Chapter 6: Memories of Childhood

Exercise 6.1 — Reading with Insight

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

SOLUTION

Though set in vastly different cultures — one among Native Americans in late nineteenth-century United States, the other among Tamil Dalits in contemporary India — both accounts share the central theme of social oppression and the humiliation suffered by individuals from marginalised communities.

Both Zitkala-Sa and Bama experience discrimination that strips them of dignity. Zitkala-Sa is subjected to a forced cutting of her hair, which her culture associates with mourning and cowardice, symbolising the violent erasure of her identity by a dominant white institution. Bama witnesses an elder of her community obliged to carry a packet by its string rather than touching it, because the upper-caste landlord considers their touch polluting.

In both accounts, the protagonists are children who are confronted with the painful reality of prejudice for the first time. The humiliation they face awakens in them a sense of injustice and a spirit of resistance. Both texts also present education as a means through which marginalised people can fight back: Bama's brother Annan advises her to study hard so that dignity comes naturally, while Zitkala-Sa's entire literary career became a form of resistance against the very system that tried to erase her.

The overarching commonality is thus the experience of oppression based on identity — whether racial or caste-based — and the inner resolve that this oppression kindles rather than extinguishes.

Answer: Both accounts depict oppression of marginalised individuals based on identity (race/caste), the childhood awakening to injustice, and the resolve to resist through dignity and education.

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?

SOLUTION

Yes, both narratives powerfully confirm that children are acutely sensitive to injustice, even when they do not yet have words to name it. The seeds of rebellion that these women describe were sown in their earliest experiences of humiliation.

Zitkala-Sa, on her very first day at the boarding school, resists the cutting of her hair with fierce determination. She hides under a bed, kicks and scratches when she is dragged out, and cries aloud throughout the ordeal. Though she is too young and too powerless to prevent it, her

refusal to submit passively — 'No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!' — shows that the child already recognises what is being taken from her: not merely hair, but identity and honour.

Similarly, Bama initially finds the elder's manner of carrying the parcel amusing, but the moment her brother explains the caste logic behind it, she feels provoked and angry rather than amused. Her sense of injustice is immediate: she wants to know why her community must perform demeaning errands for people who regard them as inferior. Though she is still in the third class, she grasps the full moral weight of the indignity.

The delayed resistance referred to in the question is structural — it takes time for a community to organise and challenge systemic oppression. But the individual recognition of wrong, the inner rebellion, begins in childhood. This is precisely why Bama studied with frenzy and Zitkala-Sa became a writer and activist: the injury sustained in childhood fuelled a lifelong commitment to justice.

Children, unburdened by the resigned acceptance that comes with repeated subjugation, perceive injustice with a raw clarity that adults may have learned to suppress.

Answer: Yes — both children immediately perceive the injustice directed at them; their early rebellions (Zitkala-Sa's hiding and resistance, Bama's anger at caste discrimination) plant the seeds for their later commitments to dignity and justice.

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?

SOLUTION

Bama's experience depicts the discrimination rooted in India's caste system, where Dalit communities are considered 'untouchable' by upper-caste people. The episode of the elder carrying the packet by its string, never letting it touch his hands, illustrates how deeply caste prejudice dehumanises: even the indirect touch of a Dalit — through food that has already been wrapped in a banana leaf and paper — is regarded as polluting by the landlord.

Zitkala-Sa's experience, by contrast, depicts racial and cultural discrimination. She is a Native American child forcibly enrolled in a white-run boarding school that aims to assimilate indigenous children by destroying their cultural identity. The cutting of her hair is not a minor grooming act: in her community, shingled hair signified cowardice and mourning. By cutting the students' hair and replacing moccasins with shoes, the institution systematically strips the children of their cultural markers and imposes a dominant white identity upon them.

Their responses differ in form but share a common spirit of resistance. Zitkala-Sa's response is immediate and physical — she hides under a bed, kicks and scratches when found, and cries aloud even as the scissors cut her braids. Though she cannot prevent the hair-cutting, she refuses to yield without a struggle. Her anguish and the loss of spirit she describes ('Then I lost my spirit') show how deep the wound is, but her later life — writing against the Carlisle school and fighting for Native American rights — is the fullest expression of that early rebellion.

Bama's response is channelled through education. Her brother Annan's counsel — that study

and achievement can restore the dignity that birth into a Dalit community denies — transforms her anger into purposeful effort. She studies with intense dedication, stands first in her class, and thereby earns the respect and friendship that caste would otherwise withhold. Both women ultimately convert childhood humiliation into a sustained, meaningful resistance against the systems that oppressed them.

Answer: Zitkala-Sa faces racial and cultural discrimination (forced erasure of Native American identity); Bama faces caste-based untouchability. Zitkala-Sa responds with immediate physical resistance; Bama, guided by her brother, responds through educational achievement — both ultimately turning childhood injury into lifelong resistance.