# Nervous Conditions Summary

- The narrator, Tambudzai, Tambu for short, begins her story with a provocative statement: "I was not sorry when my brother died." That happened in the year 1968, and the first chapter sets the context for that event. In anecdotal style, Tambu looks back at the year 1965, when her father, Jeremiah, decided that Nhamo, Tambu's older brother, would go to the mission school and live with Babamukuru, Tambu's uncle.
- She remembers how her father was always grateful for his brother's generosity, since Babamukuru had educated himself and thus found financial success. Babamukuru and his wife, Maiguru, moved to England with their children, Nyasha and Chido, for five years. Without Babamukuru's support, Tambu's family struggled.
- Mr. Matimba, Tambu's teacher, advises her to sell the maize she grows in her garden to the Whites in town. A white couple refuses to buy the corn from a child, saying she should be in school, but give Mr. Matimba a handout instead. Under Mr. Matimba's advice, Tambu gives the money to the school headmaster to keep safe, so that she can use it to pay her school fees for the next few years. Despite her father's protests and attempts to get the money for himself, the headmaster keeps the money and uses it to keep Tambu in school.
- When Babamukuru and his family return from England, Nhamo and Jeremiah take the trip to meet them at the airport while Tambu and her mother scramble to find the provisions for a feast. Tambu is suspicious of her cousins Nyasha and Chido because of their "Englishness". She thinks they seem like snobs. After dinner, in a meeting of the family patriarchy, Babamukuru reveals that he is worried about Jeremiah's branch of the family, and insists that Nhamo come to live with him at the mission school so he can be more committed to his studies.
- After his first year away, Nhamo changes perceptibly. His physical presence has become more anglicized, but he also claims to have forgotten how to speak Shona. The narrative jumps ahead again to 1968, when Babamukuru arrives to report that Nhamo has died of a mysterious illness in a hospital in town. When it is settled that Tambu shall leave for the mission school in his place, her mother becomes thoroughly depressed and cannot eat or work.
- Tambu is overwhelmed by the opulence of the mission house. She learns that she is to share a bedroom with her cousin Nyasha. The rebellious Nyasha, however, fights constantly with her parents. In school, Tambu realizes that Nyasha is not liked by her classmates. They think she tries to be "white" and spread rumours about her sexual activity. Tambu becomes fluent in English before long and learns quickly. She also notices how obstinate Nyasha can be and comments how ungrateful she seems toward her parents, who have given her every opportunity.

- When Chido is old enough, Babamukuru sends him to Salisbury to attend a mostly white secondary school, and Tambu does not see him very much after that. Meanwhile, Nyasha studies so hard for her Form Two examinations that she starts losing an alarming amount of weight. She does pass, however. When Chido comes back from boarding school for Christmas and he, Tambu, and Nyasha attend a student Christmas party. Andy, one of Tambu's friend Nyaradzo's older brothers, walks home with them. Babamukuru sees Nyasha flirting with Andy and calls her a whore. He attacks his daughter violently and she fights back, while Maiguru pleads with Babamukuru that if he must kill someone to kill her instead. She and Chido pull Babamukuru off Nyasha and hold him so he cannot kill her. For a week after that, Babamukuru stays away from the house and Nyasha retreats into herself. She stops eating again, so Tambu has lunch alone with her aunt. Maiguru confesses the pain she feels when she sees Nyasha and Babamukuru fighting.
- Babamukuru, Maiguru, Nyasha, and Tambu return home to the Shona village before Christmas. As they arrive at the homestead, Tambu looks at it with different eyes; now she sees the squalor she used to live in. Lucia, Tambu's youngest aunt on her mother's side, is pregnant with the child of Babamukuru's lazy distant cousin, Takesure. Takesure already has two wives who live elsewhere, so Babamukuru does not approve of him living in the homestead. Netsai reports that, in addition, Tambu's mother is pregnant and has been ill and unable to work for some time.
- There are twenty-four guests at the homestead for the holiday, and the women have to do unending work in order to take care of all the men and children.
- Just after New Year’s Day, Babamukuru summons a meeting to determine the fate of Takesure, while the women listen at the door. A battle ensues between Lucia and Ma'Shingayi, who believe that Babamukuru is in the wrong to demand that Lucia and Takesure leave. Meanwhile, Maiguru, who claims that since she was not born into this family, it is not her concern, and refuses to stick up for Lucia? Lucia overhears Takesure accusing her of witchcraft to Babamukuru during the council meeting, so she storms in and tweaks his ear, defending herself. She threatens to take her sister and leave immediately. Babamukuru suggests that the family's misfortunes are the result of Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi never being officially married and "living in sin." He decrees that they must have a wedding.
- As preparations for the wedding begin, Tambu becomes extremely anxious. When Babamukuru goes back to the mission with Maiguru and Nyasha, he leaves Tambu at the homestead to help with all the work. Ma'Shingayi comes to the mission hospital in March to give birth, and Lucia comes as well to be with her sister. Much to everyone's surprise, Babamukuru finds Lucia a job, cooking food at the girls' hostel. Meanwhile, Nyasha, Maiguru, and Tambu help Ma'Shingayi plan the wedding. The morning of the wedding, Tambu too depressed to get out of bed and tells her

uncle that she is sorry, but she does not want to go to the wedding. Babamukuru is furious, of course, but eventually the rest of the family goes to the homestead and Tambu is allowed to stay at the mission. Later, she is punished with fifteen lashes and two weeks of maid's work.

- Tambu finds pleasure in her punishment, since it is the result of having stood up for herself. Maiguru protests to Babamukuru that Tambu's punishment is too harsh, and finally tells him that she is unhappy living there. Babamukuru reacts by telling her to go wherever she wants. Nyasha predicts that her mother won't leave, but she is wrong: Maiguru leaves by bus the next morning. Five days later, Maiguru returns, much happier and refreshed.
- Just before Tambu's Grade Seven examinations, nuns visit the mission school to recruit for a Catholic convent school called Sacred Heart. Tambu is chosen and given a scholarship, but Nyasha thinks she will be brainwashed by the nuns and "fall for their tricks." Babamukuru refuses to let Tambu go at first, but Maiguru persuades him to allow her to attend. Babamukuru takes Tambu back to the homestead for Christmas. Since Maiguru has refused this year to "spend another Christmas catering for a family of two dozen," Babamukuru must drive back and forth between the mission and the homestead for weeks, only sometimes bringing Nyasha and Maiguru with him. When Tambu discusses her new educational opportunity with her mother, Ma'Shingayi becomes visibly depressed. She won't eat or do any work; her baby, Dambudzo, develops diarrhoea and she is unable to take care of him. Jeremiah sends for Lucia, who comes and forces her sister to get up, bathe, eat meat stew, and take care of her baby.
- Back at the mission, Tambu's old friends, Maidei and Jocelyn, are no longer kind to her. They clearly resent that she is leaving them to go to a "white" convent school. When it is time to go to Sacred Heart, Babamukuru, Maiguru, and Nyasha all drive Tambu to the convent. The building and grounds are impossibly beautiful and well groomed, but it is clear that "the Africans" have poorer living quarters, segregated from the white students. As the semester progresses, Tambu throws herself into her studies intently. She does not keep in good touch with Nyasha, though Nyasha writes her many letters. One letter in particular is revealing and emotional; she is not getting along with the girls at school or with her father.
- When Tambu returns to the mission, she notices a definite change in Nyasha, who has "grown skeletal." Tambu observes her cousin shovel her dinner into her mouth, then retreat to the bathroom to throw it up. While Babamukuru wants Tambu to return to the convent the very next day, she feels she cannot leave her cousin in this state. She is right; that evening, Nyasha flies into a suicidal rage, yelling, "They've trapped us" and injuring herself with anything she can get her hands on. Finally, Babamukuru takes Nyasha to a psychiatrist, who recognizes that she needs to be put in a clinic for several weeks for observation and recovery. While she is there, Babamukuru takes Tambu back to the homestead, where Ma'Shingayi is adamant that Nyasha is being killed by her "Englishness," and warns Tambu to watch out for it. Tambu tries to banish her mother's

suspicion, but looking back, she acknowledges that the warning stayed with her and that "quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story."

# Nervous Conditions Character List

## Tambu

Short for Tambudzai, she is the teenage protagonist of the novel. Tambu is extremely driven to be educated, even though her parents are more focused on her brother's advancement simply because he is male. When Nhamo dies, Tambu gets the opportunity to move to the mission to study. She develops a deep connection with her cousin, Nyasha, and together, the two girls navigate adolescence in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

## Nyasha

Tambu's cousin, the daughter of Maiguru and Babamukuru. She has a British education, and finds it jarring to return to Shona society in

Zimbabwe. She becomes a guide and a close friend to Tambu when she arrives at the mission. Nyasha refuses to conform to her father's image of womanhood and eventually suffers from a severe eating disorder.

## Ma'Shingayi

Tambu's mother who does all the physical labour at their homestead. Tambu helps whenever she can so that her mother does not tire herself out. Ma'Shingayi grew up in terrible poverty and wants to keep her children close to home, especially after Nhamo's death. She suffers from severe depression after Tambu leaves.

## Jeremiah

Tambu's father, who is short-sighted, uneducated, and lazy. Tambu loses respect for him after he tries to steal the money that she earned selling mealies in town. He drinks a lot and cheats on his wife with her sister, Lucia. His family is the poorest out of all his siblings, mostly because of Jeremiah's ineffectiveness.

## Babamukuru

Tambu's wealthy, educated uncle, who funds her brother's education and then hers. He is not "the sort of person who is easily cajoled;" he supports his entire family and wants to work towards their betterment. He still holds onto many of his traditional values about gender roles, leading him to clash with both his wife (Maiguru), his niece, and his daughter (Nyasha).

## Maiguru

Babamukuru's wife and Tambu's aunt. She has a master's degree in philosophy, but her own ambitions have taken a backseat to her role as a wife and mother. Over the course of the novel, she learns to stand up to her husband and supports Tambu when she is accepted to the convent school. Dangarembga characterizes Maiguru as hen-like through the use of figurative language. She "fusses, coos, and clucks" and "shakes her feathers," "chirruping away."

## Rambanai

Tambu's little sister

## Chido
Tambu's male cousin, Babamukuru and Maiguru's son, and Nyasha's brother. He is "big, athletic, and handsome". He attends a mostly white boarding school in Salisbury. He does not participate in family events and later on, Tambu alludes to his romance with a white woman.

## Nhamo
Tambu's arrogant elder brother. He likes to torment Tambu with the fact that he can have an education and she cannot because she is a woman. After a year at the mission school, he pretends to forget how to speak his native language, Shona. He dies from a mysterious illness in 1968. Because of his death, Babamukuru brings Tambu to the mission in his place.

## Lucia
Tambu's outspoken aunt, who is married to Takesure. Her opinionated nature often gets her in trouble, leading some of the men in the village to brand her a witch. She is carrying Takesure's child but has also been having sex with Jeremiah, her sister's husband. While she is six months pregnant, Lucia accompanies her pregnant sister to the mission to give birth. Lucia, eager to stay on, asks Babamukuru for a job, and he helps her. She eventually enrols herself in Grade One classes.

## Netsai
Tambu's little sister (older than Rambanai).

## Mr. Matimba
Tambu's Sunday school teacher, who helps her sell her maize cobs. He lies to a white couple, telling them that Tambu is an orphan, and obtains a generous handout, which he helps Tambu put towards her education.

## Grandmother
Tambu's grandmother, who worked hard every day until her death. Tambu recalls helping her grandmother in the garden and listening to her "history lessons," which consisted of cultural myths and family history. Through her grandmother, Tambu learns how her uncle, Babamukuru, educated himself to become successful.

## Gladys
Tambu's aunt and Jeremiah's sister. She is grossly overweight, but this makes her intimidating rather than comical. She, like Jeremiah, treats Babamukuru like a king.

## Babamunini Thomas
Jeremiah's younger brother. He does not have an advanced degree, but he is trained as a teacher and his family does not struggle too much financially.

## Anna
The maid at Babamukuru's house at the mission. She is talkative, but also very formal while carrying out her duties.

## Nyaradzo

One of Tambu and Nyasha's classmates, and one of Nyasha's best friends. She is the daughter of a white missionary.

## Brian
The younger of Nyaradzo's two older brothers.

## Andy
The older of Nyaradzo's two brothers. After the Christmas dance, Nyasha flirts with him, which ignites the conflict between her and Babamukuru.

## Takesure
A distant relative of Babamukuru, who was sent to Jeremiah's homestead to help out. Instead, he started having sex with Lucia and contributing to Jeremiah's general laziness. He is weak and Lucia easily bosses him around.

## Farai
Lucia and Takesure's baby boy, whom she takes with her to the mission.

## Dambudzo
Tambu's baby brother who is born after she moves to the mission.

## Sister Emmanuel
The nun who is both Mother Superior and Principal of the Sacred Heart convent school.

# Nervous Conditions Themes

## Gender

Tambu and Nyasha both grapple with the traditional gender roles in Shona society. As a child, Tambu feels resentment towards her brother, Nhamo, when Babamukuru offers to pay for his schooling. From an early age, Tambu realizes that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate." Tambu is, in her words, "not sorry" when Nhamo dies because it means that she will be able to attend a colonial school in his place. When Tambu moves to the mission, however, she feels conflicted between her duty to Babamukuru and her burgeoning independence. Meanwhile, Nyasha, who has been educated in England, does not hold back. All of the women in *Nervous Conditions* try to rebel against the male patriarchy with various levels of success - but nevertheless, understand that there is a battle to be fought.

## Colonization

Both Nyasha and her brother, Chido, have spent their childhood in England and therefore, have developed many Western values. Tambu's mother thinks that Nyasha's bulimia and subsequent mental breakdown are a result of her exposure to Western culture, or "Englishness" and is afraid of the same thing happening to her daughter. This "Englishness" initially drives a wedge between Tambu and Nyasha. Nyasha and Chido cannot speak Shona, and Tambu cannot speak English - nor does she approve of Nyasha's revealing clothing. When Tambu moves to the mission, she has a much easier time obeying Babamukuru than Nyasha, and is often appalled at Nyasha's insolence. However, while looking back and telling her story, Tambu is able to recognize the way the colonial education system created a culture of subjugation - where Africans learned to believe that they were inferior, and then aspired to live by Christian values.

## Race

A central issue of the novel is how the children can negotiate a colonial education while still holding onto their Shona identity. As a result of growing up in England, Nyasha has taken on certain Western values, leading her classmates to shun her because "she thinks she is white". She clashes with her parents for the same reason, even though they took her to England and enrolled her in a missionary school. The dichotomy of Nyasha's identity leads her to become internally divided and drives a wedge between her and her parents. Tambu, who has not had much interaction with white people before coming to the mission, is surprised that she actually likes some of them. However, looking back on that time, she describes the white missionaries with an air of sarcasm: "We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise." All of the racial

tension in the novel stems from Tambu and Nyasha's generation - questioning their society as they move towards discovering a postcolonial identity.

## Education

At the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu sees education as a pathway to financial success, based on the example set by
Babamukuru. She describes her uncle's offer to pay for Nhamo's education as "oceanic," since it would "lift our branch of the family out of the squalor in which we were living." Babamukuru believes that education is the route to alleviate dependency. Meanwhile, his own wife, Maiguru, has a masters' degree that she has never used. Tambu is desperate to be educated, as it will be her ticket out of poverty. When she arrives at the convent school, though, it becomes clear that her colonial education will continue to subjugate her because she is an African. To the white children, education is a right, and the Africans are taught to see it as a privilege. Looking back, Tambu recognizes that this system enforces a colonial power structure but at the time, it seemed a great opportunity and certainly does allow her to build a life outside of her family's poverty.

## Poverty

After he begins his education at the mission, Nhamo begins to feel embarrassed by the poverty of his immediate family. Meanwhile, the family members all respect Babamukuru, who has not "cringed under the weight of his poverty. Tambu and Nhamo are both eager to get out of their family home and settle into the comfortable life at the mission. However, this creates an uncomfortable distance. Nhamo pretends that he no longer speaks Shona, because he associates the language with poverty, while English shows that he is educated and therefore, better than his sisters. He forces his sisters to carry his bags and lashes them when they don't obey. While Tambu believes that she will never change the way her brother did, she is startled by the squalor of her childhood home after a year away. Ma'Shingayi is acutely aware of her child's newfound superiority and accuses Tambu of being judgmental. Looking back, Tambu has realized that she was conditioned by colonialism to deify the white missionaries and their educational system.

## "Nervous Conditions"

The title of Dangarembga's novel alludes to the effect colonization has on the minds of her characters. Tambu is anxious about what it means to be educated, and after leaving for the mission, she is pulled between her Shona roots and her colonial schooling. Tambu's nervous condition manifests itself when she refuses to attend her parents' wedding. She feels anger towards Babamukuru for categorizing her parents as sinners, and she is simultaneously

embarrassed as well. However, she cannot express her frustration out loud because she is so grateful to Babamukuru. Meanwhile, Nyasha's nervous condition is more obvious: she develops severe anorexia. Nyasha has not been raised in the Shona culture like Tambu has, so all she knows is the English way. Returning to Rhodesia makes Nyasha feel like an outsider, alone and adrift. Her condition worsens after Tambu, her closest confidante, leaves for convent school. Meanwhile, Ma'Shingayi suffers from depression. She believes that "Englishness" is the root of what killed her son and took her daughter away from her, and she could not stop it.

## Patriarchy

All of the men in *Nervous Conditions* are raised in a patriarchy society and do not take kindly to being challenged. Nhamo tortures his sister, saying "Why are you jealous anyway? Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school?" Looking back, Tambu realizes that her brother was "sincere in his bigotry. But in those days I took a rosy view of male nature," so she assumed he was just saying hurtful things to bother her when in reality it was not Nhamo, but society, that was determined to hold her back. Tambu really starts to question patriarchy when she moves in with Babamukuru. He is the bridge between the patriarchy of the Shona society and the colonial society. Tambu is torn between her reverence for Babamukuru and her growing frustration with his inflexibility. Because he is her benefactor, she cannot show him disrespect, and yet - she becomes increasingly disillusioned by his conservative values (which are deeply tied to Christianity).

# Nervous Conditions Quotes and Analysis

"Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables." - Jeremiah, Pg. 15

This is how Tambu's father responds when she complains that the family is raising funds to send her brother, Nhamo, to school. This is an example of Jeremiah's traditional Shona belief that women do not need to be educated. It represents the patriarchy that Tambu faces on her quest towards empowerment. Meanwhile, her aunt, Maiguru, is educated and has no use for her degree because colonial society expects her to be a devoted wife and mother.

"This business of womanhood is a heavy burden." - Ma'Shingayi, Pg. 16

Tambu's mother explains to her daughter that, "when there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them." This point of view demonstrates the generational gap between mother and daughter. Ma'Shingayi has accepted her fate as a servant to the men in her life, Tambu wants more. Tambu thinks she is worth more than just being a bearer of a burden, and this drives a wedge between her and her mother.

"When I was in England I glimpsed for a little while the things I could have been, the things I could have done if - if - if things were - different - But there was Babawa Chido and the children and the family. And does anyone realise, does anyone appreciate, what sacrifices were made? As for me, no one even thinks about the things I gave up." - Maiguru, Pg. 103

This is Maiguru's uncharacteristically bitter response to Tambu when she is surprised to learn that her aunt holds a Master's Degree. As a woman, Maiguru has had to sacrifice the opportunities she earned by educating herself. No one in Tambu's village knows or cares about Maiguru's education, but they show all due respect to her husband, Babamukuru, who has the same amount of education as his wife. This divide demonstrates the deep-rooted gender inequality in both Shona and colonial society in Rhodesia during this time.

"You can't go on all the time being whatever's necessary. You've got to have some conviction, and I'm convinced I don't want to be anyone's underdog. It's not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end of you. You're trapped. They control everything you do." - Nyasha, Pg. 119

Nyasha says this to Tambu after Babamukuru calls Nyasha a whore for lingering at the end of the driveway with Andy after the Christmas dance. Nyasha seems to be referring to patriarchy as "they". Nyasha's fight with her father creates a major rupture in their relationship as he cannot accept her disrespect. This scene also reveals Nyasha's disappointment with her mother, Maiguru, for being her husband's "underdog."

"I am only saying what I think, just like she did. She did tell us, didn't she, what she thinks, and did anyone say anything! No. Why not? Because Maiguru is educated. That's why you all kept quiet. Because she's rich and comes here and flashes her money around, so you listen to her as though you want to eat the words that come out of her mouth. But me, I'm not educated, am I? I'm just poor and ignorant, so you want me to keep quiet, you say I mustn't talk. Ehe! I am poor and ignorant, that's me, but I have a mouth and it will keep on talking, it won't keep quiet." - Ma'Shingayi, Pg. 142

This is part of Tambu's mother's tirade in reaction to Maiguru's dismissal of the issue of Takesure and Lucia living on the homestead. The other women in the family ask Maiguru to intervene but she claims that because she was not born into this family, so it is not her business and she goes to bed. Ma'Shingayi's vocalizes her resentment of Maiguru's education and wealth. She recognizes her own poverty and lack of education as the reasons she has had no voice. In this way, there is a hierarchy within the patriarchy of the Shona society - women who are educated get more respect, while poor housewives like Ma'Shingayi are at the bottom of the totem pole.

"It's bad enough when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end." - Nyasha, Pg. 150

This is Nyasha's reaction to Tambu when Tambu suggests that Christianity is "evidence of the nature of progress" from Shona traditions. Jeremiah has suggested a cleansing with a witchdoctor

and sacrificial ox to cure the family of its misfortunes, but Babamukuru has insisted that the source of their trouble is the fact that Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi have been "living in sin" and are still not married officially, "before God." Nyasha's reaction demonstrates her awareness of the effects of colonialism; she is scolding Tambu for embracing the colonial mind-set that Christianity is "progress," rather than an equally absurd replacement for the Shona traditions.

"I'm sorry, Babamukuru, but I do not want to go to the wedding." - Tambu, Pg. 169

These words mark Tambu's first time standing up for what she wants, speaking out against her uncle. She has become so anxious about the impending wedding between her parents that she cannot get out of bed the morning she is supposed to leave for the homestead. So she tells Babamukuru what she wants, and is punished for it by fifteen lashes and two weeks of taking over Anna's maid duties. But she is proud of herself and feels emancipated, since she spoke up and didn't have to attend. Her decision not to attend her parents wedding comes from her anger at Babamukuru for blaming her parent's unofficial marriage for the family's bad luck, and is compounded by her embarrassment about Babamukuru labelling her parents as sinners.

"Don't you remember, when we went to South Africa everybody was saying that we, the women, were loose. It wasn't a question of associating with this race or that race at the time. People were prejudiced against educated women. Prejudiced. That's why they said we weren't decent. That was in the fifties. Now we are into the seventies. I am disappointed that people still believe the same things." - Maiguru, Pg. 184

This is Maiguru's defence of Tambu's right to attend the convent school after being selected out of all her classmates. Babamukuru is surprised that his wife speaks up, but she is empowered by the act of walking out on her husband for five full days. Maiguru's defence of women's education is part of the reason Tambu is allowed to go to convent school. It also shows that Maiguru has become a more vocal decision maker in the family.

"You will eat that food. Your mother and I are not killing ourselves working just for you to waste your time playing with boys and then come back and turn up your nose at what we offer. Sit and eat that food. I am telling you. Eat it!" - Babamukuru, Pg. 192

This is Babamukuru's threat to Nyasha when she refuses to eat dinner after returning home from school forty-five minutes late. In response to his threat, Nyasha gobbles down all the food on her plate maniacally, then goes to the bathroom and vomits. It is the beginning of her bulimia. This quote marks Babamukuru's attempt to control his daughter; her eating disorder represents a way to try to gain control over her life she feels as if her father won't let her.

"The problem is the Englishness, so you be careful!" - Ma'Shingayi, Pg. 207

Tambu's mother uses "Englishness" as an explanation for Nyasha's dangerous eating disorder, as if Anglicization is a disease. She sees Western education as the root of all Babamukuru's children's troubles, and becomes depressed when she imagines her own daughter suffering the same fate. Mama's anxiety represents a postcolonial viewpoint that Western culture degrades African values

## Nervous Conditions Summary and Analysis of Chapters 1 - 2

## Summary

The narrator, Tambudzai, Tambu for short, begins her story with the statement, "I was not sorry when my brother died." This section begins to lay the context for this event, which happened in

1968. Tambu introduces her elder brother, Nhamo, as arrogant - he is too proud to walk home from school, although Tambu finds endless inspiration in her daily journey. This contrast is representative of the siblings' distinctive perspectives. Tambu recalls that in 1965, her father, Jeremiah, decided that Nhamo would go to the mission school and live with Babamukuru, Tambu's foreign-schooled uncle. She remembers how her father had always been grateful for his brother's generosity - Babamukuru pursued higher education, which resulted in his financial success. However, after Nhamo lives with his uncle for a few years, he becomes embarrassed by his own family's poverty, avoiding any labour whenever he returns to the homestead.
Nhamo was able to start school at the age of seven. Meanwhile, Babamukuru lived in England with his wife, Maiguru, and their children, Nyasha and Chido, for five years. While Babamukuru was away, Tambu's family struggled and her mother, Ma'Shingayi, was forced to sell boiled eggs to passengers at the bus terminus. Tambu was also eager to attend school, and did not understand why her parents were only concerned with raising enough money to pay Nhamo's fees. When she complained to her mother that her father did not prioritize her education, her mother answered, "This business of womanhood is a heavy burden."
Tambu remembers her recently deceased grandmother, with whom she used to work in the garden. Tambu's grandmother often shared her generational values with Tambu, who interprets, "life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules." Tambu's grandmother told her about how their family's land was taken from them by "wizards well-versed in treachery and black magic," and how her grandfather had escaped from slavery. Tambu, inspired by her grandmother's anecdotes, decides to cultivate a small plot of land and grow cobs of maize, called mealies, to sell in order to raise money for school fees. However, one day, Tambu discovers that Nhamo has been stealing her mealies and giving them away to children at Sunday school. She loses all respect for her brother that day, charging at him and attempting to kill him. Mr. Matimba, the Sunday school teacher, has to break up the siblings' fight.
Mr. Matimba advises Tambu to sell her mealies to Whites, whom he believes will pay up to sixpence apiece. Despite protests from Jeremiah, Mr. Matimba drives Tambu to town in his truck to sell the maize. First, they approach an older white couple. The woman scolds Mr. Matimba for putting a little girl to work selling mealies. Her husband, meanwhile, reproaches his wife, saying, "It's none of our business". They do not buy any mealies, but Mr. Matimba lies and tells the couple that Tambu is an orphan trying to raise money for school fees, so the white woman gives him a wad of money. This interaction is demonstrative of the racial tension in Rhodesia in the mid-1960s.
Following Mr. Matimba's advice, Tambu gives the money to the school headmaster to keep safe, so that she can use it to pay her school fees for the next few years. Predictably, Jeremiah protests and attempts to get the money for himself, but the headmaster refuses and Tambu is able to continue her education. Jeremiah expects Tambu to conduct herself like the other women in her family, focusing on keeping a household instead of her academic pursuits. When Babamukuru and his family return from England, Nhamo and his father take the trip to meet them at the airport while Tambu and Ma'Shingayi scramble to find the provisions for the large, celebratory feast.

## Analysis

In the first chapter of *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga introduces the theme of education as an avenue for social mobility through the relationship between Tambu and her older brother, Nhamo. Tambu associates education with financial success, based on the achievements of her uncle, Babamukuru. Although Babamukuru seems to have remained humble and helps with the physical labour on the homestead whenever he comes to visit, education affects Nhamo differently; he resents his meagre roots. Ma'Shingayi is uneducated herself but still understands

the importance of it, especially for men, so she boils eggs and sells them to passengers at the bus terminus in order to keep her son in school.

Dangarembga explores the theme of gender inequality when Tambu shares her thoughts while waiting for her brother to return home on the bus. Nhamo always refuses to carry his own luggage, but expects the women in his family to serve him, even beating his younger sister if she does not comply. His demeanour is generally "unpleasant", but his expectations and actions reflect the patriarchal Shona society in which he was raised. As Tambu says, "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate." As Nhamo tells his sister, she will never be able to go to school - "It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl."

Dangarembga subtly touches on the theme of racial inequality in the beginning of Chapter 2, when Tambu informs her reader that seven is "the age at which the Government had declared that African children were sufficiently developed cognitively to be able to understand the abstractions of numbers and letters." The tone of her language is resentful, because she understands that the colonial government has unfairly low expectations for African children. Tambu is weighed down, as her mother puts it, both by "the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other."

When Mr. Matimba takes Tambu into town for the purpose of selling the maize she has grown on her garden plot, they end up begging for a handout instead. Their interaction with an elderly white couple, Doris and George, demonstrates the inequality they face as "kaffers." Black people who gather to watch Doris hand Mr. Matimba a wad of money are of mixed opinions: some think that blacks should not accept handouts, since "what is good is not given," as one black onlooker puts it, but others claim that whites "could afford to be, in fact ought to be, generous." The couple won't buy maize from Tambu because they think she is being exploited, but rather, they give her a handout because they pity her. This is a representation of how colonial powers kept African populations dependent for centuries. Rather than educating and empowering Africans through business and trade, they kept them reliant on aid.

Additionally, Dangarembga explores the generational gap between Tambu and Nyasha and the older generation. Tambu's mother and grandmother do not complain about the hard labor they must endure. Tambu describes her grandmother as "an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich harvests until, literally until, her very last moment." Her grandmother would give Tambu "history lessons" while they work in the fields together, with this message: "endure and obey, for there is no other way." In this way, Tambu's grandmother gives her a different kind of education than what Nhamo is receiving in his prestigious missionary school. Tambu learns about her family's mythology and cultural beliefs.

Tambu's grandmother also tells her about the source of Babamukuru's prosperity. He became successful because his mother sent him to the mission school. Eventually he earned a government scholarship to South Africa because he worked so hard. Tambu's grandmother praises her son, saying, "he was diligent, he was industrious, he was respectful." Tambu absorbs those lessons and starts planting maize on the plot of land that used to be her grandmother's - with the hopes of selling enough to pay her school fees. While Tambu's grandmother's generation would never dream of doing such a thing, Tambu does not see the gender divide as a barrier in the same way her mother does. Instead, she interprets her grandmother's stories to mean that she, too, can do what she sets her mind to. Tambu realizes the difference between herself and the older generation - she notices that her mother "admired my tenacity but also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it".

# Nervous Conditions Summary and Analysis of Chapter 3

## Summary

As Chapter 3 begins, Tambu is awaiting the arrival of her uncle, Babamukuru, although she is resentful that she is not allowed to accompany her father and his sister, Gladys, to the airport. Jeremiah has been long awaiting his elder brother's return, especially because he has to beg to stay afloat and is counting on Babamukuru's wealth to lift their family out of poverty. Jeremiah exclaims, "Truly our prince has returned today! Full of knowledge. Knowledge that will benefit us all!" Babamukuru accepts all this praise graciously. Tambu is suspicious of her cousins, Nyasha and Chido, because of their English manners, language, and style of dress. She thinks they seem like snobs.

Tambu becomes irritable - she feels distant from the reunion because she was not allowed to accompany her father to the airport. She tries to remember what her relationship with her cousins used to be like before they left for England, and she remembers loving them. However, in order to calm her resentment, Tambu retreats to the kitchen and busies herself with making a stew for dinner. This revives her confidence, and her female relatives are impressed with her acumen and work ethic.

Tambu is given the task of carrying the water dish so that each family member can wash his or her hands before eating. She explains that there is a specific order that she has to follow. The men wash their hands first, beginning with the oldest and most senior, and the youngest wash last. This is because the water is cleanest at the beginning. Tambu, however, gets confused and makes many mistakes interpreting the hierarchy of power. She also resents her brother and cousins for eating with the men while the rest of the women and children are relegated to the kitchen.

After dinner, the women gather in the yard to dance. Tambu invites her cousins to dance, but soon realizes that they don't understand the Shona language anymore, which makes her sad. Meanwhile, the men have a meeting indoors concerning the finances of the family. Babamukuru has received the news that the family has been struggling, and offers the solution of educating at least one member in each family unit. He is most worried about Jeremiah’s branch of the family, and insists that Nhamo come to live with him at the mission school so he can be more committed to his studies. Nhamo immediately goes to find Tambu in the vegetable garden and brags to her about his new fortune. This pushes Tambu's jealousy over the edge the siblings start to fight. Tambu hurls a rock at her brother, and he runs away.

However, Tambu is relieved when Babamukuru comes to bring Nhamo back to the mission school, since she no longer has to focus on giving him the silent treatment. She also tries to develop a

friendship with Nyasha whenever her cousin comes to visit, but Nyasha does not speak Shona and Tambu does not speak English, so communication is a constant struggle. Tambu describes Nyasha as "silent and watchful... with an intensity that made me uncomfortable."

After his first year away, Nhamo changes perceptibly. His physical presence becomes more anglicized, and he also claims to have forgotten how to speak Shona. This gives him an excuse to not communicate with his family, whom he looks down upon. Jeremiah finds Nhamo's arrogance and refusal to communicate impressive, since it means his son is dedicated to his studies, but Ma'Shingayi is distressed because she thinks someone has bewitched her son into forgetting his native language.

The narrative jumps ahead to 1968, returning to the afternoon when Nhamo does not arrive home from school on time. In fact, Nhamo never arrives home at all. Instead, Babamukuru comes to report that Nhamo has died of a mysterious illness in a hospital in town. Maiguru comforts Nhamo's mother and Jeremiah cries, but Tambu is not sorry Nhamo has died. Babamukuru suggests taking Tambu to school in Nhamo's place, but Ma'Shingayi objects because she doesn't want to lose another child. However, the men eventually decide that Tambu shall leave for the mission school. While Tambu is elated, her mother becomes thoroughly depressed and cannot eat or work.

## Analysis

In Tambu's village, education leads to riches, and is therefore a mark of success. Babamukuru, who has raised himself out of poverty and attended school in England, is akin to royalty. Jeremiah, Tambu's father, begs for money in order to properly herald his brother's return. As a solution to his extended family's financial woes, Babamukuru suggests education. In this way, education is a form of empowerment against the colonial system. Instead of simply providing financial support to his family, Babamukuru wants to make sure that they become self-sufficient in the way that he has, which is why he offers to educate Nhamo at the mission.

While the character of Babamukuru is inspirational, he is still aware of the limitations of reality. On one hand, he has not "cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru [has] defied it." Tambu respects the way her uncle has broken "the evil wizard's spell" through hard work and education. However, he does not rest on his laurels. He also wants to educate members of his family, because he believes this to be "his duty". Education has given Babamukuru confidence, so unlike Baba and Nhamo, he does not need to bully anybody. He merely wants to help his family rise to the same level that he has, although he is quick to warn them, "we cannot afford to dream". His generosity, though, is also the source of his power over the whole family.

Tambu is disapproving of her cousins because of their new English affectations and customs. She comments that Chido is dressed well, but Nyasha is wearing a tiny little dress that Tambu finds inappropriate: "I could not condone her lack of decorum. I would not give my approval. I turned away." Nhamo, meanwhile, tries to speak to his cousins in broken English, which makes Tambu "thoroughly disgusted". Their time in England has made Nyasha and Chido quite literally forget their roots - they can no longer speak Shona. As a result, Tambu is unable to communicate with her cousins. They don't want to dance with her, either. Tambu sees her cousins, whom she was so excited to welcome home, as strangers. She is utterly disappointed. In this way, Nyasha and Chido's exposure to life abroad has created a barrier between the cousins, and it seems as though they now look down on Tambu's family and the Shona culture, which is foreign to them.

Meanwhile, Tambu continues to get frustrated about the limitations of her gender. She describes certain rituals that show how this inequality is actually engrained in the Shona culture. Before the welcome dinner, Tambu must offer a water dish to her relatives so that they can wash their hands. Since the water is cleanest at the beginning, the elder men go first. The women go after the youngest man has washed his hands. Additionally, the women must eat in the kitchen, after they have finished preparing and serving food to the men. The women eat what is left over after the men have taken what they want.

Later, Nhamo gloats to his sister that he is to receive an education at the mission school while she must stay at the family farm. He points out the obvious to quash her dreams, chiding, "Why are you jealous anyway? Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school?" Looking back, Tambu concludes that her brother was "sincere in his bigotry. But in those days I took a rosy view of male nature". As an adolescent, Tambu is headstrong and idealistic, not yet aware of the struggles that lie ahead. Tambu feels excitement, not fear or sadness, after Nhamo's death - because it means that Tambu will be attending school in his place. While her mother cries, thinking that an illness will claim her daughter as well, Jeremiah is initially frustrated because once Tambu is married, her wealth will follow her to her husband's house. However, he goes along with Babamukuru's plan so that Tambu can bring home as much as she can to their family before she gets married. Again, this is an indication of the gender divide inherent in the Shona culture.

## Nervous Conditions Summary and Analysis of Chapters 4 - 5

### Summary

On the ride to the mission with Babamukuru, Tambu thinks about leaving her old self behind. She fully expects herself to become a "clean, well-groomed, genteel self". When they arrive at the mission, she is overwhelmed by the opulence of the house and grounds. She remembers

Nhamo telling her, "not even the Whites themselves could afford it!" She points out that Babamukuru is the only African living in a white house, which is a source of pride for the family. At first, Tambu believes that the garage is Babamukuru's house, and is somewhat perturbed at its simplicity - but then is astonished to find out that this is a place to house "cars, not people!" She suddenly feels ashamed of her meagre upbringing and thinks her family must be very poor for Babamukuru to be helping them so much. She feels out of place, but is greeted warmly by Anna, the maid. Nyasha is also happy to see her cousin. She is baking a cake for Chido, who will leave for boarding school the next day.

Tambu waits for Maiguru to come down from her bedroom. She observes the living room, impressed by how clean it is and all the nice things in it. She starts to understand her brother's transformation after living in such opulence, but makes a promise to herself that she will not go the same way. Maiguru soon comes downstairs and Anna serves them tea and snacks. Tambu has never had so many different choices of food. She is also surprised by the way Nyasha speaks to her mother. When Maiguru scolds Nyasha for reading a book by D.H. Lawrence that is inappropriate for her, Nyasha talks back and defends herself. Even Maiguru says her children are "too Anglicised". Tambu learns that she is to share a bedroom with her cousin, which makes her both excited and nervous.

At first, Tambu is uncomfortable, standing in silence in Nyasha's room. However, they soon burst out laughing together and Tambu discovers that Nyasha is cross with her mother, not her cousin. However, Nyasha had noticed the way that Tambu sneered at her after they returned from England, and felt hurt. All the while, Tambu had thought her cousins believed they were too good for their old lives. Reaching a new understanding, the cousins become fast friends. Tambu feels comfortable enough to confront Nyasha about her treatment of her mother, but Nyasha brushes her off, saying that Maiguru doesn't "want to be respected". Anna comes and kneels down to tell them that dinner is ready.

Nyasha is clearly distressed by this habit and yells at Anna to stand up, but Anna doesn't listen.

Tambu joins the family for her first dinner at the mission and is thoroughly embarrassed by her lack of knowledge about table manners. As is custom, Maiguru serves Babamukuru and waits until he has finished eating to serve herself and the girls. Nyasha, however, decides to start eating before her father is done. Later, after declining seconds, Nyasha gets in a fight with her mother about the D.H. Lawrence book, which Maiguru has confiscated. Nyasha storms out of the dining room. At night, in their bedroom, Nyasha asks Tambu to join her for a cigarette, and Tambu is appalled. Anna asks Tambu to come to the living room, where Babamukuru lectures her about how lucky she is to have this opportunity for education. Tambu hopes to be like her uncle one day, "straight as an arrow... steely, and true."

The next morning, Tambu once again notes how Nyasha is particularly concerned about being fat, eating very little for breakfast. Then, Tambu and Nyasha head off for school, where Tambu realizes that Nyasha's classmates do not like her, despite the fact that she is the headmaster's daughter. They think she tries to be "white" and spread rumours that she is promiscuous. Tambu, however, remains uninterested in socializing or anything else that might compromise her new life. When Tambu gets her first menstrual period, she is embarrassed by the dirty rags her mother has given her to use. Instead, she learns from Nyasha how to use a tampon. Unlike Tambu, Nyasha is not ashamed.

Tambu quickly becomes fluent in English and does well in school. She also notices how obstinate Nyasha can be and how ungrateful she seems toward her parents, despite the fact that she has every comfort she could possibly want. One day after church, the headmaster of Tambu's school, Mr. Satombo, praises Nyasha and Tambu to Babamukuru. Nyasha is rude to Mr. Satombo, while Tambu feels proud. In this conversation, Tambu learns that Maiguru has a Master's Degree.

When Tambu asks her aunt about her degree, she snorts and becomes serious, saying, "No one even thinks about the things I gave up." She was educated alongside her husband, but no one in Tambu's village ever talks about Maiguru's education because she is a woman. Tambu feels sad that Maiguru's own ambition has been curtailed by her duties to her husband and children. However, she decides not to tell Nyasha about the conversation with Maiguru, since Nyasha is often annoyed by references to her mother.

## Analysis

Tambu is excited to leave behind her life of poverty and move to the mission. She is aware that her appearance marks her as a peasant: "my tight faded frock... broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers... corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair." She is ready to leave this version of herself, and her poor identity, behind. She does not seem to show remorse for leaving her weeping mother and frustrated father, but rather, is blinded by this singular opportunity.

However, once Tambu realizes just how different her new life is, she feels a pang of empathy for her late brother, understanding how he became so spoiled. The experience of adjusting to life in the mission is humbling for Tambu. She is humiliated when she does not know how to operate the light switch in her cousin's bedroom or how to use proper silverware. She realizes that it might be more difficult than she had thought to discard her old self. Tambu struggles with her identity and what it means to be educated. She is shocked by Nyasha, who does not seem to appreciate all the comforts of her life: "From what I had seen of my cousin, I was intrigued and fascinated with

one part of my mind, the adventurous, explorative part. But this was a very small part. Most of me sought order. Most of me was concrete and categorical." Tambu wants to be more like Babamukuru than his boundary - pushing daughter.

Dangarembga foreshadows Nyasha's nervous condition that will come to light in later chapters: anorexia. When Tambu first sees the size of her uncle's dining room table, she comments, "no one who ate from such a table could fail to grow fat and healthy". For Tambu, roundness means wealth and strength. Meanwhile, her cousin is concerned about putting on too much weight, a symptom of the excesses that surround her. During dinner, Nyasha quarrels with her parents and storms off to her room without eating. Her father tells her to come back and eat her food, but she insists that she is full, refusing to eat. This is in part to bother her mother, who has spent a long time cooking and preparing the meal, but also in part because she is starving herself thin.

Tambu's association of menstruation with dirtiness results from the disdain for her own gender that she has grown up with. The absence of dirt in Maiguru's living room makes Tambu view menstruation as filthy: "I knew that the fact of menstruation was a shamefully unclean secret that should not be allowed to contaminate immaculate male ears by indiscreet reference to this type of dirt in their presence." This characterization of menstruation as inherently dirty and offensive reveals a deep misogyny that exists in the Shona culture. In contrast, Nyasha uses tampons without shame and shows Tambu how to do the same.

Maiguru and Babamukuru are suspended between the two worlds of the village and the mission. Maiguru says of her children, "They're too Anglicised... they picked up all these disrespectful ways in England, and it's taking them time to learn how to behave at home again." She keeps to the traditional way of serving her husband first and making sure he has had a satisfying meal before eating. However, at the end of Chapter 5, Maiguru shows some resentment that her education took a backseat to her familial obligations. Babamukuru also thinks that Nyasha is out of control. Nyasha's attitude toward her parents is at odds with Tambu's own respect for her aunt and uncle. It seems that Nyasha's rebellion stems from the fact that she, too, is confused between her English identity and her Shona roots - but does not yet have a mature way to deal with it, like her parents do.

# Nervous Conditions Summary and Analysis of Chapters 6 – 7

## Summary

Although Tambu had once thought of white people as repulsive (an opinion she hated to have), she learns to admire the white people who live and work at the mission, and makes friends with one girl in particular, Nyaradzo. Nyaradzo has two older brothers, Brian and Andy, who attend secondary school in Salisbury. When Chido is old enough, Babamukuru sends him to the school in Salisbury as well, which has a mostly white student body. Meanwhile, Nyasha is studying for her Form Two examinations, even though it is likely that she will pass because she is the headmaster's daughter. Determined to succeed, she works so hard that she is loses weight rapidly (this is also due to Nyasha's eating disorder, but Tambu does not understand that yet). Nyasha passes at the top of her class, thanks to all her hard work.

During the holidays, Chido comes back from boarding school in Salisbury, and he, Tambu, and Nyasha attend a student Christmas party. Babamukuru is furious with the way Nyasha is dressed to go to the event, but Maiguru defends her daughter's attire. Tambu is anxious about going to the Christmas dance, as she rarely attends social events, but once she finds her friends and starts to dance, she relaxes and has fun. Andy, one of Nyaradzo's older brothers, walks home with Chido, Tambu, and Nyasha, and stays to flirt with Nyasha at the end of the driveway. Chido and Tambu try to sneak indoors without being seen but are caught by Babamukuru, who has waited up for them. He goes to the end of the driveway to fetch Nyasha and sees her talking to Andy. Babamukuru and Nyasha have a terrible fight and Tambu, not knowing what to do, wakes up Maiguru. Tambu, Maiguru, and Chido watch as Babamukuru calls Nyasha a whore and hits her twice. The second time, she hits him right back in the eye. Babamukuru attacks his daughter violently and she continues to fight back, while Maiguru pleads with her husband that if he must kill someone to kill her instead. She and Chido pull Babamukuru off Nyasha and hold him so he cannot kill her. Nyasha and Tambu retreat to the servant’s quarters and Nyasha smokes a cigarette. Tambu reconsiders the unyielding respect she used to have for her uncle. Chido brings the girls back inside and Maiguru tries to hug Nyasha, but she ignores her mother.

For a week after the fight, Babamukuru stays away from the house and Nyasha retreats into herself. She stops eating again, so Tambu has lunch alone with her aunt. Maiguru confesses the pain she feels when she sees Nyasha and Babamukuru fighting. Tambu feels closer to Nyasha than ever and climbs into bed with her that night to cuddle until they fall asleep.

Babamukuru, Maiguru, Nyasha, and Tambu return home to the village before Christmas. Chido doesn't accompany them because he has been invited to a friend's ranch for the holiday, and

Nyasha resents having to go. On the drive, Maiguru complains that they have brought too much food, and now she will have to "end up slaving for everybody" cooking all of it. Tambu looks at her former home through different eyes. She is suddenly aware the squalor she used to live in. She cleans the latrine because it is too filthy to use, and even then it is not clean enough. To Babamukuru's chagrin, he discovers that Jeremiah has left the homestead with Takesure (his distant cousin) who is staying at the house with Lucia (Tambu's mother's sister), despite Babamukuru's order for the couple to leave.

Lucia is pregnant with Takesure's child. Takesure already has two wives who live elsewhere, which is why Babamukuru does not approve of him living in the homestead. Jeremiah had agreed to send both Takesure and Lucia away, but he has clearly not done so. Netsai reports that, in addition, Tambu's mother is pregnant and has been ill and unable to work for some time. However, when Tambu visits her bedridden mother, she observes that her mother actually looks quite strong.

Thomas and Gladys show up unexpectedly with their family, which upsets the sleeping arrangements in the small house. All the unmarried women end up sleeping in the kitchen together for the two-week visit. There are twenty-four people in the homestead, and the women are saddled with unending housework in order to take care of all the men and children. The rationing of food becomes impossible, and, despite Ma'Shingayi's best efforts, the meat that could not fit in the refrigerator turns green. However, she refuses to throw away the rotten meat, so the women have to eat it while the men feast on the refrigerated portion.

Just after New Year's Day, Babamukuru calls the men into a meeting to determine the fate of Takesure, and the women listen at the door. A battle ensues between Lucia and Tambu's mother, who believe that Babamukuru is wrong to demand that Lucia and Takesure leave. Maiguru claims that since she was not born into this family, it is not her concern, and refuses to stick up for Lucia. After Maiguru leaves, Ma'Shingayi goes on a hysterical tirade about the injustices of her life. She is furious with Maiguru, whom she believes killed Nhamo. She accuses her sister-in-law of "stealing other people's children because she could only produce two of her own, and you can't call those two people." She accuses Lucia of having sex with Jeremiah and Takesure at the same time, and curses Tambu for following Maiguru around like she can do no wrong.

Lucia overhears Takesure accusing her of witchcraft to Babamukuru during the council meeting, so she storms in and tweaks his ear, defending herself. She says, "I shall leave this home of yours, Babamukuru, and I shall take my sister with me." She claims that the reason she refused to leave earlier was because she had to defend her sister against Jeremiah. After Lucia leaves in a huff, Jeremiah suggests bringing a witchdoctor into the house to perform a ceremony and rid the

household of evil. Babamukuru is incredulous at this suggestion. He believes that the family's misfortunes are the result of Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi never having an official wedding and "living in sin." The next morning, Tambu overhears Tete Gladys and Maiguru laughing about how ridiculous the men are.

## Analysis:

Tambu's perspective continues to expand as a result of living at the mission. She had once only seen white people as colonizers, as her experience was limited to the white man and woman who gave her money on the street but would not buy her mealies. At the mission, Tambu interacts with white people on a different level. They are her classmates, her neighbours, and while the divide between the races still exists, it is much more subtle than it was when Tambu lived in the village. However, as she narrates this section of the story, Tambu looks back and comments sarcastically, "We treated [the white missionaries] like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise." In this way, Dangarembga shows how deeply racism and colonialism is engrained in Rhodesian society, on every level. Nyasha sees this and, at the end of Chapter 7, urges Tambu not to think that the Christian way is necessarily the most progressive way.

Meanwhile, through the conflict between Babamukuru and Nyasha, Tambu becomes acutely aware of the fact that while her uncle supports women being educated, he still has certain antiquated expectations of a woman's role in society. Nyasha is the unfortunate victim of her father's duality - she has a hard time shedding the social freedoms she became accustomed to in England and he punishes her for it. When he sees Nyasha speaking to Andy after the dance, Babamukuru hits his daughter to "teach her a lesson," but she is obstinate and hits him right back in the eye, saying, "I told you not to hit me." Tambu is a bystander, watching Babamukuru "condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness." While Tambu consoles Nyasha, she also comments that had she been the one to strike her own father, she would commit suicide out of shame. Tambu is not as worldly as her cousin, and therefore, cannot understand Nyasha's instinct to lash out against authority.

Tambu experiences the results of her upward mobility when returns to her old home after living at the mission. For the first time, she is disgusted by the squalor, describing the caving-in roof and filthy latrine (which she cleans herself with Nyasha's help). Ma'Shingayi sees the difference in Tambu and resents her daughter's new, haughty attitude. During her tirade, she accuses Tambu of being judgmental. Meanwhile, Tambu herself has no idea how much she has changed.

The disparity of wealth also affects the relationship between Maiguru and the other women in the house. The other women (Ma'Shingayi and Lucia, especially) think that Maiguru thinks she is

better than the rest of them because she is educated. Looking back, Tambu comments on how the women should have come together to stand up against the oppressive patriarchy instead of allowing their insecurities to divide them. She comments, "what was needed in that kitchen was a combination of Maiguru's detachment and Lucia's direction." However, she understands why that could not happen, finding it "frightening to acknowledge that generations of threat and assault and neglect had battered these myths into the extreme, dividing reality they faced."

Like Nyasha, Lucia is outspoken and the men consider her rude for standing up to herself. She bosses around the lazy Takesure and claims that her sister needs protection against Jeremiah, who is abusive. Because of her outbursts, Lucia is labelled a witch. Ultimately, this section of the novel addresses the deep-seated gender inequality in 1960s Rhodesia. There are both men and women who believe deeply in a system of patriarchy - the men silence their female counterparts, and some of the women believe that they should be silenced. However, it is women like Nyasha, Lucia, and to some extent, Maiguru, who are attempting to make strides.

# Nervous Conditions Summary and Analysis of Chapters 8 – 10

## Summary

The preparations for Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi's wedding begin, and Tambu becomes extremely anxious. She grows resentful of Babamukuru for "having devised this plot which made such a joke of my parents, my home and myself." She can feel her anger against Babamukuru rising up inside herself and yet, squashes it back down because she considers him to be Godlike and therefore, infallible. She amuses herself by making clay pots for fun with Nyasha. When Babamukuru goes back to the mission with Maiguru and Nyasha, he leaves Tambu at the homestead to help with the wedding preparations. Lucia continues trying to convince Ma'Shingayi to leave the homestead with her, but Ma'Shingayi has reservations. She says, "What I have endured for nineteen years I can endure for another nineteen, and nineteen more if need be." Meanwhile, Tambu and Lucia fix the damaged roof but when Babamukuru comes to collect Tambu and take her back to the mission, Jeremiah takes credit for it.

Back at the mission, Tambu continues to be an "exemplary young lady" while Nyasha keeps disappointing her father. Ma'Shingayi comes to the mission hospital to give birth, accompanied by Lucia. Lucia takes the opportunity to pester Babamukuru about Takesure and it becomes clear that she hopes to stay at the mission and get a job there. Much to everyone's surprise, Babamukuru does find Lucia a job cooking food at the girls' hostel. She also begins to go to Grade One classes in the evening. This once again changes the way Tambu views her uncle, once again. Meanwhile, Nyasha, Maiguru, and Tambu help Ma'Shingayi plan the wedding. Nyasha takes on the task of organizing almost everything, including shopping for material to make a dress. Tambu is offended by the frenzy, feeling that it reduces her parents "to the level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers." On the night that Tambu is supposed to return home to help start wedding preparations, she hides in the girls' hostel. The next morning, Tambu is depressed, unable to get out of bed, and apologizes to her uncle, refusing to go to the wedding. Babamukuru is furious, of course, but eventually the rest of the family goes to the homestead and Tambu is allowed to stay at the mission. After the family returns, Babamukuru punishes Tambu with fifteen lashes and two weeks of maid's work. Tambu finds a certain measure of satisfaction in her punishment, because it is the result of having stood up for herself.

Lucia visits with her new baby, Farai, and stands up to Babamukuru, insisting that he should not be punishing Tambu so severely, and Maiguru agrees with her. After Lucia leaves, Maiguru continues to argue with her husband, finally saying what has been on her mind for some time:

"When I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house." Babamukuru reacts by telling her to go wherever she wants. Nyasha predicts that her mother won't leave, but she is wrong. Maiguru departs by bus the next morning. Tambu is surprised by how much this pleases Nyasha, since her cousin points out, "there was a difference between people deserting their daughters and people saving themselves." She sees hope in her mother's actions, since now she can foresee her own emancipation from Babamukuru's rule. Five days later, Maiguru returns, much happier and refreshed.

Just before Tambu's Grade Seven examinations, nuns visit the mission school to recruit students to attend a Catholic convent school called Sacred Heart. To her surprise, Tambu is offered a generous scholarship to attend. However, Nyasha thinks she will be brainwashed by the nuns. Meanwhile, Babamukuru refuses to let Tambu go, thinking that she will go astray. Maiguru uses her newfound confidence to speak up for Tambu, pointing out that in the 1950s, when she went to school, "people were prejudiced against educated women," and argues that it is high time that things changed.

Babamukuru takes Tambu back to the homestead for Christmas alone, since Maiguru has refused to "spend another Christmas catering for a family of two dozen". Babamukuru commutes between the mission and the homestead for weeks, and sometimes brings Nyasha and Maiguru with him. Tambu eavesdrops on a conversation between Babamukuru and Jeremiah, in which Babamukuru reveals that he is going to allow Tambu to go to the convent school. Excited, Tambu discusses this development with her mother, who becomes visibly depressed at the prospect of losing her child again. She won't eat or do any work; and the new baby, Dambudzo, develops diarrhoea. Jeremiah sends for Lucia, who forces her sister to get up, bathe, eat meat stew, and take care of her baby.

After the holidays, Tambu returns to the mission. Her old friends, Maidei and Jocelyn, are no longer kind to her and show resentment that she is leaving to go to a "white" convent school. Back at the house, Nyasha refuses to eat. After Babamukuru commands her to eat all the food on her plate, she gobbles it down quickly and then goes to the bathroom to vomit. She confesses to Tambu that after she leaves, "there won't be anyone to laugh with." She worries about facing her father alone. When it is time to go to Sacred Heart, Babamukuru, Maiguru, and Nyasha all drive Tambu to the convent. The building and grounds are impossibly beautiful and well groomed, but Babamukuru is clearly on edge upon seeing the entirely white student body. A nun shows them to the room where "the Africans" will be sleeping - there are six beds crammed into a space for four.

As the semester progresses, Tambu throws herself into her studies. She does not keep in good touch with Nyasha, though Nyasha writes her many letters. One letter in particular is very emotional, revealing that Nyasha does not get along with the girls at school or with her father. In

the following letter, she informs Tambu that she has "embarked on a diet," and after that, her letters stop coming as regularly. Tambu is so busy with her new activities and school work that she barely notices. When Tambu returns to the mission for a night, she notices a definite change in Nyasha, who has "grown skeletal." She shovels food into her mouth and then vomits. While Babamukuru wants Tambu to return to the convent the next day, she feels she cannot leave her cousin in this state. She is right; that evening, Nyasha flies into a suicidal rage.

Babamukuru agrees to take Nyasha to a white psychiatrist in the city of Salisbury. Unfortunately, that psychiatrist claims that "Africans did not suffer in the way [he] ... described," and almost convinces Babamukuru to just take Nyasha home and punish her. Later, a second psychiatrist recognizes that Nyasha needs to be put in a clinic for several weeks for observation and recovery. While she is there, Babamukuru takes Tambu back to the homestead, where Ma'Shingayi is adamant that Nyasha is being killed by her "Englishness," and warns Tambu to watch out for it. Tambu tries to banish her suspicion, but the narrator acknowledges that it stays with her. She shares that as she gets older, "quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story."

## Analysis:

Tambu's nervous condition manifests itself when the time comes for her parents' wedding. "Whenever I thought about it... I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin, my chest contracted to a breathless tension and even my bowels threatened to let me know their opinion." She is angry and resentful of Babamukuru for insisting that event take place. She finds it demeaning, and feels like it casts a shadow of sin over her childhood, but she cannot stop it. For the first time, Tambu disobeys Babamukuru by not going to the wedding.

She starts to understand that "deep in the less accessible areas of my mind, although outwardly I would have hotly denied it, I was ashamed of what to me was a pervasive and enervating vagueness." She worries that she is weak and lets "guilt, so many razor-sharp edges of it, and slice away at me. My mother had been right: I was unnatural; I would not listen to my own parents, but I would listen to Babamukuru even when he told me to laugh at my parents. There was something unnatural about me." On one hand, she feels that she should worship Babamukuru because her father always has. His education makes him a powerful figure, and he offers Tambu a place in his world. However, Tambu cannot reconcile her growing feelings of disapproval.

Lucia uses her wiles to get herself away from the homestead with Jeremiah and Takesure. She is six months pregnant when she gets to the mission, with the declared purpose of helping her

sister give birth. But she asks for a job and gets it, and eventually enrols herself in Grade One classes so that she might have some education, as well. Lucia's change in fortune is due to the very outspokenness that she is so often scolded for - she serves as an older example for Nyasha and Tambu, as well as for Maiguru. Maiguru finally stands up to Babamukuru and tells him how unhappy she is. She even leaves the house to demonstrate her independence, but returns after a week. By showing her husband that she *would* leave changes the dynamic between them. Her sojourn gives her the power to convince Babamukuru to send Tambu to the convent school.

As Tambu becomes more empowered, her mother's nervous condition begins to consume her. She blames Babamukuru for Nhamo's death, and when he takes Tambu away, she becomes anxious for her daughter's life. When she learns Tambu will be going to a convent school with mostly white students, she becomes anxious that Tambu will be afflicted with the dangerous "Englishness." Her depression prevents her from eating, bathing, or taking care of her baby until Lucia comes to the homestead and forces her out of bed. At the end of the novel, Tambu starts to understand the root of her mother's scepticism when Nyasha has a psychotic break.

The contrast between Nyasha and Tambu is at the core of *Nervous Conditions*. Dangarembga says, "Whatever class and/or cultural difference there is between them, they still have to struggle with becoming a person given the common constraint of being a woman". Tambu comes from nothing, and therefore, is unable to question Babamukuru's authority. Nyasha, meanwhile, is bound by her privilege. She is worldly and yet, trapped in a society where she cannot express herself. Ultimately, her ideological incarceration drives her to the edge. Tambu, however, struggles to find her voice. Because an older Tambu is narrating the book, she can offer mature insight into her adolescent turmoil.

## Nervous Conditions Essay Questions

1. **How does Maiguru embody the struggle of her gender, even as an educated woman?**

Maiguru stands out among the women in her family because she is educated. In fact, she is as educated as her husband, holding a Master's Degree from England. When Tambu demonstrates surprise to learn this fact, Maiguru becomes bitter and says, "When I was in England I glimpsed for a little while the things I could have been, the things I could have done if - if - if things were - different - But there was Babawa Chido and the children and the family. And does anyone realise, does anyone appreciate, what sacrifices were made? As for me, no one even thinks about the things I gave up."

Finally, Maiguru is inspired by Lucia and stands up for herself against Babamukuru. She thinks that Tambu is being punished too harshly for not attending her parents' wedding, as Lucia has pointed out, and when her husband disagrees with her, she continues the fight. Eventually, she tells him she is unhappy; when he reacts by telling her to go somewhere where she will be happy, then, she does. Her leaving is a demonstration of her independence; she has seen Lucia stand up for herself and decides to do the same.

When she returns five days later, she is refreshed having discovered that she could leave. She no longer dotes on Babamukuru and her smiles have become more frequent and "less mechanical." Nyasha is disappointed that her mother has not become "what she might have been with the right kind of exposure!" She sees her mother as having lost most of her opportunities because of her loyalty to Babamukuru.

Babamukuru is shocked when Maiguru decides to speak up for why Tambu should go to the convent school when she is offered a scholarship. Maiguru points out that when she herself was being educated in South Africa, "People were prejudiced against educated women. Prejudiced. That's why they said we weren't decent. That was in the fifties. Now we are into the seventies. I am disappointed that people still believe the same things." This motion to speak up for Tambu's education demonstrates a change in Maiguru's character after she comes back from her time away. Now she feels compelled to stand up to Babamukuru in a way she never could before.

2. **How does Englishness divide mothers from daughters in *Nervous Conditions*?**

Maiguru acknowledges the Englishness of her children when she sees Tambu's negative reaction to the way Nyasha speaks to her mother. She explains, "They're too Anglicised... they picked up all these disrespectful ways in England, and it's taking them time to learn how to behave at home again." Nyasha's attitude toward her parents is at odds with Tambu's own respect for her aunt and uncle.

Ma'Shingayi's anxiety concerning the idea of Englishness is revealed when she asks her daughter, "What will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time." In the last interaction in the novel, she blames Nyasha's bulimia on "Englishness," warning Tambu that, "The problem is the Englishness, so you just be careful!" This opinion is not necessarily untrue, since there is a certain tension evident between the Shona culture and the white missionaries' culture and expectations. But Ma'Shingayi's determination to stave off Englishness, as she sees it, is an untenable solution.

3. **In what ways does the repression of women manifest itself to Tambu as a child?**

After her brother's death, Tambu is suddenly able to receive a Western education. While Nhamo is going to school, he makes his female relatives carry his luggage when he returns home. Tambu knows that "he did not need help that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him." From the first chapter of the book, Tambu states that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate."

The issue of gender is constantly at the forefront for Tambu. Before the welcome dinner, she must carry a water dish for her relatives to wash their hands in. The water is cleanest at the beginning, of course, so the elder men begin. This type of ritual demonstrates on a daily basis the ways in which the men have power over the women. The women must eat in the kitchen, after preparing the meal for the men; they have to eat what is left over after the men take what they want.

Tambu's association of menstruation with dirtiness alludes to the disdain for her own gender that has been drilled into her her whole life. The absence of dirt in Maiguru's living room makes her think about menstruation as a type of dirt: "I knew that the fact of menstruation was a shamefully unclean secret that should not be allowed to contaminate immaculate male ears by indiscreet reference to this type of dirt in their presence." This characterization of menstruation as inherently dirty and offensive reveals a deep misogyny in the Shona culture. In contrast, Nyasha uses tampons without shame and shows Tambu how.

The stigma of women behaving unchastely is clear in Babamukuru's reprimanding of Nyasha for staying out too late talking to Andy. He yells at her for being indecent, and scolds Chido because "you let your sister behave like a whore without saying anything." He hits his daughter to "teach her a lesson," but she is obstinate and hits him right back in the eye, saying, "I told you not to hit me." Tambu thinks "how dreadfully familiar" the fight is, with Babamukuru "condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness."

4. **How does Tambu perceive race throughout the novel?**

The central moral issue of the novel is the question of how black families can negotiate a postcolonial education and "freedom" with Shona traditions and oppressions.

Nyasha is disliked by her classmates because "she thinks she is white." The racial tension works both ways; whites seem to look down on blacks, or at least feel bad for them in a disparaging way, while blacks at the mission school disdain those who act in a way they think of as "white."

The difference Tambu perceives between black and white people is evident in the very beginning of Chapter 6. Now that she lives at the mission, she sees many more white people than ever before. Sarcasm is evident in the tone of the narration as she looks back on the way she and the other black people viewed the white missionaries: "We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise."

The problem of race is clear in Chapter 10 when Tambu arrives at the convent to find that her sleeping quarters are cramped in with "the African" students. The nuns at Sacred Heart are not immune to this type of segregation. Likewise, there are no black psychiatrists for Nyasha to see in Salisbury concerning her eating disorder. The first white psychiatrist they bring her to suggests that because she is black, she cannot possibly suffer from what they describe. He suggests that she is merely acting out, and that she needs to be disciplined. This understanding that whites and blacks suffer from different mental ailments is evidence of a racial divide in the culture.

5. **Describe how education is viewed by the Shona people of Tambu's homestead.**

Tambu describes her uncle's gesture to pay for Nhamo's education as "oceanic," since it would "lift our branch of the family out of the squalor in which we were living."

The theme of education and its importance to the people of Tambu's village who live in poverty is evident from the beginning. Jeremiah, Tambu's father, makes a ridiculous show about how indebted they are to Babamukuru upon his return. Babamukuru suggests education as a solution to the family's financial woes, and insists that Nhamo go to live with him at the mission school.

The other women see Maiguru as different not just because she is wealthy, but because she is educated. During her tirade, Ma'Shingayi accuses, "She did tell us, didn't she, what she thinks, and did anyone say anything! No. Why not? Because Maiguru is educated. That's why you all kept quiet." There is a divide between the women, although they are all victims of male superiority, because Maiguru is educated and the others are "just poor and ignorant," as Ma'Shingayi puts it.

6. **Which characters become self-conscious of their poverty? When and how?**

After his education at the mission, Nhamo begins to be embarrassed by the poverty of his immediate family. The poverty that is so closely tied to race is evident in this chapter. Babamukuru is an anomaly because he has not "cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru had defied it." Tambu sees this as breaking "the evil wizard's spell" through hard work and education. This also frees Babamukuru from having to bully women, since he has earned respect through his actions rather than by virtue of his gender.

Tambu is very aware that she is leaving behind her poverty when she moves to the mission. Her appearance marks her as a peasant: "tight faded frock... broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers... corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair."

She sees herself as leaving this "person," this identity, behind. She is humiliated when she does not know how to operate the light switch in her cousin's bedroom; Nyasha picks up on her ignorance and kindly shows her how.
The theme of poverty arises as Tambu returns to her old home, having been living at the mission in much better conditions. Now she sees the squalor of the caving-in roof and filthy latrine, and cleans it herself with Nyasha's help. Ma'Shingayi is clearly resentful of being seen this way; she is acutely aware of her daughter's judgment and accuses her of it during her tirade.

7. **Throughout the novel, Tambu's nervous condition develops. Describe how this happens.**

Beginning in Chapter 4, Tambu's neurosis is clear. She has anxiety about her identity and what it means to be educated, and she worries constantly about the changes in her life. She becomes embarrassed at herself for underestimating Babamukuru's wealth and for not believing Nhamo's stories about the way their uncle and cousins lived. She acknowledges it herself when she learns that she is to share a bedroom with Nyasha: "From what I had seen of my cousin, I was intrigued and fascinated with one part of my mind, the adventurous, explorative part. But this was a very small part. Most of me sought order. Most of me was concrete and categorical."
Tambu's own nervous condition is apparent at the student Christmas party she attends with Nyasha and Chido. She explains, "When the surroundings were new and unfamiliar, the awareness was painful and made me behave very strangely. At times like that I wanted so badly to disappear that for practical purposes I ceased to exist... I do not know how I came to be like that." Because of this intense social anxiety, Tambu dreads the Christmas dance.
Tambu's nervous condition manifests clearly in her reaction to her parents' wedding. "Whenever I thought about it... I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin, my chest contracted to a breathless tension and even my bowels threatened to let me know their opinion." She is angry and resentful of Babamukuru for insisting that this embarrassing event take place. But she is generally anxious about many other things; "deep in the less accessible areas of my mind, although outwardly I would have hotly denied it, I was ashamed of what to me was a pervasive and enervating vagueness."
In addition, she becomes anxious about her inability to speak up for herself and her family regarding the wedding, which she sees as a joke, of which her family is the butt. She worries that she is weak and lets "guilt, so many razorsharp edges of it, slice away at me. My mother had been right: I was unnatural; I would not listen to my own parents, but I would listen to Babamukuru even when he told me to laugh at my parents. There was something unnatural about me."

8. **Nyasha has financial stability because of her parents' education, but she develops a nervous condition because of a feeling that she is out of control of her own life. How does that occur over the course of the novel?**

Nyasha suffers from an eating disorder. At first, she won't eat at all. This disorder is foreshadowed at Tambu's first dinner at the mission, when Nyasha storms off to her room. Her father tells her to come back and eat her food, but she insists that she is full, refusing to eat. This is in part to bother her mother, who has spent a long time cooking and preparing the meal, but in part because she doesn't want to eat the dinner at all.
Nyasha's nervous condition is revealed to Tambu in Chapter 6, when she uses studying for her Form Two exams as an excuse to not eat. Tambu notices that "She was looking drawn and had lost so much of her appetite that it showed all over her body in the way the bones crept to the surface, but she did not seem to notice." Tambu doesn't understand the root of the problem and blames it on over-studying.
Nyasha's eating disorder morphs into bulimia by Chapter 9. When Tambu returns to the mission house, she realizes that Nyasha is throwing up dinner in the bathroom. When she asks her if she is ill, Nyasha confesses to forcing herself to throw up but says, "Don't ask me why. I don't know." In a letter she writes to Tambu at the convent school, she reveals her anxiety about the social aspects of her life, confessing that she is "embarking on a diet to discipline my body and occupy my mind." Three months later, Tambu returns to the mission to find her coping with her anxieties by starving herself to death; she is "pathetic to see."

9. **How is the Shona idea of male superiority embedded in Tambu's mind?**

Tambu's gender is at first a restriction for her education, as well. Nhamo rubs her face in the fact that he is to receive an education at the mission school while she must stay at the family farm with Jeremiah, pointing out the obvious: "Why are you jealous anyway? Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school?" As a narrator, Tambu concludes that her brother was "sincere in his bigotry. But in those days I took a rosy view of male nature," so she assumed he was just saying hurtful things to bother her.

Tambu the narrator (as opposed to Tambu the character in the time when the story takes place) realizes that, while the women listen to the meeting of the patriarchy, "what was needed in that kitchen was a combination of Maiguru's detachment and Lucia's direction." But the problem was that the women have been conditioned to understand themselves a certain way, as "images that were really no more than reflections... it was frightening now to even begin to think that, the very facts which set them apart as a group, as women, as a certain kind of person, were only myths; frightening to acknowledge that generations of threat and assault and neglect had battered these myths into the extreme, dividing reality they faced."

10. **Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, is the most disadvantaged female character in the novel. She suffers from racial, gender, and financial repression. How does she deal with this situation?**

Ma'Shingayi suffers from is depression. This condition is hinted at in the beginning of the novel, when she reacts negatively to Tambu's going away to the mission school. Rather than feel proud of her daughter, she becomes angry and withdrawn. When Tambu returns for Christmas, she finds her mother bedridden although she seems perfectly healthy, physically. Ma'Shingayi has reacted by withdrawing to her bedroom and staying there, immobilized by depression, to the situation between Takesure, Jeremiah, and Lucia at her homestead.

After learning that her daughter, Tambu, will be sent to a convent school around white people, she becomes anxious about Tambu's looming "Englishness." She won't eat, bathe, or take care of her baby until Lucia comes to the homestead and forces her to.