the characters in this story. She is a little cheerful girl who loves to observe things taking place in her street. She says though it takes only ten minutes to reach home from her school but she takes about thirty minutes to reach her home from the school. She then explains the reason behind it. She says when she is on her way to home she sees a monkey performing and a snake charmer doing some act with his snake which was very interesting for her. Then there was a cyclist also who was cycling from past three days. There was

one famous temple which had a big bell and a tribal man who sells clay beads, needles etc. She also comes across various snack stalls and street acts. Then she explains about how various political parties come to her street to give lectures. As she proceeds further, she saw a landlord sitting and watching his workers work in the field. She then saw an old man of her community handling a snack pack in a very strange manner and then offering it to the landlord. She finds it so amusing that she bursts out into a laugh. On reaching home she narrates it to her elder brother and starts laughing. He then tells her a real truth about her being from a low caste and that the upper caste people do not like their presence or touch the low caste as it would make them impure. She finds it so disgusting that she grows angry over the upper caste people. Some days later her elder brother is questioned about his whereabouts to know his caste. He then suggests her to study hard as only this could earn her respect. She works as per his suggestions and become topper of her class. This not only earns her respect but many friends too.

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NCERT SOLUTIONS

Questions (Page No. 100)

(Reading with Insight)

Question 1. The two accounts that you read above are based in two distant cultures. What is the commonality of theme found in both of them?

Answer: Both the autobiographical passages, based upon two different cultures, represent the lives of two ladies from marginalized communities who look back at their childhood and think about their relationship with mainstream culture. 'Memories of childhood' plays autobiographical scenes by two women from culturally marginalized regions in two separate cultures of the world. The thread of commonality that appears in both stories is the feeling of sadness and insult felt by both the women of marginalized societies. One highlights the evil practice of racial prejudice while the other talks about the hierarchical Indian caste system and untouchability. The first account is by an American Indian woman. The second account is characterized by a contemporary Tamil Dalit writer. The mentioned women relate to two different cultures. Pain and sorrow are experienced by both women in their early life. Native Indians don't get importance and respect for dignity in America. They are obliged to follow their tradition, whims, and trades. The poor Indian lady was pulled out and tied to a chair and her long and dark hair was shingled. Bama, on the other hand, awakened early to the dehumanization of having been born in a community of untouchables and hence directed all her power into fighting the prejudice of such a system. Both of them fight and protest against injustice and discrimination.

Question 2. It may take a long time for oppression to be resisted, but the seeds of rebellion are sowed early in life. Do you agree that injustice in any form cannot escape being noticed even by children?

Answer: Yes, indeed, injustice in any form can't escape being noticed even by children. The world is full of inequality. While the adults have grown used to this, the innocence of childhood does not understand hate and prejudice. Innocent-looking children have their knowledge of the world and its people. In the case of the two extracts given in Memories of Childhood, this is evident.

Zitkala-Sa understood as soon as she entered the school run by the whites that they meant to transform her into a distinct person than what she had been before. In the story 'The Cutting of my Long Hair' the author describes the emotional torture she has to go through because she is discriminated against based on her race. She wants to have long and heavy hair, it is the culture of a society. Only cowards have shingled hair among them. She struggles and says she is defeated.

In the other extract “We too are human beings”, the writer addresses how she and her community is neglected by society under the appearance of untouchability. Bama has a first-hand experience of untouchability in India. The people of high castes don't think of the low castes even as human beings. She had seen an elder conquered by a landlord on a street and she observed how even the elders in her society are disrespected and despised.

Question 3. Bama's experience is that of a victim of the caste system. What kind of discrimination does Zitkala-Sa's experience depict? What are their responses to their respective situations?

Answer: While Bama was subjected to untouchability and caste discrimination, Zitkala-Sa was a victim of racial prejudice. Zitkala-Sa was packed off to a European missionary school where, being a local tribal, she was looked down upon. Bama and Zitkala-Sa highlight the humiliation and exploitation of the defeated people. They write about women from marginalized societies. Zitkala-Sa belongs to the community of native Americans and she is expelled from her community and separated from its culture. She feels robbed of her name and dignity. The poor girl struggles till she is defeated.

On the other hand, Bama, who saw the violation of untouchability, decided to blur the difference of castes with the knowledge of education. The people who belong to a low caste have to fight against the higher caste. She is motivated by the terms of her elder sibling, now works hard, and stands first in the class. Both Zitkala-Sa and Bama fought with courage against the humiliation they were subjected to.