



THE VILLAGE
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL
"We Nurture Dreams"

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

The Main Title:

No other title could have suited the two anecdotes better than "Memories of Childhood." Both the girls belong to marginalized communities and in spite of the distance in terms of time and space (the Native American Indian was born in 1876, and Bama, a Roman Catholic Tamilian, belongs to the late 20th century) were victims of a common social stigma. Both suffered indignities in childhood which ignited the spark of revolt in them. Their memories of childhood get reflected in their autobiographical episodes.

Sub-Title : THE CUTTING OF MY LONG HAIR

"The Cutting of My Long Hair" is an aptly suited title for the episode by Zitkala-Sa. Before the child was inducted into the Carlisle Indian School she had cherished certain preferences and likings that were prevalent in her community. From what the child's mother tells her, one gathers that the women of her marginalized community were very particular about their hair and were fond of keeping long hair. Cutting it short or getting it shingled was considered inauspicious. The prisoners of war were given the shingled cut in their community and the mourning women wore short hair. Obviously at the Carlisle School the little child missed her long hair the most and is thus not able to forget about the loss all through her life. This loss was the worst indignity that the child suffered. Hence "The Cutting of My Long Hair" is an apt title for the episode.

Sub-Title : WE TOO ARE HUMAN BEINGS

The sub-title "We Too Are Human Beings" by Bama is an extract from her autobiography 'Karukku'. It is a loud piercing cry of a small child who cannot bear to see the people of her caste being segregated and ill-treated. She is shocked when she learns from her brother that there are two classes of people in their set up-the upper and lower-and that the upper caste people consider themselves to be superior and those of so called lower caste to be inferior. Sometimes the latter are given inhuman treatment, too. They have been taught from their childhood that if they touch the lower caste people, they will be polluted. The sensitive child is unable to digest it, because she feels that every human being is equal and her class justifiably deserves to be treated as human beings. Thus she takes her brother's advice seriously and works very hard to stand first in the examinations.

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS:

1. Why does the author feel "spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless"? Discuss.

Ans: Deprived of the warmth and freedom of home, the author finds herself shackled by strict discipline and dictatorial regimentation of the school authorities. Her spirit wants to break loose the barriers and win back her freedom, but unfortunately she's helpless. Thus she feels she's deprived of freedom.

2. What are the views of the author about the dress code?

Ans: The author condemns the rigid school dress code. The Indian girls wore stiff squeaking shoes and 'closely clinging dresses.' The small girls donned sleeved aprons and shingled hair. According to the author, the girls were immodestly dressed.

3. Comment on the author's odd behaviour in the dining hall.

Ans: The students conduct during the meals was strictly regimented. They all stood up together, took their seats and began eating when the different bells rang, each indicating a different stage. Since the author was new to the school she didn't know the rules. So when the first bell rang, she immediately sat down on a chair. Her behaviour was odd because all the other children still stood waiting for the second bell.

4. Why did the author begin to cry in the dining hall?

Ans: The author felt embarrassed for her odd behaviour at the time of breakfast when she sat down at the first bell before the others. Then she noticed a white faced woman glowering at her. She felt more embarrassed and terrified. By the time everyone else began eating, she began to cry.

5. In the words of the author "...eating by formula was not the hardest trial in that first day." What other ordeal was in store for her?

Ans: "Eating by formula" itself was a tough trial for the author but she was in for a more brutal treatment. Her friend Judewin overheard that their long hair was going to be cut, which would be a greater tragedy because, 'among her people short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by mourners.'

6. Why did the author not want her hair to be cut short?

Ans: In the author's community long hair was a symbol of bravery and shingled hair a symbol of defeat or cowardice. That is why the author did not want her hair to be cut short. She also felt that cutting her hair was an indignity heaped upon her by the school authorities and a sort of cultural assault on her. Moreover, she loved her long braids.

7. What idea do you form of about the author's friend Judewin from her comment about hair cutting "We have to submit, because they are strong"?

Ans: On the face of it, Judewin's comment reflects practical wisdom because it is foolish to fight a losing battle; but if one reads deep into the line, one gets to learn that she is cowardly and spineless because she chooses to surrender without any fight. The real spirit lies in fighting to the finish. It also points out to the rigid and regimental discipline imposed by Carlisle school authorities.

8. The author and her friend Judewin have contrasting views about shingling their hair. Do you think their reactions spell out the difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary?

Ans: The attitude of an individual towards a given situation makes her an ordinary or extraordinary person. An ordinary person usually has an apathetic attitude towards life and has a tendency to give in without a fight, whereas an extraordinary person always gives a fight, like the author, even if it is a losing battle.

9. At the time of taking breakfast the author wore moccasins; but later on they were changed to “squeaking shoes.” What reason do you assign to this change?

Ans: Moccasins are soft leather shoes. They are indigenous shoes of the Native Americans. That is why the author loved to put them on. Since moccasins were not part of the school dress, the author’s pair was forcibly taken away from her.

10. How would you interpret the author’s statement, “...now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.”

Ans: The authorities of Carlisle Indian School refused to treat its students as human children and gave the same treatment to each and every child, forgetting the basic truth that each child had a unique personality. The children were so shabbily treated that the author felt they were not human beings, but animals. So the author rightly felt that she was being ‘driven by the herder.’

11. “In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.” Why do you think the author uses the expression “In spite of myself...” here?

Ans: The author’s mother had advised her to be a fighter in life and never to submit. The child tried her best and used all weapons in her kitty to escape being shingled, but she was made helpless by brutal force, hence the use of this expression.

12. How do you account for Bama’s statement, “I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability” ?

Ans: The author was a student of class three and hence too young to recognize class distinction in society. The people around her also never discussed the topic of untouchability with her thinking that it might be beyond her comprehension.

13. What lesson do you learn from the episode “ We Too Are Human Beings”?

Ans: It teaches us the lesson that all human beings are equal and each one of us has human dignity, honour and self-respect. It also emphasizes the need of eradicating such evils as untouchability and discrimination on the basis of caste through education, empowerment and economic growth.

ADDITIONAL SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS:

1. Why did it take Bama nearly one hour to cover a distance needing just ten minutes?
2. While describing the activities going on under the supervision of the landlord, the girl adds “our people were hard at work...” How would you interpret the expression “our people”?
3. What made the little girl want to double up with laughter at the sight of the strange man?
4. The little girl told her brother that the grown up man made such a game out of carrying the parcel. Can you spell out the real reason for carrying the packet in that manner?
5. Who was Annan? How did he justify the strange behaviour of the elder?
6. What episode of discrimination did Annan narrate to Bama? Why?
7. What advice did Annan give Bama? How did his words of advice affect her life?

LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS:

1. The two accounts are based in two distant cultures. What is the commonality of theme found in both of them?
 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?
 3. Do you think that sincerity of purpose and staunch determination are the true pillars of success in life? Answer on the basis of your reading of the two anecdotes in Memories of Childhood.
 4. Had Bama not been guided properly by her elder brother regarding untouchability, she would have grown up into a complex-torn woman. Do you agree? Support your answer.
 5. Justify that Bama has a keen sense of observation and is capable of giving the minutest of details.
 6. 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?
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