

Chapter 8 : Memories of Childhood

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Reading with Insight

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

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.

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

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 overly 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.

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 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 remonstrance.