

Memories of Childhood

The cutting of my Long Hair

We too are Human Beings

- *In Memories of Childhood two women Zitkala-Sa and Bama share their experiences of troubled childhood. They faced marginalization because they were not from mainstream culture. This raises many questions to ponder over like should we not have a human idea of looking at people; do we dislike people because they are different from us? You can add more issues and questions.*
- *There are children who are forced to take shelter in refugee camps. But the life is usually difficult in a refugee camps. Hunger and misery make people selfish, even cruel Mikali, a fourteen-year-old boy, found life in a refugee camp even more difficult because he had to look after his little brother, a motherless infant.*

Read the text –Maternity by Lilika Nakos to find out how the humanity triumphs in difficult circumstances.

1. IT WAS more than a month since they had been-at Marseille, and the camp of Armenian refugees on the outskirts of the town already looked like a small village. They had settled down in any way they could: the richest under tents; the others in the ruined shed; but the majority of the refugees, having found nothing better, were sheltered under carpets held up at the four corners by sticks. They thought themselves lucky if they could find a sheet to hang up at the sides and wall them from peering eyes. Then they felt almost at home. The men found work — no matter what — so that in any case they were not racked with hunger and their children had something to eat.

Of all of them, Mikali alone could do nothing. He ate the bread which neighbours cared to offer and it weighed on him. For he was a big lad of fourteen, healthy and robust. But how could he think of looking for work when he literally bore on his back the burden of a newborn babe? Since its birth, which had caused his mother's death, it had wailed its famine from morn till night. Who would have accepted Mikali's services when his own compatriots had chased him from their quarters because they were unable to bear the uninterrupted howls which kept them awake at night.

Mikali himself was dazed by these cries; his head was empty and he wandered about like a lost soul, dying from lack of sleep and weariness — always dragging about with him the deafening burden that had been born for his misfortune and its own — and that had so badly chosen the moment to appear on this earth. Everybody listened to it with irritation they had so many troubles of their own and they pitifully wished it would die.

But that did not happen for the newborn child sought desperately to live and cry louder its famine. The distracted women stuffed their ears and Mikali wandered about like a drunken man. He hadn't a penny in his pocket to buy the infant milk and not one woman in the camp was in a position to give it the breast. Enough to drive one mad!

One day, unable to bear it further, Mikali went to the other side of the place where the Anatolians were: they also had fled from the Turkish massacres in Asia Minor. Mikali had been told that there was a nursing mother there who might take pity on his baby. So there he went full of hope. Their camp was like his — the same misery. Old women crouched on the ground, barefoot children played about in pools of dirty water. As he approached, several old women rose to ask what he wanted. But he walked on and stopped only at the opening of a tent. From the interior of the tent came the sound of a wailing infant.

"In the name of the Most Holy Virgin," he said in Greek, "have pity on this poor orphan and give

him a little milk. I am a poor Armenian.

" At his appeal, a lovely, dark woman appeared. She held in her arms an infant blissfully sucking the maternal breast, its eyes half closed.

"Let's see the kid. Is't a boy or a girl?"

Mikali's heart trembled with joy. Several neighbours had come closer to see and they helped him to take from his shoulders the sack where the baby brother was held; with curiosity they leaned over. He drew back the cover.

2. The women gave vent to various cries of horror. The child had no longer anything human about it. It was a monster! The head had become enormous and the body, of an incredible thinness, was all shrivelled up. As until then it had sucked only its thumb, it was all swollen and could no longer enter the mouth. It was dreadful to see! Mikali himself drew back in fright. "Holy Mother!" said one of the old women, "but it's a vampire"; a real vampire, that child! Even if I had milk I still wouldn't have the courage to feed it."

An old crone came up. "Hou! Hou!" she screamed, seeing the newborn child. "It's the devil himself!" Then turning to Mikali she yelled, "Get out of here, son of mischance, and never set foot again. You'll bring us bad luck!"

And all of them together chased him away, threatening. His eyes filled with tears and he went off, bearing the little child still wailing its hunger.

3. There was nothing to be done. The child was condemned to die of hunger. Mikali felt himself immensely alone and lost. A chill ran up his spine at the thought that he was carrying such a monster. He slumped down in the shadow of a shed. It was still very warm. The country spread out before him, an arid wasteland, covered with refuse. Noon rang out somewhere. The sound reminded him that he had eaten nothing since the day before. He would have to go sneaking about the streets, round cafe terraces, filching some half-eaten roll left on a plate; or else rake about in the garbage for what a dog would not have eaten. Suddenly life seemed to him so full of horrors that he covered his face with his hands and began to sob desperately.

4. When he raised his head a man stood before him gazing down upon him. Mikali recognised the Chinaman who often came to the camp to sell paper knicknacks and charms which no one ever bought from him anyway! Often they mocked him because of his colour and his squint eyes; and the children hounded him, shouting, "Lee Link, the stinkin' Chink!"

Mikali saw that he was looking gently down at him and moving his lips as though to speak. Finally the Chinaman said, "You mustn't cry, boy..." Then, timidly, "Come with me..."

Mikali's only answer was to shake his head negatively; he longed to flee. He had heard so many horrors about the cruelty of the Orientals! Yet the man remained there and did not budge. So, being in great distress, Mikali followed him. What more awful thing could happen to him? As they walked along he stumbled weakly and almost fell with the child. The Chinaman came to him and taking the baby in his arms, tenderly pressed it to him. They crossed several empty lots and then the man took the little lane that led them to a sort of wooden cabin surrounded by a very small garden. He stopped before the door and clapped his hands twice. A few light steps inside and a tiny person came to open the door. Seeing the men her face reddened and then a happy smile lit it up. She made a brief courtesy to them. As Mikali remained there, hesitatingly rooted to the threshold, the Chinaman said to him, "Come in, then; do not be afraid. This is my wife."

Mikali went into the room, rather large it seemed, separated in the middle by a coloured paper screen. It was all so clean and neat, though very poor looking. In the corner he noticed a wicker cradle. "That is my baby," said the young woman, cocking her head graciously to one side and

smiling to him. "He is very tiny and very beautiful; come and see."

Mikali went up closer and silently admired it. A chubby baby, a few days old, slept peacefully, covered with a gold brocade cloth, like a little king.

5. Then the husband called his wife over, bade her sit on a straw mat, and without a word set down on her lap the little famished one, bowing deeply before her. The woman leaned over with astonishment and drew back the covering in which the child was wrapped. It appeared to her in all its skeletonic horror. She gave a cry — a cry of immense pity — then pressed the babe to her heart, giving it the breast. Then with a gesture of modesty she brought forward a flap of her robe over the milk-swollen breast and the poor, gluttonous infant suckling there.

Discuss in Pairs/Groups

- ***Without milk the infant was sure to die. But Mikali loved him and wanted him to live. Did anyone help him? If so, who — Mikali's own people or some strangers?***
- ***Many of us are suspicious of people of other castes or creeds and sometimes we look down upon them. Why do we do this? Is it justified?***

Let us Reflect and Do

Children who live in difficult circumstances have to fight for survival day after day, finding food, looking for a safe place to spend the night, protecting themselves against violence that constantly threatens them.

A fourteen year old refugee child, Said, from Syria feels that children shouldn't be victims. Children shouldn't have to watch people drown as they couldn't get in the boat. They shouldn't be hungry...

- ***Collect more stories of children living in difficulties. Share and take up activities to give them some relief. You can take up initiatives of health care, education, food etc.***
- ***Read about Child Rights and make posters on them.***
- ***Collect views of children who have to leave school to look after their younger sibling. Ask their opinion on how they can get education, time to play etc.***