

English Notes



Vistas Chapter-8

Memories of Childhood

Introduction

The chapter **Memories of Childhood** contains two autobiographical accounts that come from **different cultures, places, and time periods**, yet they share a common theme. Both stories describe the **humiliation, discrimination, and prejudice faced by marginalized communities**.

The writers **Zitkala-Sa** and **Bama** show how education and determination helped them fight social injustice. Both use **the power of writing and education to resist oppression and defend human dignity**.

Part 1: The Cutting of My Long Hair

Author: Zitkala-Sa

Summary

The first part describes the painful experience of **Zitkala-Sa**, a Native American girl, at the **Carlisle Indian School**.

On her first day at the school, she finds everything strange and unfamiliar. The school follows strict rules and customs that are completely different from her own culture. She is forced to wear clothes that she considers **uncomfortable and undignified**.

During breakfast, she feels embarrassed because she does not know the school rules. At the first bell everyone pulls out their chair. Zitkala-Sa sits down immediately, but the others remain standing. At the second bell everyone sits down, but she stands up. Her mistakes make her feel **confused, humiliated, and frightened**.

Later, she learns from her friend **Judewin** that the authorities are planning to **cut her long hair**. In her culture, only cowards or captured warriors had their hair cut short, while mourners also wore short hair. Therefore, cutting her hair would be a great insult.

She tries to resist by hiding under a bed, but she is discovered. She is dragged out, tied to a chair, and her hair is forcibly cut. This act deeply humiliates her and destroys her spirit. She feels like **an animal being controlled by a herder** and longs for the comfort and freedom of her home.

Part 2: We Too Are Human Beings

Author: Bama
From the autobiography **Karukku**

Summary

The second part is taken from the autobiography **Karukku** by **Bama**, a Tamil Dalit writer.

As a child, Bama lived in a village and enjoyed watching street performances such as puppet shows, monkey acts, and snake charmers while walking home from school.

One day she noticed a man from her community carrying a **food packet by holding the string without touching it**. She initially found it amusing.

Later, her elder brother explains the reason behind this behaviour. The man belonged to a **lower caste**, and the upper caste people believed that the food would become polluted if he touched it.

This realization shocks Bama deeply. She learns that people from her community are treated as **untouchables** and forced to suffer humiliation and discrimination.

Her brother advises her that the only way to gain **respect and dignity** is through **education and hard work**.

Inspired by his words, Bama studies seriously and eventually **stands first in her class**, proving that education can help fight social injustice.

Common Theme of Both Accounts

Although these stories take place in different cultures, they share several common ideas:

- Both writers belong to **marginalized communities**.
- Both experience **humiliation and discrimination** at a young age.
- Both show **courage and determination** in facing injustice.
- Both believe that **education and knowledge can fight oppression**.

Main Themes

1. Discrimination and Prejudice

Both writers describe the unfair treatment faced by their communities.

2. Loss of Innocence

Both girls learn about social injustice at a very young age.

3. Importance of Education

Education becomes a powerful tool to overcome discrimination.

4. Self-respect and Identity

Both writers struggle to protect their dignity and cultural identity.

Message of the Chapter

The chapter teaches that **social discrimination and prejudice can deeply affect people's lives**, but **education, courage, and self-respect can help individuals fight injustice and gain dignity**.

Important Board Question

Q. Compare the experiences of Zitkala-Sa and Bama in Memories of Childhood.

Answer

The two autobiographical accounts in **Memories of Childhood** describe the painful experiences of discrimination faced by **Zitkala-Sa** and **Bama**. Although they belong to different cultures and time periods, their experiences reveal similar social injustices.

Zitkala-Sa, a Native American girl, faced discrimination at the Carlisle Indian School where she was forced to follow unfamiliar customs. The authorities cut her long hair against her will, which was a deep humiliation because in her culture short hair symbolized cowardice or mourning. This incident hurt her dignity and identity.

Similarly, Bama, a Tamil Dalit girl, became aware of caste discrimination when she saw a man from her community carrying a food packet by its string to avoid touching it. She later learned that upper-caste people believed that lower-caste people could pollute food if they touched it. This realization shocked and saddened her.

Both writers felt humiliated because of social prejudice. However, they responded with courage. While Zitkala-Sa resisted the forced cutting of her hair, Bama decided to work hard in her studies to gain respect and dignity.

Thus, both accounts highlight discrimination but also show how **education, courage, and self-respect can help people fight social injustice.**

Comparison: Zitkala-Sa vs Bama

Aspect	Zitkala-Sa	Bama
Background	Native American girl	Tamil Dalit girl from India
Source	“The Cutting of My Long Hair”	“We Too Are Human Beings”
Book	Part of Memories of Childhood	Taken from autobiography Karukku
Type of discrimination	Cultural discrimination against Native Americans	Caste discrimination against Dalits
Main incident	Forced cutting of her long hair at Carlisle Indian School	Sees a lower-caste man carrying food by its string to avoid touching it
Reaction	Feels humiliated and resists the cutting of her hair	Feels shocked and decides to study hard
Lesson learned	Loss of cultural identity due to forced assimilation	Education can help fight social discrimination

Common Points (Similarity)

- Both belong to **marginalized communities**.
- Both experience **humiliation and discrimination** at a young age.
- Both show **courage and awareness of injustice**.

- Both believe that **education and determination can bring dignity and respect.**

Important Questions

1. Why was Zitkala-Sa terrified when she heard that her hair would be cut?

Zitkala-Sa was terrified because in her Native American culture, short hair was worn only by mourners or by cowards who were captured in battle. Therefore, cutting her hair would mean losing her dignity and cultural identity. When she heard about the plan, she hid under a bed to avoid it. However, she was dragged out and her hair was forcibly cut, which made her feel humiliated and powerless.

2. Why did Zitkala-Sa feel embarrassed at the breakfast table?

Zitkala-Sa felt embarrassed because she did not know the strict dining rules at the Carlisle Indian School. When the first bell rang, she sat down while everyone else remained standing. When the second bell rang, she stood up while others sat down. Her mistakes made her feel confused, frightened, and humiliated in front of everyone.

3. What realization did Bama have when she saw the elderly man carrying food by its string?

At first, Bama found the situation amusing. However, her brother explained that the man belonged to a lower caste and was forced to carry the food packet by its string so that he would not touch it and pollute it for the upper-caste landlord. This made Bama realize the cruelty and injustice of caste discrimination.

4. How did Bama decide to overcome discrimination?

Bama's brother advised her that the only way to gain respect and dignity was through education. Inspired by his words, Bama decided to work hard in her studies. She studied seriously and eventually stood first in her class, proving that education can help overcome social discrimination.

5. What lesson did Bama learn from her brother?

Bama learned that instead of feeling ashamed of her caste, she should work hard and prove her ability through education. Her brother encouraged her to study well so that she could earn respect and fight social injustice.

6. How did the incident of cutting her hair affect Zitkala-Sa?

The forced cutting of Zitkala-Sa's hair deeply hurt her dignity and spirit. It symbolized the loss of her cultural identity and freedom. She felt powerless and humiliated, as if she were an animal being controlled by others.

7. What common theme connects the two accounts in Memories of Childhood?

Both accounts highlight the theme of **social discrimination and humiliation faced by marginalized communities**. Although the writers belong to different cultures, they both experienced injustice at a young age. Their stories show that **education, courage, and self-respect are powerful tools to fight oppression**.

5 Important Value-Based Questions

1. What message do we learn from the experiences of Zitkala-Sa?

Zitkala-Sa's experience teaches us the importance of **respecting cultural identity and human dignity**. Forcing people to abandon their traditions and customs can cause deep emotional pain. Her story reminds us that all cultures deserve respect and that discrimination based on race or culture is wrong.

2. What lesson does Bama learn from her brother?

Bama learns that **education and hard work are powerful tools to fight social discrimination**. Her brother encourages her to study well and prove her ability so that she can gain respect and dignity in society.

3. What do the stories of Zitkala-Sa and Bama teach us about discrimination? Both stories show that discrimination based on race, culture, or caste can cause humiliation and emotional pain. They also teach us that people should be judged by their **character and abilities**, not by their background or social status.

4. How can education help in overcoming social discrimination?

Education gives people **knowledge, confidence, and opportunities**. It helps individuals understand their rights and fight injustice. As shown in Bama's story, education can help marginalized communities gain respect and improve their social position.

5. Why is it important to treat everyone with equality and respect?

Treating everyone with equality and respect creates a **fair and harmonious society**. Discrimination leads to injustice and suffering. When people respect each other regardless of caste, race, or culture, society becomes more compassionate and inclusive.