



THE VILLAGE
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL
"We Nurture Dreams"

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

Summary

Two people recall their childhood when they were made victims of social inequalities. Zitkala Sa was a Red Indian. She was admitted in the Carlisle Indian School run by the British. The school authorities imposed a lot of rules on the students, some for the students' good and some to show the British superiority and some for fun.

But Zitkala could not agree with all this; she could not think of allowing her long hair to be cut. She didn't like to wear the short skirts, stiff shoes, uniforms... But she had to. When the authorities attempted to cut her hair short, Zitkala ran away and hid under a bed. But she had to submit. They tied her to a chair and cut her hair. Another custom that she didn't agree to was the ceremonial eating which she calls 'eating by formula.' The basic human way of eating doesn't involve any rules. Eat when you are hungry is the natural way. But the British superiority wanted the people here to dance to their senseless tunes. There were bells to take the chair out, sit on the chair, pray to God, take a spoon, take a fork... Zitkala did not know of these rules. When the first bell sounded she thought it was time to eat. She sat down and initiated eating .

Similar was the case with Bama, an Indian writer from Tamil Nadu. She too was a human being but the richer and privileged society didn't consider her so. She was a happy girl but once she witnessed a scene of discrimination. A much respected elder of her society was once made the victim of untouchability. This infuriated her. She wanted to react. She knew the only weapon to fight ostracism/discrimination/oppression was acquiring equal status through education.

Zitkala Sa

- An American native girl
- She was admitted in the Carlisle Indian School (Boarding) in Pennsylvania, USA
- The school had a set of strict rules and they were:
 - Uniform dresses
 - Shingled/short hair
 - Short skirts of girls
 - English was to be spoken and no other local languages were permitted.
 - Shoes and moccasins were to be worn for school and for hostel.
 - There were other rules for eating as well: There was a prayer to be recited before meals and frequent ringing of bells controlled their action.
- But Zitkala was not at all willing to follow these rules/manners/customs. She decided to fight back but just failed.
- Zitkala knew that the authorities were going to cut her long hair. She could not think of her hair cut because:
 - In her tradition, shingled/shortened hair was a mark of shame, defeat and extreme inferiority.
 - It was a punishment given to unskilled warriors of her tribe.

- It was also a custom imposed on "mourners," a group of people who cried at funerals.
- It was a punishment given to cowards as well.
- Zitkala Sa ran away but she was caught and her hair was shingled. She ran away as a coward, she was caught like an unskilled warrior, she cried as a mourner!

Bama

- A Tamil girl. She belonged to a group that was once considered "untouchable."
- She was a very happy girl in her childhood but one day she saw the practice of untouchability in front of her eyes:
 - She was coming from school one evening
 - A threshing field was set up and many people of her group were working in the threshing field. They were working for the landlord.
 - The landlord himself was present there, watching the work.
 - In the meanwhile she saw one of the "untouchables" from her group approaching the landlord with a parcel of *vadais* from a shop.
 - She as usual enjoyed this sight and began to laugh at the man because:
 - The man was healthy and stout.
 - He was carrying a tiny parcel far away from his body to avoid contact.
 - She wondered why he couldn't hold it closer!
 - The man came very close and gave the vadai to the landlord. The landlord began to eat it.
- Her childhood was ruffled, disturbed.

Zitkala Sa, the Red Indian

1. What do you know about Carlisle Indian School?

Carlisle Indian School was a school run by the British to educate the Red Indians and the British students. It had strict rules and regulations for all students. The students had to wear uniforms, girls had to wear short hair and skirts and tight shoes. The eating style also was different there. There were bells before eating. There was a prayer before eating.

2. How was Zitkala Sa different from the other native American students?

Zitkala Sa was a native American girl. She had great love for her tradition and culture. She was proud of her beliefs. She held closer to her heart these beliefs and felt hurt when the rest of the girls followed the foreign culture without any hesitation.

3. What does Zitkala Sa mean by, 'this eating by formula?'

When Zitkala Sa was admitted in the Carlisle Indian School, she faced a number of rules the students had to follow. One of them was the manner of eating. There were three bells to be tapped before the students were allowed to start eating. Being a natural being, Zitkala Sa could not digest the meaning of these polished manners which were alien to her culture.

4. What was it that the school authorities had failed to recognize in Zitkala Sa?

The authorities of the Carlisle Indian School were colonists and therefore could not understand the feelings of the people they ruled over. They believed that it was their duty

to impart their civilization to the uncivilized native Americans but failed to understand their attachment to their own culture and traditions.

5. **Why was Sa against the idea of cutting her long hair?**

Zitkala Sa's mother had taught her that shingled hair was worn by mourners, cowards, and unskilled warriors caught in war. She had a great deal of love for her traditions and her hair. For her the hair meant much closer to her culture. To save her identity, to uphold her civilization and pride Sa fought against the attempts of the authorities to cut her hair.

6. Bring out the extreme orthodox, blind racial beliefs that Zitkala Sa had held close to her heart.

7. In which way did Zitkala Sa deserve the shame of getting her hair shingled?

Bama, an Indian writer

1. **How was Bama's innocent childhood ruffled up by the sight of an elderly man handing the parcel to the landlord at the threshing-field?**

Bama was an innocent girl. She lived in a discriminated society with landlords above them and her community running errands for them. The first instance of class discrimination Bama experienced in her life was the incident of an elderly man of her caste carrying food for the landlord. The man had to carry the packet in the most shameful manner, holding the hand away from his body as a mark of untouchability.

2. **What made Bama laugh at the sight of the elderly man handing the parcel to the landlord at the threshing-field?**

Bama saw an elderly man of her society carrying a very small and light parcel to the landlord. The way the man held the parcel with its strings, the special respect the man showed towards the parcel and the way he offered it to the landlord without supporting it from the bottom made Bama laugh.

3. **What did Bama feel when her Annan explained to her why the village elder had to carry the parcel in a funny manner?**

When Bama saw the elderly man from her society carrying a small parcel of eatable to the landlord, she laughed a lot but when her Annan told it was a scene of caste discrimination, she could not laugh any more. She grew angry with this social evil and wanted to touch the eatable herself and make it dirty. She felt helpless about her being untouchable and angry with the rich people who considered her so.

4. **“Because they had scraped four coins together...” What did Bama mean?**

According to Bama the cause of the rich people's superior attitude and behavior is the possession of money. Money makes a man feel superior over the poor and it makes him blind. While the ordinary people have a little wealth in their hands, the rich ones have a lot.

5. **What was the point of the question raised by the landlord's man to Bama's elder brother, “On which street do you live?”**

The people of Bama's time believed in untouchability and social discrimination. Some people were considered privileged while the majority of the others suffered from the shame of being backward class. People gave respect or disrespect to each other on the basis of caste, religion and being rich and poor. The landlord's men wanted to know if Bama's brother was touchable or untouchable and therefore he asked where he lived.

6. **How did Bama fight against discrimination in her life?**

Bama lived in a discriminated society with the evils of untouchability playing havoc. When she

was aware of it Bama determined to fight it in her way. She was told by her Annan that education only could liberate her from being looked down by the society. Bama studied in a frenzy and stood top in the class and fought the class discrimination.

7. Why was the narrator taking an hour or half to reach home instead of ten minute?

The narrator was taking an hour or half to reach home as she used to watch the roadside fun and games. The entertaining novelties like the performing monkey, snake charmer's display of snake, marathon cycling, dried fish stall by the statue of Gandhi, street play or puppet show used to pull her stand still on her way back home.

8. How had Zitkala – Sa been subjected to extreme indignities?

Since the day she was taken from her mother Zitkala had suffered many indignities. She was stared at and tossed like a wooden puppet. Her long hair was shingled like a coward's. In her pain when she cried for her mother no one came forward to comfort her. She was just like one of animals driven by a herder.

9. What did Judewin tell the narrator? What was the effect?

Judewin who could understand a little English informed the narrator that the strange woman intended to cut their long hair. But the narrator had learnt from her mother that the enemy cut the hair of the unskilled warrior when they are captured and among their people mourners wear short hair and cowards shingled hair. So, she decided to resist. She hid herself under a bed in a dark room.

10. How did Bama come to know about untouchability?

Bama saw an elder carrying a packet containing food with its string and without touching the packet gave it to the landlord. She found it funny and told her elder brother about it. Her elder brother told her that the man who handed over the food packet was a low caste- an untouchable. Then she came to know about untouchability.

11. Why did Bama study so hard?

Bama's brother who was studying at a University told her because they were born in a low caste they are deprived of honour and dignities. He advised her to study and make progress to throw away the indignities. The words of her brother left a deep impression in her mind and she studied hard.

Long Questions and Answers

- 1. Power leads to dominance and reaches oppression and ends up in rebellion and failure. How is this statement true in the case of the rebellion raised by Zitkala Sa**

and Bama?

One of the most irrevocable human tendencies is domination. Everyone wants to impose some sort of dominance over the other and if one doesn't do so it is because he is weaker than the others or that he is educated. Both Zitkala Sa and Bama lived in two opposite ends of the world yet both experienced this social evil in their early life.

The Red Indians were the true inhabitants of America. With the discovery of this new continent the European world converted it into their mines for resources. The European colonists considered educating the rest of the world to be the white man's burden. They established schools for the backward and taught them their culture, their language, their whims, their fancies, their furs but failed to respect the values of the people they oppressed and ruled. The Red Indians too had their own sacred culture and practices. They considered cutting of one's hair equal to death but all the students were forced to get their hair cut. The British cut short the decency of dressing and curbed personal freedom by imposing uniform system. They brought in rules for eating.

The same was the case with the privileged landlords of India because they were richer than the peasants, the landlords restricted their freedom. The poor peasants had to accept their state of being untouchables in the public. The mortification that this status brought to them was beyond sheer shame. The blindness that extreme possession of power brings makes anyone do the worst activities including suppressing the weak ones. But this power is always temporary. One day the weaker ones will gather power of resistance and fight back the oppression.

2. The two accounts that you read in The Memories of Childhood are based in two distant cultures. What is the commonality of theme found in both of them?

The autobiographical accounts included in the "Memories of Childhood" are by two women from socially marginalized sections in two distant cultures of the world. One highlights the evil practice of racial prejudice while the other talks about the hierarchical Indian caste system and untouchability. The first part traces how the author, a Native American, was victimized at the hands of the European staff of her boarding school. The second account gives a picture of the hardships and humiliations faced by the Indian 'Dalits' from the eyes of a third standard student.

Although they are set in different cultures, both the stories share a similar theme. They show the sufferings and oppression faced by their respective communities. The practice of social stratification is rebuked by both the authors. Zitkala-Sa's hair was "shingled" at the behest of Europeans who considered themselves superior to the Native American. On the other hand, Bama witnessed untouchability being practiced openly where people from 'lower castes' were considered impious and were not even allowed to touch the people from the upper castes. From a very young age, both Zitkala-Sa and Bama start protesting and resisting in their own ways.

3. 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?

The world has been gripped in the web of stratification, oppression and discrimination at many levels. While the adults have grown used to this, the innocence of childhood does not understand hatred and prejudice. However, their keen observant eye is capable enough to notice any form of injustice and discrimination. When subjected to such evil practices, their sensitive minds and hearts are deeply affected. Perplexed, they often resist in their own simple ways.

In the lesson, the two girls describe their encounters with inequality. Zitkala-Sa, in the very first line reports that her first day in school was “bitter-cold”. For her, it not only describes the weather, but also represents the atmosphere of the boarding school. The disciplined students of the school and the European staff were unfriendly or “cold” towards her, and the vain struggle against her hair being shingled was a “bitter” experience for her. On the other hand, Bama walked on her brother's footsteps to protest against the practice of untouchability through education. She studied wholeheartedly to reach a position where people would forget her “caste” and feel proud to befriend her.

4. 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?

While Bama was subjected to caste discrimination and untouchability, 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. Her precious, long and heavy hair, which was her pride, was shingled. She tried to resist with all her might but, ultimately, she was forced to give up her struggle. On the contrary, Bama, who witnessed the malpractice of untouchability, decided to blur the difference of castes with the light of education. Under the guidance and supervision of her elder brother, she judiciously utilized her anger and sense of rebellion to study hard and outwit any form of prejudice. She understood that a social change would be possible only if these so-called lower castes make an effort to study and, thus, make progress.

It can easily be noticed that though both the protagonists tried to protest against the injustice they faced, the paths they chose are remarkably different. Through this journey of rebellion, Zitkala-Sa is forced to give in; on the contrary, Bama successfully implemented her brother’s advice to finally top in her class. While Zitkala-Sa continued to rebel by criticizing the evils of racial prejudice through her works, Bama opted for a more subtle way to carry forth her silent yet effective remonstrations.

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