MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

PART – I

• The first part deals with the account of Simmons, An American Indian, who fought against the prejudices of the society against American Indians.
• She describes her experiences on her first day at the Carlisle Indian School.
• The customs and rules of the place were strange and new to her.
• She was forced to wear clothes that were considered undignified in her culture.
• At breakfast, she was embarrassed as she did not know the routine of the place.
• When she comes to know that they were planning to cut her hair, she protests by hiding under the bed, even though she knew it was futile. In her culture, it was the cowards whose hair was shingled.
• She felt like an animal driven by a herder.

PART – II

• The second part is an excerpt from the autobiography ‘Karukku’ by Bama – a Tamil Dalit.
• She was in her third grade when she becomes aware of the indignities that the lower caste people face.
• She happens to see an elderly person from her community abase himself in front of a higher caste person as he was not supposed to touch the food that he was ordered to fetch for the landlord.
• Later, her brother explains to her that the incident was not at all funny as she initially thought, but very pathetic. The people from the lower caste were treated as untouchables.
• She was deeply saddened and decided to study hard to overcome discrimination.

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?

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.
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?

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?

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 remonstration.

4. Seeds of rebellion are sown early in life injustice even can’t escape the eyes of child. Justify the statement with reference to the lesson and “Memories of childhood.”

The lesson ‘Memories of Childhood’ is an amalgamation of two autobiographical episodes. One by American Indian woman and second by a Tamil Dalit writer. Both stories highlight the women’s oppression, class barriers, racialism, discrimination and exploitation that tend to pull them down. Both the stories advocate the statement that seeds of rebellion are sown early in life.

In ‘The Cutting of my long hair’ the feeling of breaking free and gaining freedom are seen in the girl. 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. Though she was a child but she could observe the overly disciplined students of the school and and its unfriendly staff. She faced indignity & oppression since she had left her mother. She is not ready to get her hair cut, to lose her & identity. She fights till the end but is helpless as she overpowered.

Also in ‘We Too Are Human Beings’, when Bama was in class 3rd, no had talked to her about untouchability but still she had experienced it and could notice the difference between landlords and Dalits. The little girl was amused to see how the old man was holding the packet but when she came to discover the truth, she is extremely upset & citizens the way of the rich. Through her struggle & hard work she stands first & wins many friends. Thus we can see that though the children are small & innocent but they cannot tolerate injustice if they are taught early in their life.

5. It took almost an hour for Bama to reach back home from school. Why?
OR
What were the ‘novelties and oddities’ in the bazaar which entertained Bama?
Ans. Bama was a young playful girl studying in class three. Her school was at a distance of ten minutes from her home but she normally took at least thirty minutes to traverse this distance.
The bazaar on the way was full of novelties and oddities for her—the performing monkey, the snake kept by the snake charmer in its box, the cyclist who had not got off his bike for three days, the spinning wheels, the Maariyaata temple, the pongal offerings being cooked in front of the temple; the various food stalls in front of the temple, the different hues of the street light and the narikkuravan hunter gypsy with its wild lemur in cages. A different kind of performance on stage such as a street play, a puppet show, a magic show or speeches by budding politicians also caught her attention. Even the way the waiters cooled the coffee at the coffee clubs or the way people cut onions held the little girl spell-bound. The fruit growing on a tree as well as the seasonal fruits being sold held her captive. Hence we see that before Bama was rudely oriented to the unfortunate reality of her caste she was an innocent child buoyed by the simple sights of life.

6. Both the units of 'Memories of Childhood' present autobiographical episodes from the lives of two women from 'marginalized communities'. Describe the main issues raised as well as the common features highlighted in them.

Ans. The lesson 'Memories of Childhood' presents autobiographical episodes from the lives of two women. They highlight the plight of 'the marginalised communities'. The people of these communities never receive honour and dignity due to them. In 'The Cutting of My Long Hair' Bonnin describes how an Indian girl suffered extreme indignities. She tried to maintain her identity and her distinct culture. She liked to wear, long and thick hair. But the 'paleface woman' and others dragged her out. They tied her fast in a chair and gnawed off her long hair. In 'We Too Are Human Beings' Bama, a Tamil Dalit writer presents the struggle of a girl of a low caste. The people of low castes are never respected and honoured. They have to carry a food packet by its string without touching it. The girl in 'We Too Are Human Beings' struggles, studies hard and stands first in the class. She attains equality, and honour.

The most common feature of both these episodes is the struggle and fight against racial and social discrimination. They don't take oppression, exploitation and injustice meekly.

7. Describe how the narrator in “The Cutting of My Long Hair' resists and fights against the attempt of shingling her long and heavy hair. How is she ultimately made to lose her distinct cultural identity?

The narrator's friend Judewin gave her a terrible warning. She knew a few words of English. She had overheard the 'paleface woman.' She talked about cutting the long and heavy hair of Native Indian girls. It was a shocking news. Their mothers had taught them that shingled hair was worn only by cowards! Judewin advised her to submit. The narrator had made a decision. She was not to submit. She was to struggle and fight against that oppression.

The narrator disappeared unnoticed. She crawled under the bed and cuddled herself in the dark corner. She shuddered with fear whenever she heard footsteps nearby. Voices became louder. They stormed into the room. She was dragged out. She resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. She was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. Then they gnawed off her long and
beautiful hair. No one came forward to help her. Nor was anybody present there to console her.
Thus, the narrator lost her distinct cultural recognition and identity. Now she was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

8. The narrator in 'We Too Are Human Beings' is amused at the way the elder of her street carried the food packet by its string without touching it. But the same girl is provoked and becomes angry when Annan makes her aware of the social inequality and untouchability in the social system. Describe how the narrator attains honour and dignity inspite of her humble birth.

The narrator in 'We Too Are Human Beings' passes through different phases of mental and physical development. The role of her elder brother (Annan) in shaping her personality can’t be minimized. He inspired her to fight against inequality and untouchability. The narrator saw a threshing floor set up at one corner of her street. An old man of her street attracted her attention. The elder came along from the direction of the bazaar. He was a big man carrying a small packet of food by its string without touching it. She thought it quite funny.
She narrated the incident to her elder brother but he was not amused. The man was not being funny. He belonged to a 'low caste'. He couldn’t touch the food packet. She felt terribly sad. She felt so much provoked and angry that she wanted to touch those vadais herself straightaway. Annan described that the people of their caste were not respected and given importance. Education, learning and prosperity bring honour and dignity. The narrator was inspired by his words. She studied hard and stood first in the class. Then many friends came to her on their own accord.

9. Why was Bama first amused at the scene of the old man carrying a food packet by its string without touching it? Why was she filled with anger, dismay and revolt later on?

A strange scene amused Bama. A threshing floor had been set up at a corner of her street. Men were working and the landlord was watching the proceedings. An old man came from the side of the bazaar. He was carrying a food packet. He was holding it by its string without touching it. The manner of holding the packet amused Bama.
Bama narrated the whole story to her elder brother. But he was not amused. There was nothing comic about it. The landlord belonged to a high caste. The old man belonged to a low caste. He couldn’t even touch the food packet. Had he done so, the food could have been polluted.
The landlord would not have accepted it. On hearing this Bama was filled with anger, dismay and revolt. She felt like touching that packet with her own hands. She believed that all are human beings. They need not bow low to their masters. Her elder brother told her that the people of their caste had no respect and dignity. They can earn honour and dignity if they get education and knowledge. The words of her brother touched her deeply. She worked hard and stood first in the class. She proved that she was second to none.
10. How does ‘Memories of Childhood.’ Bring out the plight of marginalized communities in India?

**Hints:**— the text—experiences of two small girls from marginalized communities—forced to accept the rules laid by people of so called high caste—both humiliated and tortured for being from low caste—throws light on how they had to sacrifice their self right to self esteem and were subjected to unbearable humiliation—characters symbolize communities—personal experiences universalized—compels the reader to think how humane is the human world.

**Short Answer Type Questions**

Q. 1. What did she notice about the Indian girls in the school?

Ans. The narrator was placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls. They were in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. Small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair.

Q. 2. Why did she feel uncomfortable in the dining room?

Ans. The narrator felt quite uncomfortable in the dining room. A small bell was tapped. She pulled her chair out and sat on it. She was the only one seated there. A second bell was sounded. All were seated. A ‘paleface woman’ watched her keenly. Then everyone started eating. All these activities confused her. She felt quite uncomfortable and uneasy.

Q. 3. Why was Zitkala-Sa terrified when Judewin told her that her hair would be cut short? *(A.I. CBSE 2008)*

Ans. Judewin had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Zitkala-Sa was terrified. Their mothers had taught them that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among her people short hair was worn by mourners and shingled hair by cowards.

Q. 4. How did she hide herself? Did she succeed?

Ans. The narrator disappeared unnoticed. She came to a large room with three white beds in it. She crawled under the bed and cuddled herself in the dark corner. From her hiding place she peered out. She shuddered with fear. She couldn’t succeed in hiding herself for long. They stormed into the room and dragged her out.

Q. 5. How was she forced to part with her long and heavy hair?

Ans. The narrator was found out. She was dragged out. She resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. Inspite of herself, she was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. The cold blades of scissors ran across her hair. And so her long and heavy hair was shingled. No one came to her help. None comforted her.

Q. 6. “Now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder”. Why did the narrator feel so?

Ans. The narrator was an American Native Indian. Among her people, young girls wore long and heavy hair. She wanted to maintain her distinct cultural identity. Her long
and beautiful hair was shingled against her wish. She lost her distinct identity. Now she was one of the little animals driven by a herder.

Q. 7. When did the narrator experience untouchability?
Ans. When the narrator was in the third class, she hadn't yet heard people speak only of untouchability. But the curse of untouchability did exist in the society. She had already seen, felt and experienced it. There were occasions when she felt humiliated by it.

Q. 8. The distance from the narrator's school to her home could be covered in ten minutes. Why did she then cover it usually in half an hour to an hour? What were the things that stopped her?
Ans. The narrator took about half an hour to an hour to cover the distance from her school to home. She used to watch all the fun, entertainment and games on the way. All novelties and oddities in the streets and shops attracted her attention. Performing monkeys, snake charmers and sweet stalls attracted and stopped her from going home.

Q. 9. What made the narrator double up and shriek with laughter?
Ans. The narrator stood at threshing floor near her house. Just then, an elder of her street came along from the bazaar. He was carrying a small packet. It contained vadai or green banana bhajji in it. He was holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. The manner in which he was walking made her double up and shriek with laughter.

Q. 10. Why wasn't the narrator's elder brother amused when she told him the story in all its comic detail?
Ans. The narrator's elder brother was not amused. He told her that the man was not being funny. He belonged to a 'low' caste. The people of his community couldn't touch the food packet. Therefore, he was holding it out by its string. Had he touched it, the landlord would never accept such a thing.

Q. 11. Why did the narrator feel terribly sad and provoked?
Ans. The narrator came to know why the elder carried the packet with a string. She didn't want to laugh any more. She felt terribly sad. She felt so provoked and angry that she wanted to touch those wretched vadais herself. She felt bad that people had to bow low and work so hard for their masters.

Q. 12. What did Annan say about his community to the narrator?
Ans. Annan told the narrator that they belonged to a 'low' caste. The people of his community were not respected, honoured or given any importance. The members of their community can attain honour and dignity if they study and prosper. If they become learned, people will come to them of their own accord.

Q. 13. How was the narrator inspired by the words of her elder brother (Annan)?
Ans. The narrator was highly inspired by the words of her elder brother. There was only one hope for the people of her caste. They can attain dignity and honour if they
are learned. Then people will come to them of their own accord. The narrator studied very hard and stood first in her class. Very soon she made a lot of friends.

Q. 14. **What are common features present in both the episodes?**

Ans. 'Memories of Childhood' contains the writings of two women writers of 'marginalised communities'. 'The Cutting of My Long Hair' highlights the racial discrimination, the Native Indians of America suffer at the hands of the white people. The girl's long and heavy hair is shingled against her wish. In 'We Too Are Human Beings' the narrator attains equality, dignity and fights against untouchability.