VISTAS

Memories of childhood

By Zitkala-Sa and Bama

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Story 1- The Cutting of My Long Hair by Zitkala – Sa

About the Author

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, born in 1876, was an extraordinarily talented and educated Native American woman who struggled and triumphed in a time when severe prejudice prevailed towards Native American culture and women. As a writer, she adopted the pen name ‘Zitkala-Sa’ and in 1900 began publishing articles, criticizing the Carlisle Indian School. Her works criticised dogma, and her life as a Native American woman was dedicated against the evils of oppression.

Introduction to the lesson - The cutting of my Long hair

‘The cutting of My long hair’ is a story that showcases the discrimination faced by the Indians in the western world. The story describes how an Indian girl was forced to wear western dresses and cut her hair by her school authorities in order to make her look like an American student.
Summary - The cutting of my Long hair

The story begins with Zitkala’s first day in a boarding school Carlisle Indian school. It is a school opened for native Indians where they are trained to leave behind their own culture and become part of the American culture. Zitkala describes that she really felt bad when a shawl is taken off her shoulders by the school authorities before entering into the dining hall. She also wonders about how the other Indian girls agreed to wear tight clothes which were immodest according to her as their whole body shape could easily be seen. Even their hair was cut short which according to the author was not good. Her mother had told her only a coward’s or a mourner’s hair should be shaved off. Later on Zitkala and other girls were taken to the dining hall where she was keenly noticed by a pale faced woman for not following the table manners. Judewin, another Indian girl tells her that the pale faced woman has decided to cut her hair. Zitkala revolts back as she does not want to look like a coward or a mourner. She hides herself under a bed in some room upstairs. Everyone starts searching for her and finally she is caught. She is tied up and her hair is cut down. She felt so depressed and humiliated with this. She is reminded of her mother who would have comforted her during this hard time. At the end she submits her to her herders like a tamed animal.

Lesson and explanation - The cutting of my Long hair

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voice crashing through the belfry overhead and into our sensitive ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.

Bare: uncovered
Belfry: part of a bell tower
Crashing: break through
Clatter: bang, sound of heavy objects
Bedlam: uproar, unrest

The writer describes that her first day in the land of apples was extremely cold. The ground was fully covered with snow whereas the trees were not covered with snow. A bell rang indicating breakfast time. It was a loud sounds that breakthrough the part of bell tower and reached into their sensitive ears. The disturbing sound of the tip-toe of the shoes was making the writer restless. There was a continuous noise everywhere as if the sounds were clashing with each other. There were people who were talking in an unknown language. She got so disturbed that she felt as if her freedom was lost.

A paleface woman, with white hair, came up after us. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. While we marched in, the boys entered at an opposite door. I watched for the three young braves who came in our party. I spied them in the rear ranks, looking as uncomfortable as I felt. A small bell was tapped, and each of the pupils drew a chair from under the table. Supposing this act meant they were to be seated, I pulled out mine and at once slipped into it from one side. But when I turned my head, I saw that I was the only one seated, and all the rest at our table remained standing. Just as I began to rise, looking shyly around to see how chairs were to be used, a second bell was sounded. All were seated at last, and I had to crawl back into my chair again. I heard a man’s voice at one end of the hall, and I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their plates. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a paleface woman upon me.
Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was so keenly watched by the strange woman. The man ceased his mutterings, and then a third bell was tapped. Everyone picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead, for by this time I was afraid to venture anything more.

Paleface: yellow face
Clinging: tight (dress)
Shingled: cutting of hair
Moccasins: slipper or shoe
Immodest: indecent
Spied: notice, spot
Rear ranks: last
Mutterings: privately explained complaints
Venture: here, a risky task

A woman with yellow face and white hair went up to see the girls. Zitkala was placed in the line of the girls who were heading towards the dining hall. She describes that they were the Indian girls who were wearing hard shoes and tight dresses. The small girls were wearing sleeved aprons and their hairs were cut short. Zitkala was walking without making any noise of her shoes. She felt so ashamed when her blanket (scarf, shawl) was removed from her shoulders. All the other Indian girls seemed to be very indecent to her as all of them were wearing tight clothes which were not a good thing as per the writer. As they were going to the dining room, the boys came from the opposite door. The writer notices the three boys who according to her were brave; she says so because they were also the new entrants into the school and were not wearing the dress like others. She looked at them while they were standing behind her. They were also not comfortable like her. A small bell rang and all the students dragged their chairs. The writer also pulled her chair and she at once gets seated. But she found herself being noticed by all others as none of them had seated. The next bell ranged and all the others seated themselves. The writer also did it once again just to mend her mistake. Suddenly she heard a manly voice from one corner of the room. She tries to see the man but found everyone looking down towards their plates. While she was looking at them she saw that the yellow faced woman was constantly looking at her. She dropped her eyes but was feeling uncomfortable about being watched like this. The man stopped speaking and with the ringing of the bell for the third time all of them picked up their forks and knives. The writer got so afraid by the time that she started crying as she didn't want to get into such risky task anymore.

But this eating by formula was not the hardest trial in that first day. Late in the morning, my friend Judewin gave me a terrible warning. Jude win knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the pale faced woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

Unskilled: untrained
Capture: catch, arrest
Mourners: a person at a funeral
Coward: weakling

The writer says that the way of eating was not the only thing which she thought to be the hardest one. But there was one more terrible thing that her friend Judewin told her. As she could understand a few words of English so she had heard the pale faced woman saying that their hair should be cut down. The writer didn’t want to do it because she had heard her mother saying that only untrained warriors that are arrested by the enemy cut their hair. In their community only those who either were at funeral or were cowards cut short their hair. As Zitkala was neither a weakling nor a mourner so she didn’t want to cut her hair.

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judewin said, “We have to submit, because they are strong,” I rebelled. “No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!” I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed, I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes, — my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hall I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in
The windows were covered with dark green curtains, which made the room very dim. Thankful that no one was there, I directed my steps toward the corner farthest from the door. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and huddled myself in the dark corner.

Fate: destiny, god’s will
Rebel: Revolt
Crept: Crawl, move on hands and knees
Squeaking: making high pitched sound
Whither: where
Dim: dark
Huddled: holding arms and legs closely

Both Judewin and Zitkala discussed about their destiny as they knew that their hair will be cut short. Judewin was of a view that they should agree to what the authorities wanted to as they were strong then these two girls but the author was not ready for it and so she decided to go against the school authorities.

She went up stairs very quietly without being noticed in order to safeguard her hair. She was trying to walk very quietly because her moccasins were changed with shoes that make sound while walking. She crossed the hall and went into a room without knowing where she was going. She entered into a room which had three beds and green curtains making it a bit dark. She then crawled under a bed and hides herself from those who want to cut her hair.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judewin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Someone threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In Spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

Peered: try to see
Shuddering: shiver, shake
Drag: pull
Resist: hold out against
Scratch: scrape

The writer shivered with the voice of footsteps whenever she tried to look out of her hiding place. She could hear many voices calling out for her name including her friend Judewin. She didn’t reply to them. Soon she heard the sound of steps and voices growing stronger and stronger. Women and girls entered into the room where she was hiding. They were searching for her everywhere; even the curtains were also removed. Soon she was found under the bed and was pulled out of it. She tried hard to safeguard herself, even scraped the other person but she was taken away and tied up to a chair.
I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

Gnaw: here, cut  
Braid: Hairs bind into a plait  
Indignities: shame, humiliation  
Stare: gaze  
Tossed: thrown  
Puppet: a wooden resemblance of humans or animals controlled with the help of strings  
Anguish: pain, agony  
Moan: cry, wail  
Comfort: console, sympathy  
Reasoned: here, discussed  
Herder: a person who looks after the live stock (herd of sheep)

The author cried a lot as she doesn't want anyone to cut her hair. Suddenly she felt a pair of scissors behind her neck and soon her hair was cut down. She lost all her confidence and felt that she had always been humiliated since she was taken away from her mother. She recalled all her bad moments that embarrassed her as people had gazed on her, she was thrown into the air like a puppet. But this time her hair was cut down and she felt like a coward. She was crying. She wailed for her mother as she used to console her in her sad moments but today no one came to console her. No one tried to know her point of view. She felt like an animal that is part of a herd and is being herded by someone. This means now she was being controlled by someone.