

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

(ZITKALA-SA & BAMA)

The cutting of long hair is a firsthand account of writer's firsthand account of writer's first day in the land of apples. She was led to a dining room on a line along with other Native American boys and girls. It was an unpleasant experience. The girls wore clinging dress and stiff shoes. They had shingled hair.

She was not used to the etiquettes of the dining hall. It led to an embarrassing situation. She learnt the hair would be cut was unacceptable. Her mother taught her that short hair was kept by cowards or mourners.

Zitkala Sa decided to give a fight and not allow them to cut her hair. She crept upstairs and entered a large room. She hid herself under a bed. However, they found her dragged her out. She resisted, kicked and scratched wildly. But she lost the fight.

We Too are Human Beings.

The narrator relates her encounter with untouchability in this account. One day while Bama was returning home, she noticed an elderly man of her street carrying a packet holding it in a string. The elder was not touching it. The scene was funny. The elder crouched while handing over the packet to the landlord.

When she narrated the incident to her brother Annan, he was not amused. He told her that the village elder was an untouchable and so the upper caste landlord treated him badly. His touch would pollute the food in the packet. When Bama learnt this, she was very angry. Her brother advised her to study hard and learn all that she could. Only education could help them get the honour and respect that they have been deprived of. These words made a deep impression on Bama. She studied hard and stood first in her class.

Questions & Answers

Q1. The two accounts that you have read above are based in two distant cultures. What is the commonality of theme found in both of them?

Ans. The two accounts given in the unit 'Memories of Childhood' are based in two distant cultures. Two grown up and celebrated writers from marginalised communities look back on their childhood. They reflect on their relationship with the mainstream.

The discrimination, oppression, humiliation, suffering and insults that they faced as young members of the marginalised communities are common to both. Zitkala-Sa highlights the severe prejudice that prevailed towards the Native American culture and women. Depriving her of her blanket that covered her shoulders made her look indecent in her own eyes. The cutting of her long hair reduces her to the status of a defeated warrior as in her culture shingled hair are worn only by cowards. The replacing of her moccasins by squeaking shoes and "eating by formula" at breakfast table are other signs of forcible erosion of their own culture and imposition of dogma on them.

Bama highlights the humiliations faced by the untouchables who were never given any honour, dignity or respect as they were born in lower classes. They were made to live apart, run errands, and bow humbly to the masters. They scrupulously avoided direct contact with the people of higher classes or the things used by them. The sense of rebellion against the existing state of affairs and decision to improve them are also common themes.

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Q2. 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?

Ans. Children are more sensitive and observant than the adults. They see, hear, feel and experience whatever happens around them. They are quick to note any deviation from the normal or any aberration. Bama at first, thinks the behaviour of the elder of her community is quite funny. He is holding the packet by string and running with it awkwardly. But when she learns the reason of his behaviour in that particular manner her ire is aroused against the cruel, rich people of upper castes who shamelessly exploit them and heap humiliations on them. She is ready to rebel against the oppression by snatching the packet of vadai from the landlord and eating them herself. Her elder brother channelises her anger. He tells her to study with care and make progress. We see the seeds of rebellion in her.

Zitkala-Sa too shows that she has the seeds of rebellion in her even at an early age. Her friend Judewin tells her that the authorities are going to cut their long, heavy hair. She says that they have to submit, because they (authorities) are strong. But Zitkala-Sa rebels. She declares that she will not submit. She will struggle first. And, she does carry out her resolution. She hides herself to foil their attempt. When she is detected hiding under the bed and dragged out, she resists by kicking and scratching wildly. She is overpowered and tied fast in a chair, but she does not take things lying down. The spark of rebellion in her is not put out by oppression.

Q3. 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?

Ans. Bama is a victim of the caste system as she has been born in a dalit community. Zitkala- Sa is a Native American who finds that the people who have overpowered the natives are out to destroy their culture. She notices the discrimination against Native American culture and women. The cutting of her long hair is a symbolic of subjection to the rulers. In their culture, only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. She is deprived of her soft moccasins—the shoes worn by Native Americans. Her blanket has been removed from her shoulders and she feels shy and indecent. The rules observed at the breakfast table are alien to her.

Both of them rebel against the existing circumstances. They do not bow down to their situations. They struggle hard to remove the discrimination and other barriers raised by people in power. Their struggle is against oppression, prejudice, dogma, superstition and ignorance. The tool with which they carry out their struggle is education. Both Zitkala- Sa and Bama study hard and earn a name for themselves. They take to writing and distinguish themselves in their respective fields. Their works depict their viewpoints and carry on their struggle against the discrimination that constraint and binds the free flow of their spirits.

MORE QUESTIONS SOLVED

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of these lines from the story 'The Cutting of My Long Hair' justifies the statement below?

The author of 'The Cutting of My Long Hair' was in a place where the students were trained to respond like a trained dog would.

- A. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room.
- B. *I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I.*
- C. *and then a third bell was tapped. Every one picked up his knife and fork and began eating.*
- D. *Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer.*

ANSWER: C

2. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a pale face woman upon me.

Immediately I dropped my eyes wondering why I was keenly watched by the strange woman. a)

Who was being watched?

b) Why was the speaker being watched?

c) Where was the speaker being watched?

How was the speaker being watched?

3. We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judewin said, —We have to submit, because they are strong.|| I rebelled.

a) What is the speaker speaking about?

b) Why did the speaker rebel?

c) Who is strong according to the speaker?

What fate awaited the speaker?

4. From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. a)

Whom does I refer to?

b) Where is she/he hiding?

c) Why did he/she hide himself/herself?

d) Whom is he/ she hiding from?

5. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards! a)

Name the chapter.

b) Who is the speaker of this line?

c) Whom does the speaker remember through this line?

What does 'shingled' mean?

6. But I had already seen , felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.' a)

Who is 'I' in the above lines?

b) When had she/he realised that she/he had been humiliated?

c) What does 'it' refers to ?

Why was she/he humiliated?

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

1. How is the innocence of Children highlighted through Bama?

By showing us the same event from the perspective of Bama and then Annan, the author is trying to show that children are innocent and do not discriminate. It is only the adults who practice it and consequently teach the children to do so too.

2. What was the deeper significance behind Zitkala-Sa's protest against having her hair shingled?

Answer in 20–30 words with reference to the story 'The Cutting of my Long Hair'.

Zitkala-Sa's protest against not having her hair shingled had little to do with aesthetics. It was a protest against losing her cultural identity as having short hair signified negative things in her culture.

3. Mention one point of similarity and difference between Zitkala-Sa and Bama with reference to 'Memories of Childhood'.

Both Zitkala-Sa and Bama belonged to marginalised communities. Zitkala-Sa was a victim of cultural discrimination whereas Bama was a victim of class-based discrimination.

Zitkala-Sa was a victim of cultural discrimination whereas Bama was a victim of class based discrimination/ Zitkala-Sa had to live almost like a slave whereas Bama still lived with her family.

4. Why was Zitkala-Sa in tears on the first day in the land of apples?

Ans. Zitkala-Sa was already feeling uncomfortable in her new dress when she entered the dining hall. A small bell was tapped. Thinking that they had to be seated. Zitkala pulled out a chair and sat on it. But to her surprise everybody kept standing. She was getting up when the second bell rang and all were seated.

Finally, she could not use the knife and fork for eating and she started crying because of her embarrassment.

5. According to Zitkala-Sa what does "eating by formula" mean?

Ans. According to Zitkala-Sa, "cating by formula' meant following an eating-decorum in the dining room. At the sound of the first bell the pupils drew a chair from under the table. All were seated when the second bell was sounded and when the third bell was tapped everyone started eating with forks and knives

6. Children relish the small pleasures of life just like Bama did when she dawdled along on her way back from school, enjoying all the novelties. Elaborate.

Ans. Children relish the small pleasures of life just like Bama did when she dawdled along on her way back from school, enjoying all the novelties. Bama was distracted by the little trivialities on the street. The buzzing market, the snake charmers, the lemurs in cages, etc., all caught her attention. Thus, it took Bama thirty minutes to return home from school. Just like, Bama we are also attracted to the different shops and activities going outside.

7. What does Zitkala-Sa remember about her 'first day in the land of apples'?

Ans. It was a bitter-cold day. The snow still covered the ground. The trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast. Its loud metallic sound crashed through the belfry overhead and penetrated into their sensitive ears.

8. How did Zitkala-Sa react to the various sounds that came when the large bell rang for breakfast?

Ans. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors disturbed the peace. There was a constant clash of harsh noises and an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue. All these sounds made a bedlam within which she was securely tied. Her spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom.

9. Where were the girls taken and how?

Ans. The girls were marching into the dining room in a line. The Indian girls were in stiff shoes and tightly sticking dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. They did not seem to care that they were indecently dressed.

10. "I felt like sinking to the floor", says Zitkala-Sa. When did she feel so and why?

Ans. It was her first day at school. She was marching into the dining room with other girls in a line. She walked noiselessly in her soft moccasins. But she felt that she was immodestly dressed, as her blanket had been removed from her shoulders. So, she felt like sinking to the floor.

11. "But this eating by formula was not the hardest trial in that first day", says Zitkala-Sa. What does she mean by 'eating by formula'?

Ans. The ringing of a large bell summoned the students to the dining room. Then a small bell tapped. Each pupil drew a chair from under the table. Then a second bell was sounded. All were seated. A man's voice was heard at one end of the hall. They hung their heads over the plates. The man ended his mutterings. Then a third bell tapped. Everyone picked up his/her knife and fork and began eating.

12. How did Zitkala-Sa find the 'eating by formula' a hard trial?

Ans. She did not know what to do when the various bells were tapped and behaved unlike others. When the first bell rang, she pulled out her chair and sat in it. As she saw others standing, she began to rise. She looked shyly around to see how chairs were used. When the second bell was sounded, she had to crawl back into her chair. She looked around when a man was speaking at the end of the hall. She dropped her eyes when she found the paleface woman looking at her. After the third bell, others started eating, but she began to cry.

13. What did Judewin tell Zitkala-Sa? How did she react to it?

Ans. Judewin knew a few words of English. She had overheard the paleface woman. She was talking about cutting their long, heavy hair. Judewin said, "We have to submit, because they are strong." Zitkala-Sa rebelled. She declared that she would not submit. She would struggle first.

14. 'Why, do you think, was Zitkala-Sa so opposed to cutting of her hair?'

Ans. Zitkala-Sa had heard from her mother that only unskilled warriors, who were captured, had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among their people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards. Since she was neither, she was dead against cutting of her long hair.

15. How did Zitkala-Sa try to avoid the inevitable loss of her long hair ?

Ans. She crept up the stairs and passed along the hall. She did not know where she was going. She turned aside to an open door. She found a large room with three white beds in it. The windows were covered with dark green curtains. She went to the corner farthest from the door and crawled under the bed in the darkest corner.

16. How was the search made for Zitkala-Sa?

Ans. First, they called out her name in the hall in loud voices. Then the steps were quickened. The voices became excited. The sounds came nearer. Women and girls entered the room. They opened closet doors. They peeped behind large trunks. Someone threw up the curtains. The room was filled with sudden light. Someone stooped, looked under the bed and found her there.

17. How was Zitkala-Sa treated on being traced from her hiding place ?

Ans. Zitkala-Sa was dragged out. She tried to resist by kicking and scratching wildly. But she was overpowered. She was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. She cried aloud and kept shaking her head.

18. What did Zitkala-Sa feel when her long hair was cut?

Ans. When she heard them remove one of her thick braids, she lost her spirit. She had suffered utmost indignities there. People had stared at her. She had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet and now her long hair was shingled like a coward's. In her anguish, she moaned for her mother. She felt herself as one of the many little animals driven by a herder.

19. Which words of her brother made a deep impression on Bama?

Ans. While returning home, Bama's elder brother told her that although people do not get to decide the family they are born into, they can outwit the indignities inflicted upon them. It left a deep impression on her.

20. Name some of the novelties and oddities in the streets that attracted Bama?

Ans. These included the performing monkey, the snakecharmer's snake, the cyclist who had kept on biking for three days, the spinning wheels, the Maariyaata temple and the huge bell hanging there. She also noticed the pongal offerings being cooked in front of the temple.