

Nervous Conditions



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in Rhodesia (what is now Zimbabwe), but spent several years of her childhood in England. She returned to Rhodesia at age six. She graduated from a missionary high school in Umtale and then returned to England to attend Cambridge. She studied medicine there but left in 1979 to return to Rhodesia, only a few months before the country declared its independence and became Zimbabwe. After that, she studied psychology at the University of Zimbabwe and did copywriting work for a marketing agency. During this time, she began writing plays and joined a local theater group. She began to publish short stories and plays that attracted positive attention in the mid-1980s, which culminated in *Nervous Conditions* in 1988. The novel won the African selection of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1989. Despite her success, Dangarembga abandoned writing novels for almost two decades, and, during that time, studied film in Berlin and made several films that have been shown at prestigious international film festivals. She finished the second installment of Tambu's story in 2006 and completed the planned trilogy in 2018, more than 30 years after she began writing about Tambu.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rhodesia was first colonized by the British South Africa Company in the 1890s. The Company created a number of Christian missionary schools to serve local populations. Far from being a benevolent endeavor, the mission schools were intended to control the population, reinforce the supremacy of white settlers, and often censored knowledge. In the mid 20th century, the Rhodesian government—which was still controlled by white settlers—chose to fund education such that European children received nearly 90% of educational spending. Tambu would've been part of the 4% of native children who even attended secondary school during the 1970s, and one of even fewer girls to have the opportunity—given the scarcity of educational opportunities, they were often afforded to boys. These discrepancies intensified starting in 1965 as Rhodesia began to angle for independence from British rule. The United Kingdom stated that in order to grant colonies independence, the colonies needed to shift to governments that were controlled by a black majority. This requirement terrified the white Europeans in Rhodesia and led to several attempts to create an independent state under white rule, none of which were recognized by the international community. In 1980, after nearly a decade of bloody war, Rhodesia became the

internationally recognized and independent state of Zimbabwe.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dangarembga conceived of *Nervous Conditions* as being the first in a trilogy. She published the second in the series, *The Book of Not*, in 2006, and the third, *This Mournable Body*, in 2018. NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We Need New Names* is another coming of age novel focusing on a Zimbabwean girl, though it takes place in the early 2010s. *Nervous Conditions* was the first novel published by a Zimbabwean woman in English; because of this distinction, she joins the ranks of authors such as Chinua Achebe (his debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, was one of the first Nigerian novels to gain international acclaim) and the playwright Wole Soyinka, whose plays portraying the effects of colonialism on the Igbo population in Nigeria, such as *Death and the King's Horseman*, were extremely successful and some of the first African-authored plays presented in London. The intersection between education and colonialism has been explored by a number of writers from formerly colonized countries all over the world, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*, *The Thing Around Your Neck*) and the Indian author Amitav Ghosh (*The Shadow Lines*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nervous Conditions*
- **When Written:** 1983-84
- **Where Written:** Harare, Zimbabwe
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Post-colonial African Literature
- **Genre:** Semi-autobiographical novel; Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Rhodesia, 1965-1971
- **Climax:** Tambu stands up to Babamukuru and refuses to go to the wedding, inciting Babamukuru's rage.
- **Antagonist:** All the men in Tambu's life are antagonists to a degree; more broadly, she fights colonialism, racism, and sexism
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Publishing Issues. Tsitsi Dangarembga actually finished writing *Nervous Conditions* in 1984 and attempted to get it published in Zimbabwe, but none of the small African publishing companies would accept the novel. This is why *Nervous Conditions* was only published by a British publishing house four years later.



PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, a woman named Tambu, tells the reader that she wasn't sorry when her brother Nhamo died. She'd like to explain how she came to feel that way and tell the stories of her aunt Lucia, her mother, Mainini, her aunt Maiguru, and her cousin, Nyasha.

Tambu begins to dislike Nhamo long before he dies in 1968. Her highly educated uncle, Babamukuru, insisted that Nhamo begin school early. Babamukuru went to [England](#) in 1960 to study with his wife, Maiguru, and two children, Nyasha and Chido. While he was gone, Tambu's family was unable to send Tambu after her first year of school. Jeremiah insisted that Tambu didn't need to go to school, while Mainini counseled Tambu to learn to carry the weight of womanhood and make sacrifices. Instead, Tambu asked for corn to grow so she could raise her own school fees. When the corn was ripe, the cobs began to disappear. At Sunday school, Tambu discovered that Nhamo was the one stealing them and attacked him. A teacher, Mr. Matimba, broke up the fight, listened to Tambu's story, and offered to help her sell her corn in Umtali. By telling a white woman that Tambu is an orphan, Mr. Matimba is able to raise ten pounds for Tambu's education. Jeremiah is furious, but Mr. Matimba points out that Tambu will be able to support the family with a job if she's educated. She attends school for the next two years.

When Babamukuru and his family return from England, Tambu discovers what Mainini meant by "the weight of womanhood": she's not allowed to go to the airport to greet her family, and Nhamo monopolizes Nyasha and Chido. Tambu also learns that her cousins no longer remember Shona, which makes her feel alone. During the party, Babamukuru decides to take Nhamo to his mission school with him. Nhamo makes sure to tell Tambu that she doesn't get to go because she's female.

Over the next several years, Nhamo "forgets" Shona and does what he can to get out of coming to the homestead. He looks down on his family's poverty and antagonizes Tambu every chance he gets. At the end of term in 1968, Nhamo doesn't come home on the bus as planned. Babamukuru and Maiguru arrive by car late in the evening with news that Nhamo died of mumps. After the funeral, Babamukuru decides to take Tambu to the mission. Though Tambu is excited to discover a clean, well-fed, and academic version of herself at the mission, she also believes that, unlike Nhamo, she'll never look down on life on the homestead. When Babamukuru turns his car up the driveway, Tambu is shocked: the house is huge, and there's a special small house for cars. She feels unworthy and as though Babamukuru is richer than she ever imagined. Two huge guard dogs bark at Tambu, scaring her, though the house girl Anna assures Tambu she's safe. Tambu enters the house through the kitchen. It's clean and to Tambu looks extravagant, though the older narrator points out that there are things that betray that

Babamukuru and Maiguru are on a budget. Surprisingly, Nyasha greets Tambu warmly.

Anna shows Tambu to the living room, which is extremely glamorous. Tambu understands how Nhamo came to feel so superior, as the glamour is dangerous and, in her mind, Babamukuru is a god. Maiguru arrives, greets Tambu casually, and brushes off Tambu's attempts to greet her formally. They have tea, and Tambu is shocked by the amount of cookies and the hot tea. Nyasha is rude and brushes off Maiguru's requests to greet Tambu formally, which shocks Tambu. Maiguru laughs it off and says her children are too Anglicized. She then shows Tambu to Nyasha's room, which the girls will share. Nyasha is reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which Maiguru takes offense to, but she shows Tambu her things and then leaves the girls.

Once the girls begin talking, Nyasha admits that at the party after her return from England, she didn't talk to Tambu because she was afraid. She laments that she and Chido are cultural hybrids, which their parents hate. At dinner later, the table is anxiety-inducing for Tambu; it's covered with interesting dishes, and she's afraid she won't be full. Babamukuru arrives late, doesn't want to speak, and is offended that there's no gravy. While Nyasha is making gravy, Babamukuru takes *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Nyasha believes Maiguru took it. The dinner is embarrassing for Tambu, especially when Maiguru gives Tambu a spoon and gives her sadza. After dinner, Tambu speaks with Babamukuru in the living room. He tells her how much he's giving up to put her through school and tells her about her responsibility to raise up the family. Back in the bedroom, Tambu doesn't put on pajamas and tries to hide the fact that she doesn't know how to turn the light off.

The next morning, Tambu enjoys her bath and struggles through breakfast. School is fortunately easy for her. Nobody likes Nyasha, but everyone loves Tambu. Soon, Tambu begins to menstruate and though she initially refuses, Nyasha convinces her to use tampons. She also discovers that Maiguru has a master's degree, but that Maiguru doesn't have control of her paychecks. Tambu feels sorry for Maiguru, but can't believe her situation is too bad since she's married to Babamukuru.

Nyasha takes her first public exams right before Christmas during Tambu's first year at the mission. She's very anxious about them and studies constantly. After the exams, the school throws a Christmas party. Nyasha, Tambu, and Chido have fun at the dance, and Nyasha's date follows them home. At home, Chido and Tambu get tired of waiting for Nyasha and head to the house without her. Babamukuru realizes they've left Nyasha alone. When she finally comes in, the two fight furiously: Babamukuru accuses Nyasha of being a whore and beats her. After the fight, Tambu sits with Nyasha outside, shaken since she now knows that Babamukuru will victimize women just like Nhamo victimized Tambu for being female when they were children.

A week later, Tambu and Babamukuru's family travel to the homestead for Christmas. Their car is laden with provisions, including half of an ox. Maiguru is already upset that she's going to be in charge of all the cooking as the most senior wife. At the homestead, Netsai and Rambanai greet their guests.

Babamukuru is shocked to discover that Lucia and Takesure are on the property: Lucia is Mainini's wild younger sister and is pregnant with Takesure's baby. Takesure already has two wives he's paying off, but he doesn't want to work. Babamukuru told them both to leave a while ago.

Tambu carries food inside and then goes to the bedroom to see Mainini, who is also pregnant and is unwell. Babamukuru and Maiguru follow. Nyasha is predictably rude. Surprisingly, Tete Gladys and Uncle Thomas come as well with their spouses and children. Tete Gladys doesn't have to help with chores, as she's patriarchal, so Maiguru, Nyasha, Tambu, and the serving girls do all the work. Maiguru does all the cooking and struggles to ration the meat, which soon turns green. She cooks special rice on her [Dover stove](#) for the patriarchal family members.

After the new year, Babamukuru calls a family meeting to deal with the issue of Lucia and Takesure. The excluded women fight amongst themselves and decide to eavesdrop. They hear Takesure accuse Lucia of witchcraft, at which point Lucia enters the room, grabs Takesure by the ears, and threatens to leave with Mainini. Jeremiah suggests they hire a medium to cleanse the family of its evils, but Babamukuru says the true problem is that Jeremiah and Mainini aren't married and are living in sin. He wants to throw them a wedding. Though Tambu's relatives laugh about the wedding, she panics when she thinks about it. She believes a wedding would make a joke of her parents, but she also believes she can't be angry with Babamukuru. After Tambu returns to the mission three weeks later, things return to normal. Mainini gives birth to a boy in March, and, while she's at the mission hospital, Lucia takes the opportunity to ask Babamukuru to find her a job. After a week, he follows through. Tambu is in awe, but Nyasha insists that people like Babamukuru have to help people like Lucia.

As the wedding approaches, Tambu continues to agonize. Her bridesmaid's dress fits perfectly, but she knows she doesn't want to go. On the day of the wedding, Tambu has an out-of-body experience and refuses to attend. After, Babamukuru gives her fifteen lashes and makes her perform Anna's chores for two weeks. Lucia visits and takes offense to this, and later, Maiguru tells Babamukuru that she's not happy catering to his family. She leaves the next morning. She's gone for a week until Chido calls, tells Nyasha where Maiguru is, and Babamukuru goes to fetch her.

Late in the term, Catholic nuns arrive. They administer a test that the students later discover was an entrance exam to the Catholic school. Because Tambu has been reading Nyasha's books and talking with Nyasha about different ideas, she has the skills to pass and earns a scholarship. Nyasha discourages

Tambu from going on the grounds that the nuns would assimilate Tambu into their culture. Babamukuru agrees with Nyasha, but Maiguru doesn't: she stands up to her husband and insists that Tambu go. Over Christmas, Babamukuru discusses the Catholic school with Jeremiah and decides that Tambu should go. Tambu is thrilled, but Mainini is afraid that Tambu will die. Mainini becomes ill with worry and only recovers after Lucia spends a few days visiting.

Tambu takes the bus back to the mission and is excited to see Nyasha, but Nyasha isn't home. Tambu finds her studying in a classroom. At dinner, Babamukuru forces Nyasha to eat all her food but after, Tambu hears her throwing it up. Tambu is still very excited to go to the Catholic school. Nyasha accompanies her and Babamukuru to the school. Tambu is one of six black students, which is more than usual. She immerses herself in her studies and though she receives letters from Nyasha, some of which are concerning, she doesn't write back. Tambu doesn't see Nyasha again until August, at which point Nyasha is a skeleton. She vomits after every meal and one night, she faints in her plate. Late that night, Nyasha experiences a mental break and screams that "they" have done this to her. Babamukuru takes her to a psychiatrist the next day. The psychiatrist insists that Africans don't suffer like this, but another psychiatrist checks Nyasha into a clinic. Tambu spends a few weeks at home, where Mainini insists that the "Englishness" is going to kill them all. Regardless, Tambu returns to school and doesn't start to question things until much later, at which point she writes this story.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tambu – Tambu is the teenage protagonist of the novel. She's born and raised on a homestead in Rhodesia where her family lives in poverty. Because her uncle Babamukuru is wealthy and educated, he insists that Tambu and her older brother, Nhamo, attend school. When Jeremiah and Mainini run out of money to send Tambu, she feels the injustice sharply and raises the money herself. Because Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, is educated and seems to live a happy life, Tambu believes that education won't make her useless. When Nhamo tries to thwart her attempt to raise money, Tambu begins to hate him, a feeling that persists until Nhamo's death. At this point, Babamukuru decides to take Tambu to the mission school so that she can pull her family out of poverty. Tambu takes this responsibility very seriously and believes that, unlike Nhamo, she won't fall prey to the grandness of Babamukuru's house and make her look down on life at the homestead. Tambu is only partially successful in this endeavor. While she never stops loving parts of the homestead, such as the river [Nyamarira](#), and continues to respect her parents, she's shocked when she discovers that things at home aren't as clean as when she left.

Tambu becomes friends with her cousin Nyasha, who introduces her to her library and engages her in conversation about poverty, racism, and sexism. Though Tambu finds these interesting, because she idolizes Babamukuru and believes that her job is to excel at school, she understands that thinking outside the box is dangerous. She refuses to stand up for herself when it comes to Babamukuru until he decides that her parents need to marry. She believes the wedding will make a joke of her parents and refuses to go, but can only do so because she has an out-of-body experience. Tambu notes that her idolization of Babamukuru kept her from developing critical thinking skills. Despite this, Tambu is accepted to a prestigious Catholic school and is thrilled to attend, as she believes it'll help her help her family. She doesn't realize until later, when she writes the novel, that the school system brainwashed her.

Babamukuru – Babamukuru is Tambu's uncle. He and his wife, Maiguru, received scholarships to study in South Africa in the 1950s, and in 1960, they went to [England](#) to pursue master's degrees with their children, Chido and Nyasha. As the eldest brother, Babamukuru is the family patriarch. He uses his power and influence as the headmaster of a mission school to educate Nhamo and then Tambu. Babamukuru is also a staunch Christian; he doesn't drink alcohol and is aghast when Jeremiah mentions hiring a medium. Tambu idolizes Babamukuru and continues to do so throughout the novel, especially when she sees how rich and powerful he is. Though Tambu struggles to recognize it, Babamukuru isn't entirely good. He's upset that his children are so anglicized. Nyasha is especially difficult for him as she's headstrong, opinionated, and doesn't care to observe traditional manners or customs—all things that make her a lesser woman in Babamukuru's eyes. He beats her for her perceived promiscuity and takes books from her that he deems inappropriate. Beating Nyasha shows Tambu that Babamukuru is willing to vilify and punish women simply for being women, but this doesn't diminish her idolization of him. Tambu also struggles to see that Babamukuru is, in Nyasha's words, an "artifact"; he's a "good African" who was nurtured by the mission system and fully believes in their project of colonizing Rhodesia. He's the only member of his family who is highly educated and believes that education is the way to pull the family out of poverty and, in some cases, out of sin. After the extended family suffers a number of tragedies, he decides that the issue is that Jeremiah and Mainini aren't married under God and decides to throw a wedding. Tambu believes that the wedding will make a joke of her parents and is a way for Babamukuru to display his wealth, so she refuses to go. He punishes her for this in a number of ways, including by refusing to let her attend Sacred Heart. After Maiguru stands up to him, he allows Tambu to go.

Nyasha – Nyasha is Tambu's cousin, who is about her same age. When the two are little, they are great friends, but their relationship is interrupted when Nyasha goes with

Babamukuru and Maiguru to [England](#). She returns five years later, at age eleven, as an entirely different person: anglicized and, in Tambu's eyes, useless and uncouth. Worst of all, Nyasha doesn't remember Shona well. Tambu doesn't begin to rethink this assessment until she goes to the mission school. While she continues to believe that Nyasha is tactless, headstrong, and a poor excuse for a good, traditional woman, she also discovers that Nyasha is worldly and able to think about things in more nuanced ways. Nyasha constantly questions what's right and wrong, which leads her to stand up to Babamukuru regularly. He takes issue with her inability to act like a good, respectful daughter, and at one point beats Nyasha for her perceived promiscuity. Tambu is caught between idolizing Nyasha and demonizing her, as she recognizes that Nyasha's ability to think abstractly is compelling but potentially dangerous—it leads Nyasha to question the status quo, something that, if Tambu were to follow suit, would jeopardize her educational opportunities. As tensions rise in Babamukuru's house, Nyasha turns to constant studying and dieting to cope. Both happen sporadically at first and only when Nyasha is preparing for exams, but especially after Tambu leaves the mission to attend Sacred Heart, Nyasha's health takes a turn for the worse. She develops a dangerous eating disorder, and, after about eight months, she's skeletally thin and faints. After a fainting episode, Nyasha experiences a mental break in which she accuses "them" (presumably, white settlers) of turning her into a stranger and denying her whiteness while also alienating her from her parents. Mainini agrees with this assessment; she believes that "Englishness" brought Nyasha's illness on and will kill her. Nyasha ends the novel checked into a clinic for several weeks, and Tambu gives no indication if Nyasha ever recovers.

Mainini – Mainini is Tambu's mother. She's been married to Jeremiah for nineteen years, since she was fifteen, and Tambu believes that this is one of the reasons—alongside crushing poverty and Jeremiah's overbearing nature—that Mainini is spiritless. However, Tambu's assessment isn't entirely true. Though Mainini is often tired, exasperated, and picks her battles carefully, she does stand up to Jeremiah and makes her opinions known to the men around her. Tambu's assessment likely comes from Mainini's defeatist nature; when Tambu is a child, Mainini counsels her to learn to carry the "burden of womanhood" so that she can more easily make sacrifices and care for her future husband and children. She also laments the burden of being black, which suggests that she's more aware of the colonial system's effects than Tambu gives her credit for: under white colonial rule, black Rhodesians were denied access, respect, and prestige. Though Mainini is initially enthusiastic about Babamukuru's desire to educate Nhamo, she soon sees that education and exposure to white culture fundamentally changes a person. She's hurt when Nhamo "forgets" Shona and won't speak to her anymore, and when he dies, she believes that Maiguru cursed him. This is why she also isn't happy when Babamukuru decides to take Tambu to the

mission, as she fears Tambu will suffer the same fate. Mainini suffered several miscarriages and lost several babies under a year old over the course of her marriage, so she's especially distraught when she becomes pregnant while Tambu is at the mission school. Though her pregnancy is difficult, she gives birth to a healthy baby boy in March. Not long after, she agrees to go through with Babamukuru's proposed wedding even though she doesn't see the point. After Nyasha is hospitalized, Mainini ominously says that "Englishness" will kill her and Tambu, indicating that Mainini isn't sold on the Western version of success that her children experience at the mission.

Maiguru – Maiguru is Tambu's aunt and Babamukuru's wife. She studied with Babamukuru in South Africa in the 1950s and accompanied him to [England](#) in 1960. Tambu thinks of Maiguru as being caring and concerned for everyone, as well as deserving of the utmost respect. She believes Maiguru's life cannot possibly have any downsides, given that she's married to the wonderful Babamukuru. This illusion begins to break down when Tambu begins attending the mission school and observes Maiguru at close quarters. Nyasha insists that Maiguru doesn't want respect, and that she likes to complain, which baffles Tambu. Tambu learns after a few months that Maiguru went to England to study for a master's in philosophy, not just to care for Babamukuru. Maiguru also doesn't have control over her paycheck. Though Tambu finds this sad, she again cannot truly appreciate Maiguru's missed opportunities and oppression given that Maiguru is married to Babamukuru and therefore, cannot have a bad life. As the senior wife, Maiguru is expected to cook for the entire extended family during family gatherings, though she's excluded from patriarchal meetings. The other lesser women of the family, like Mainini and Patience, believe that Maiguru thinks she's better than them because of her education and her wealth. Maiguru finally takes a stand against Babamukuru after the wedding. She insists that she's tired of having to care for Babamukuru's family and of being told what to do, so she leaves for five days. Upon her forced return, Maiguru is happier and more vocal about her beliefs. She advocates for Babamukuru to allow Tambu to attend Sacred Heart and insists that going to the school won't turn Tambu into a "loose" woman, as she recognizes that "loose" is merely a slur designed to punish women for being anything more than wives and mothers.

Lucia – Lucia is Mainini's younger sister. Unlike Mainini, Lucia is unmarried, and, until Tambu goes to the mission, lived with her parents in relative freedom. This means that Lucia is very independent, able to think for herself, and has no qualms about having sex when and with whom she wants—though this also earns her a reputation as a loose woman and possibly as a witch. She comes to the homestead when Mainini becomes pregnant to help out, where she soon begins sexual relationships with Takesure and with Jeremiah. When she becomes pregnant with Takesure's baby, it causes a number of

problems within the family, mostly because Babamukuru is incensed that nobody will listen to his instructions and about Jeremiah's desire to claim the baby as his own and take Lucia as a second wife. Being so headstrong, Lucia refuses to let the men make decisions about her without consulting her, so she interrupts the family meeting to tell the truth—that neither Takesure nor Jeremiah are good or honest men—and to threaten to run away with Mainini. This earns her the respect of Nyasha, who believes in women's liberation. A few days after Mainini gives birth, Babamukuru finds Lucia a job as a cook at the mission school. There, Lucia is also able to attend school for the first time, which gives her a sense of direction, agency, and purpose. She remains a powerful force in Mainini and Tambu's lives; when Mainini becomes ill following the news that Tambu will attend Sacred Heart, Lucia visits the homestead to jolt Mainini into wellness and taking care of herself.

Jeremiah – Tambu and Nhamo's father. Jeremiah is lazy, self-indulgent, and likes to drink, all of which makes him a disgrace in the eyes of Babamukuru. Worst of all, Jeremiah isn't Christian; he suggests several times that the family hire a medium to drive out evil spirits and he also expresses interest in taking a second wife. When Tambu is a child, Jeremiah is a major villain in her life. He doesn't want to work for the money to send Tambu to school and doesn't want to let Tambu work for it either. Though he supports Nhamo in his schooling, he doesn't believe that educating Tambu will be a good investment for him, given that her career will only benefit him until she marries. He's often angry about Tambu's headstrong nature and her desire to be treated like an equal, though he can never find the energy to punish or beat her for being so forward. When it comes to larger family matters, Jeremiah defers to Babamukuru, whom he idolizes and fears. He agrees with whatever Babamukuru says, which is why Tambu is allowed to go to the mission school and then to Sacred Heart. Because he and Mainini never married in the Christian sense when they first began living together, Babamukuru decides to throw them a big Christian wedding so that God will stop punishing the family. Jeremiah is a difficult and domineering husband both before and after the wedding; Tambu notes that he broke Mainini's spirit early and continues to keep her down by refusing to work and bullying her.

Nhamo – Nhamo is Tambu's older brother. He dies in 1968 of mumps, and his death is the reason Tambu gets to go to the mission school at all. Though Nhamo was always a superior and self-important person, education makes him more so: when Jeremiah and Mainini run out of money to send Tambu to school but work extra to send Nhamo, Nhamo makes sure to tell Tambu that girls don't get to go to school very long. This turns Nhamo into a villain in Tambu's eyes. Later, when Tambu grows corn to sell to raise money for her school fees, she discovers that Nhamo is the one responsible for stealing her corn out of the field and thwarting her efforts. After

Babamukuru returns from [England](#), he decides to take Nhamo to the mission. This makes Nhamo even more conceited. He "forgets" Shona, though he can remember it if there's something especially important to discuss, and he does whatever he can to get out of visiting the homestead or working when he does visit. While Jeremiah sees this as all part of Nhamo's education, Mainini worries about his development and wishes he'd talk to her. During his years at the mission, when he does come home, he antagonizes all three of his sisters for the fun of it and demands special treatment. All of this means that when Nhamo dies, Tambu isn't particularly upset. She's mostly upset for Nhamo because his educated, Westernized life was, according to him, entirely worth living.

Mr. Matimba – A teacher at the village school and at Sunday school. He breaks up the fight when Tambu tackles Nhamo for stealing her corn, and, after listening to her tale, he offers to help her sell her corn in Umtali. Unlike most of the other adults in Tambu's life, Mr. Matimba listens carefully to Tambu and takes her desires seriously. When they're on the street together in Umtali, Mr. Matimba tells Doris, a passing white woman, a story about Tambu's circumstances designed to arouse her sympathies and with this, is able to help Tambu raise enough money for two years of school. Understanding that the ten pounds would immediately disappear if Tambu takes it home, Mr. Matimba sets up a system to pay for school that allows Tambu to use the money without having to keep it herself. He later tries to impress upon Jeremiah that Tambu's education will be valuable to the family.

Anna – Maiguru's house girl. Tambu meets her for the first time during events surrounding Nhamo's funeral, and though she generally likes Anna, she also finds her unserious and too talkative. Tambu initially thinks that she'd like to sleep with Anna at Babamukuru's house rather than Nyasha. However, within a few hours of Tambu's arrival at the mission, Anna becomes an entirely different person. She speaks few words to Tambu, and when she does speak, it's with respect, deference, and honorifics. Eventually, Tambu comes to think of Anna as boring and just a part of the background. To an outside observer, it's clear that Anna isn't treated particularly well in her position. Her workload is extensive and, when Tambu misbehaves, Babamukuru lays off Anna without warning so that Tambu can assume her duties as punishment.

Takesure – A distant cousin of Babamukuru. He has two wives and is struggling to pay their bride prices, so Babamukuru sends him to Jeremiah's homestead to help out and earn money. Tambu believes that Takesure agreed to go because, like Jeremiah, he doesn't want to work and knows that Jeremiah won't make him. While there, he becomes involved with Lucia, and she gets pregnant. This causes major issues in the family, mostly because of the lies that Takesure and Jeremiah tell Babamukuru: Takesure insists that Lucia is cursing Jeremiah's children, while Jeremiah tries to claim paternity over Takesure's

baby. Though Takesure is deferential to Babamukuru when he's around, he has no interest in obeying his cousin. As soon as Babamukuru leaves after Christmas, he and Lucia begin sleeping together again.

Chido – Tambu's cousin. He's several years older, very handsome, and kind. However, like Nyasha, Chido is also a "hybrid," given that he spent five years as a child in [England](#) while Babamukuru studied. This is one of the reasons he's so successful in the present; his head start in England helps him earn admission to a prestigious school in Salisbury. His hybrid identity also means that he's willing to stand up to Babamukuru when he beats Nyasha for being promiscuous, though he knows enough about local traditions to understand that, in Babamukuru's eyes, Nyasha is behaving horrendously. Mainini hears at the end of the novel that Chido is romantically involved with a white girl, which reinforces her belief that "Englishness" is going to kill everyone in Babamukuru's family.

Tete Gladys – Babamukuru's only sister. She's a very large woman and is very traditional. Though she respects Babamukuru when she's around him, it's implied that she doesn't always take him seriously when she laughs about his plan for Jeremiah and Mainini's wedding. Because Gladys is part of the patriarchal family line, she isn't required to do chores when she visits the homestead for Christmas, and she gets to eat with the patriarchal family members in the house, rather than in the kitchen with the other women.

Grandmother – Tambu's paternal grandmother. She and Tambu were very close; Tambu spent a great deal of time with her, during which Grandmother taught Tambu how to cultivate corn and told her about their family's history. Though she speaks poorly of white settlers in her tales, she credits the white missionaries for taking in and educating Babamukuru after her husband died and left her with six children. She died taking a rest in her cornfield.

Doris – A white woman who buys corn from Tambu in Umtali. She's initially disgusted to see Tambu selling corn, as she believes Mr. Matimba is using the girl for child labor. However, Mr. Matimba is able to appeal to her sense of propriety by spinning a tale of Tambu's unfortunate circumstances, which makes Doris guiltily hand over enough money to pay for several years of Tambu's schooling.

Netsai – Netsai is Tambu's younger sister. Tambu notes that Netsai will one day make a sad and yielding wife: she's very kind and likes to do nice things for other people, even Nhamo. She helps Tambu with her chores and thrives on praise, and she genuinely doesn't mind fetching Nhamo's luggage for him when he returns from the mission school.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dambudzo – Mainini's baby. He's born when Tambu is about fourteen, not long before Mainini and Jeremiah's wedding. Babamukuru immediately begins saving for his education.

Rambanai – Tambu's baby sister. She's a toddler when Tambu first begins her schooling. Rambanai seems to genuinely adore her sisters.

Thomas – Patience's husband and one of Babamukuru's three siblings. Like his siblings, he idolizes Babamukuru and takes everything he says very seriously.

Patience – Thomas's wife. She still has personality and spark because she's only been married eight years.

Nyaradzo – The daughter of a white missionary. She is one of Nyasha and Tambu's friends.

Sylvester – A servant in Babamukuru's house. He steps in to help when Tambu performs Anna's chores for two weeks.

Farai – Lucia's baby boy, who is big for his age.

Shupikai – One of Tambu's little cousins.

Nyari – Tambu's friend at her local village school.

TERMS

Sadza – A traditional Zimbabwean porridge, often made from cornmeal. It's a staple food that is eaten with nearly every meal, and can be made with other grains as the need arises.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE LIMITS OF EDUCATION

Nervous Conditions follows Tambu, a young Rhodesian girl, from the age of ten to sixteen.

During this time, Tambu chafes as she watches her older brother, Nhamo, receive an education at their uncle Babamukuru's mission school while the equally bright Tambu is, save for a few years of education at the local school, denied the opportunity to learn. This changes when Nhamo dies suddenly of mumps in 1968, and the family makes the decision to send Tambu to the mission school in his place. Over the next two years, Tambu applies herself to her studies, as she knows it's the only way she'll be able to lift herself out of poverty. However, especially as Tambu observes her English-educated aunt Maiguru and learns about the sacrifices that Maiguru made, often because of her education, Tambu begins to see that education isn't a guaranteed key to her liberation. Rather, while

education may offer a number of benefits and a way out of poverty, it's not enough to undo the sexism, the racism, or the traditional family structures that trap both Tambu and Maiguru.

Tambu has had examples of what education can do for a person around from a young age. Her uncle, Babamukuru, and his wife, Maiguru, received bachelor's degrees in South Africa. This enabled Babamukuru to return to Rhodesia to act as the headmaster of the mission school, thereby affording him a level of financial security and prestige. Then, several years later, Babamukuru and Maiguru receive offers to pursue higher education in [England](#), which makes Babamukuru nearly a god in the eyes of his family members. Because of Babamukuru's income, he's able to support Tambu's family financially by paying for Nhamo's school fees when he attends the local school and by feeding the many relatives who congregate at Tambu's family homestead most years for Christmas. Because of Tambu's immediate family's dire poverty, these actions seem almost magical—Babamukuru's visits are the only time that Tambu gets cake and meat, for instance. For this reason, as well as the simple fact that Tambu is good at school and loves to learn, she also wants to become educated—as far as she can tell, there are no downsides to education.

Tambu's thinking on this matter begins to change after Nhamo starts attending the mission school. Though he was always self-important, his access to education makes him feel even more so and helps him justify not helping his family with farm labor when he visits home. To make matters worse for Tambu, her family prioritizes Nhamo's access to education over her own. Her father, Jeremiah, insists outright that educating his daughter offers few or no benefits for him: while he accepts that Tambu's education may be able to support the family when she's a young and unmarried woman, he asks her rhetorically, "can you cook books and feed them to your husband?" This indicates that, as far as Jeremiah is concerned, being educated isn't an attractive quality in a marriageable woman. He also later indicates that his reasoning is even more selfish, as he refuses Tambu's request to go to school on the grounds that her education won't benefit him: after she marries, Tambu's husband will receive the benefits of Jeremiah's investment. Both Jeremiah's insistence that education for Tambu isn't necessary and Nhamo's abuse of the power he gains through education only make Tambu more intent on becoming educated herself. She tells herself that unlike Nhamo, she'll remain loyal to her birth family and not look down on them, while Jeremiah becomes a convenient villain for her to work against.

Over the course of Tambu's two years at the mission school and specifically, through her relationship to Maiguru, Tambu begins to understand that education isn't a fail-safe way for her to save her family from poverty or to become a god-like figure like Babamukuru. Tambu eventually learns that Maiguru didn't go to England with Babamukuru to take care of him, as her relatives say. Instead, Maiguru earned a master's degree in

philosophy while she was there, which is why, in the present, she's able to teach at the mission school alongside her husband. Along with the social insult of Maiguru's education not being valued among family and friends, Tambu also discovers that Maiguru doesn't have control over the money she earns through teaching—Babamukuru uses her income to support the extended family, thereby depriving Maiguru of any power she might otherwise have to make decisions for herself or empower herself in other ways.

Though the young Tambu's strong sense of obedience keeps her from actually interrogating why it is that her highly educated aunt is in many ways a prisoner in her own home, Tambu the narrator—who is an adult with perspective and opinions, which she sometimes shares with the reader—makes it clear that education wasn't a force in her young life that was entirely good. Despite her noble intentions, Tambu is still appalled when she returns to the homestead and is reminded of her family's poverty and lack of education, just as Nhamo was. Similarly, the simple fact that Maiguru is female keeps her from effectively standing up for herself to her husband or her extended family, and she never obtains control of her paycheck. With this, the novel makes it clear that while education does provide upward mobility, that doesn't mean that it will be taken seriously, valued, or actually provide freedom and agency to women who receive it.



MEN VS. WOMEN

When Tambu is first pulled out of school, something that shakes her to the core, the reasons both of her parents give her for why this is acceptable have to

do with the fact that Tambu is female. By paying close attention to Tambu's thoughts and observations as she goes on to fight for her education and specifically, as she observes the lives of other women around her, the novel presents a wide range of ways for womanhood to look—though even with so much difference in education, marital status, or westernization, Tambu recognizes that all of the women in her family are still treated as inferior to the men around them.

When Tambu is first pulled out of school and complains to Jeremiah and Mainini about it, they both say much the same thing: Tambu's job in life, as a woman, is to get married, have babies, and care for her future family. As a child, Tambu finds this ridiculous since she has the example of Maiguru to look up to. In her assessment, Babamukuru is the one who looks after Maiguru in a big, luxurious house, and she isn't trapped by poverty or her husband. She is, as far as Tambu is concerned, free of the constraints that society puts on women like Mainini. Though Tambu remains mostly unwilling to reevaluate her initial assessment, the observations about Maiguru's life that Tambu is able to make after coming to live with Maiguru and Babamukuru paint a very different picture of what Maiguru's life is actually like. Despite being a highly educated working

woman, Maiguru doesn't have control over her paychecks or agency in how to parent her children. Though her home is, by Tambu's standards, lavish, the adult Tambu who narrates the novel is able to point out things that betray the fact that Maiguru and Babamukuru live on a tight budget and cannot actually afford everything. Maiguru also defers to her husband for every decision—something that indicates strongly that despite Maiguru's seemingly luxurious life, she's just as powerless as the other women around her when it comes to dealings with men.

This powerlessness is most apparent during holiday gatherings when the four branches of Babamukuru's family—his family, Jeremiah's family, his sister Gladys's family, and brother Thomas's family—all convene at Jeremiah's homestead, and it becomes even more pronounced when Tambu's maternal aunt Lucia comes to stay to help with Mainini's pregnancy. As the oldest brother, Babamukuru assumes the role of the family patriarch. As his wife, Maiguru is in charge of planning meals, providing food, and cooking for two-dozen extended family members. Maiguru conceptualizes this task not as an honor, but a burden put upon her. Though she does eventually put her foot down and refuse to attend Christmas festivities at the homestead, being shouldered with this responsibility in the first place suggests that her status as an educated woman doesn't mean she's not expected to serve her husband's family. On the other hand, because Gladys is part of the patriarchal line, she's a respected figure at these gatherings and when Babamukuru calls a family meeting, she's the only woman invited to participate—even though the reason for the meeting has nothing to do with her.

The subject of the meeting is Lucia, Maini's younger sister who is unmarried, in her mid-thirties, and pregnant with Takesure's baby, who is a distant cousin of Babamukuru's who was sent to Jeremiah's homestead to help Jeremiah manage. When Lucia isn't invited to participate in this meeting, it indicates that the men don't value Lucia's take on events and don't believe she has any right to voice her opinions regarding how the situation should be resolved. Though Lucia does insert herself into the meeting and tell the truth—that both Takesure and Jeremiah have been sleeping with her, though Jeremiah waited until after she was pregnant to do so—the men still attempt to lob ludicrous accusations at her. Takesure attempts to accuse her of witchcraft, while Jeremiah tries to claim the baby as his and use this as reasoning to take Lucia as a second wife. Notably, while Babamukuru wasn't going to allow Jeremiah to marry Lucia, he was going to allow these accusations to stand if Lucia hadn't defended herself.

In Lucia's case and Maiguru's case, the only option that either woman feels they have is to run away from the male relatives who oppress them. Lucia threatens to take Mainini with her and leave the family altogether, while Maiguru actually does leave Babamukuru for five days after a particularly intense

fight. Through Lucia's threat and Maiguru's action, both women do achieve some degree of freedom and autonomy: Babamukuru finds a job for Lucia as a cook at the mission, while Maiguru refuses to support Babamukuru's family members and advocates for Tambu to be allowed to attend the Catholic mission school.

While these instances offer some hope for the women of Tambu's family, the constant fights and occasional beatings that Nyasha suffers at the hands of Babamukuru for being improperly female suggest that those successes are isolated. For a variety of reasons including Nyasha's youth, her Western habits, and her unfeminine willingness to fight Babamukuru about how he treats her, the successes of other women in her family don't translate to her situation. Instead, Nyasha is forced to develop her own objectively unhealthy coping mechanisms—constant studying, anorexia, and bulimia—to deal with the stress and the pain of being female in a patriarchal society. Though the novel offers no fixes or remedies for the gender relationships that lead Nyasha to these habits and oppress Tambu's other family members, it instead offers Nyasha as a cautionary tale of what can happen when women's bids for empowerment aren't taken seriously. It's not just women's minds, babies, or food security at stake—their lives are in jeopardy.



COLONIALISM

Though Tambu sees education as an undeniably good thing, given that she believes she'll be able to use it to lift herself and her family out of poverty, the Rhodesian education system's roots in colonialism and racism present a number of challenges for Tambu and even more for Tambu's cousin Nyasha, who spent five years of her childhood in [England](#). Though Tambu mostly refuses to consider any deeper questions about colonialism, through Nyasha and Nhamo, *Nervous Conditions* paints a picture of a colonial system that's damaging and dangerous, but still attractive in important ways for individuals who wish to abandon traditional ways of doing things in favor of a white and Western definition of success.

It's important to keep in mind that even though Tambu isn't necessarily willing or able to make the connection, the school system she wishes to be a part of is a fundamental part of the colonial system in Rhodesia. During the mid-late 1960s when the novel takes place, Rhodesia was in the process of becoming independent from the United Kingdom and struggling to do so: the UK stated that colonies needed to transition to a black majority rule before being granted independence, something that the small percentage of white Englishmen in Rhodesia were unwilling to let happen. The schools were a major help to the settlers in this regard, as they offered them a platform from which to help "non-threatening" black natives become more "white" in terms of education and mannerisms, import Western

ideals to take the place of traditional customs and beliefs, and maintain the political and social systems that kept them in power.

This shows up in a variety of ways throughout the novel, first in regards to Nhamo. Tambu notices that after only a few years of education, Nhamo "forgets" Shona, their native language (though he inexplicably remembers if the mood strikes him), and begins to look down on life on the homestead. However, because Tambu and Nhamo's family sees education—and by extension, inclusion in upper-class, professional society that's white and Christian—as the only way out of poverty, Nhamo's behavior is seen as sad and annoying by his parents, not tragic and insulting. Tambu, on the other hand, feels that Nhamo's transformation turns him into a complete stranger. However, she also recognizes that his life as a student is more valuable than hers. This leads her, after Nhamo's death, to say, "I was not sorry that he had died, but I was sorry for him because, according to his standards, his life had been thoroughly worth living." This confession recognizes that while she found his snobbishness insulting, she only found it so because she wasn't also part of the "better," white educational system.

Later, when Tambu moves in with Babamukuru and Maiguru, Tambu discovers that forgetting Shona is only the tip of the iceberg. Nyasha admits to Tambu that at the party the family threw upon their return, she didn't ignore Tambu in favor of Nhamo because she didn't want to be friends: after five years in England, Nyasha was no longer fluent in Shona or in traditional customs. This becomes a major sticking point for Babamukuru throughout the rest of the novel, as he and Maiguru are consistently tried by Nyasha's cultural "hybridization" brought on by her time in England. Nyasha wants to wear short skirts and makeup, dance with boys, and behave disrespectfully to her parents—all things that her parents attribute to her upbringing in England. Her fluency in Western culture also brings her into contact with literature and political theory regarding current events, including the growing movement for women's rights and against apartheid in South Africa, which make her an even more dangerous individual in her parents' eyes. Finally, the pressure to conform to one correct way of being culminates in being hospitalized for an eating disorder—an illness that the first white psychiatrist Nyasha sees insists isn't something that afflicts Africans. With this, Nyasha's illness comes to embody the paradox of existing as a black person in the colonial system, as Nyasha is essentially damned by her parents for not being African enough, and ignored by the white establishment when it seems she's become too white.

Tambu continues to experience a great deal of angst about the relationship between the colonial system she's immersed in at school with the local beliefs and traditions her parents still practice at home. This angst begins to manifest in scary and dangerous ways when the family begins experiencing misfortunes in all branches of the family. Babamukuru brushes

off Jeremiah's suggestion that they hire a medium, and instead insists that the issue is that Jeremiah and Mainini aren't married in the Christian sense, and are therefore living in sin and causing God to punish the entire family for it. Babamukuru's suggested fix, a wedding, doesn't sit well with Tambu, as it makes her question her own participation in the mission school and her desire to become educated and wealthy, like Babamukuru. It first suggests to her that her entire existence isn't correct, given that if Babamukuru is right, she was born out of wedlock. She fears this only because she spends so much time on religious education at the mission school and takes their teachings very seriously. Then, she also suspects that the wedding is less about righting a cosmic wrong and more about an opportunity for Babamukuru to show off his wealth and prestige by funding an elaborate party that would, in Tambu's eyes, strip her parents of their dignity and turn them into powerless performers. In other words, Tambu sees the wedding as an insidious arm of colonialism that seeks to vilify the traditional ways of life that Tambu grew up with—which is exactly what she vowed she'd never do when she took Nhamo's place at the mission school.

Tambu's refusal to attend her parents' wedding can be read as one way in which she refuses to conform to Western and Christian ideals espoused by the mission, though it's only in brief moments in her narration that she's able to allude to this. Her teenage inability to recognize the colonial system as one that wishes to divorce her from her blackness and her roots, the narrator suggests, is awful, but not something she should be condemned for. Rather, the older Tambu suggests that the reader should be sympathetic towards her younger counterpart and recognize that for all colonialism's horrors, it offered her the only opportunities she saw to raise herself out of poverty, and that, at the time, those opportunities seemed too good to pass up.



OBEDIENCE VS. INDEPENDENCE

Nervous Conditions is, in many ways, a coming of age story for Tambu: over the course of the novel, she transforms from a headstrong child into an

obedient and, by many measures, successful teen. Despite the outward appearance of academic success, however, much of Tambu's process of coming of age happens as she grapples with the intersection of obedience and independence, specifically regarding her growing suspicions that her uncle Babamukuru isn't the kind and generous man he appeared to be when she was a child.

As a child, Tambu is extremely independent and takes issue with every injustice she sees before. When her parents run out of money to pay her school fees, she takes matters into her own hands by growing a plot of corn and selling it to raise the money herself. She thinks little of her parents, whom she sees as victims of poverty and a lack of education, and idolizes her

uncle Babamukuru, whom she holds up as a god who took matters into his own hands to become educated and successful. Tambu's tenacity can be attributed to her deep sense of betrayal when faced with the injustices of being denied an education. Notably, her tenacity and independence diminish very quickly after she starts at the mission school and takes up residence with Babamukuru and Maiguru. This, in turn, traces back to Tambu's idolization of her uncle and her belief that the most effective way to thank him for his kindness is to be as obedient as possible. Tambu's sudden shift to obedience has to do with her belief that she's an unworthy or unexceptional recipient of her uncle's kindness. When she first learns that she'll be going to the mission school, she reasons that Babamukuru would have done the same thing for any other promising family member—which she then proves to herself by bringing up that she's only at school because Nhamo died.

Using Babamukuru as her example, Tambu comes up with a simple plan for the rest of her life: work hard, obtain as much education as possible, and then get a job that will allow her to pull her family out of poverty. As far as she's concerned, the only way to make this plan work is by continuing to impress Babamukuru, as he's the one who holds the keys to her future. This means that while Tambu does read Nyasha's questionably appropriate library (Nyasha is reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* when Tambu arrives at the mission) and listens to Nyasha ask difficult, probing questions about race, gender, and the state of the world, Tambu declines to ask any of her own questions and instead, learns how to answer the questions posed to her. Nyasha, on the other hand, turns into a villain in Tambu's eyes. Because Nyasha is shockingly and inappropriately independent and willing to fight her father for her right to behave in that way, she becomes an easy scapegoat for the consequences of independent thought and progressive ideals.

Tambu's belief that Nyasha is out of hand and too independent doesn't stop her from recognizing that Babamukuru is harsh and at times violent towards his daughter. When Nyasha stays out a few minutes late to dance with a boy, Babamukuru beats her and calls her a whore, while Nyasha fights back the best she's able. This is one of many fights the two have as they clash over whether or not Nyasha can actually be so independent.

Over the course of the novel, Tambu learns a number of things that *should* lead her to question whether her uncle is actually as good and benevolent as she thought he was as a child. She learns that in addition to beating his daughter for her perceived promiscuity, Babamukuru controls Maiguru's paychecks, cares little for his family members' happiness or wellbeing, and looks down on members of his family like Jeremiah and Mainini. He sets impossibly high standards, and his callousness and desire for power push all his family members away, and, eventually, lead Nyasha to develop a dangerous eating disorder. Even though she recognizes these things as facts, Tambu refuses to consider that her uncle might not be a good man and a god. Her

refusal to consider these possibilities—and indeed, many possibilities she encounters during her time at the mission—means that by the end of the novel, she is still very much an undeveloped child.

However, the adult Tambu who narrates the story offers some hope for her future in underhanded and, to the young Tambu, undetectable ways. Because Tambu read so many of Nyasha's books and listened to her theoretical musings, when Catholic nuns come to administer an admissions test to the Catholic mission school, Tambu finds that she's developed enough of a critical mind to pass the test and earn a full scholarship to the school. Though the Catholic school presents another environment in which Tambu will be rewarded for conformity, it also gets her out of her uncle's house and on her own for the first time. The fact that Tambu later goes on to narrate the novel and in doing so, make critical assessments of her teenage obedience suggests that while it didn't happen during the period of the novel, Tambu was able to develop the ability to think critically—and that her deference to her uncle during her time at the mission school did indeed pave the way for her development later in life.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [blue text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ENGLAND

For Tambu and many of her family members, England is a faraway and almost magical land that symbolizes success, prestige, and affluence. It's where Babamukuru and Maiguru received their advanced degrees and where Nhamo eventually wants to go to school. Later, when Nyasha begins to struggle with eating disorders and ask difficult questions about colonialism, she suggests that England is actually a symbol of the oppressive colonial system in Rhodesia. Because of her time in England, Nyasha finds herself unable to properly conform to traditional ways of being—yet, because she's black, Nyasha can't be properly white and Western either. England then becomes her scapegoat and signifies her oppression, loss of identity, and inability to function in Rhodesia.



NYAMARIRA

For Tambu, the river Nyamarira represents the few joys of the homestead and her life in poverty. It's a life-giving river, allowing everyone a place to bathe, the women a place to do laundry, and those tasked with carrying water a place from which to fetch it. Tambu's love for the river doesn't change throughout the novel, suggesting that in some ways she

is doing better than Nhamo did in her endeavor to not look down on life at the homestead—she can still find joy and happiness in being at home, even with her education. However, the fact that the river itself changes as the local village grows and expands (the swimming holes once used by children become a thoroughfare) positions Nyamarira as a symbol of change, while Tambu's continued respect for the river indicates that it's possible to find a middle ground between the colonial system as represented by [England](#) and the dire provincial poverty of the homestead itself.



THE DOVER STOVE

Maiguru's Dover stove, which she brings with her to the homestead to cook with during holidays, makes it clear to everyone that Maiguru's immediate family is superior and successful. It's often used to cook food specifically for the most revered members of the family, as when Mainini uses it to cook rice instead of sadza for Babamukuru and the patriarchal family members. This reinforces the prestige of the family members who eat this food, as well as the specialness of the stove itself. When Babamukuru gives the stove to Jeremiah and Mainini as a wedding gift, Mainini conceptualizes the stove as a symbol of her family's power: by owning one of Maiguru's most prized possessions, the barrier to the power as represented by the stove (Maiguru) is removed altogether, and Mainini can assume some of that power.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Lynne Rienner Publishers edition of *Nervous Conditions* published in 2004.

Chapter One Quotes

☹️ All this poverty began to offend him, or at the very least to embarrass him after he went to the mission, in a way that it had not done before.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Nhamo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tambu steps back in time to explain the changes that Nhamo underwent after he began attending school at the mission. First, he became embarrassed by the poverty of the homestead. With this, Tambu begins to

explore how Nhamo became so self-important through his schooling. The mission school gave him a sense of superiority over his sisters, both because he was receiving a quality education and because he was staying with Babamukuru in his expansive and luxurious house, which made the homestead look especially rundown. This also begins to show how the colonial system—of which the mission school is an arm—works to turn young people away from their families and from traditional ways of life through schooling. Had Nhamo lived and continued to be good, the white missionaries would've rewarded him for not being poor and continued to oppress the rest of his family for not being able to do the same.

Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Mainini, Jeremiah, Nhamo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12



Explanation and Analysis

After explaining several ways in which Nhamo behaved especially poorly towards Tambu, Mainini, and his younger sisters after starting school at the mission, Tambu the narrator—who is much older than the Tambu of the novel, and has since learned to think for herself—recognizes that Nhamo was not actually doing anything wrong according to either traditional customs or the Western ideals he was exposed to at school. Though Tambu doesn't realize it now, her life is considered less valuable than Nhamo's simply because she's female. Historically speaking, Nhamo would've been one of only a few black children who received an education to begin with, and most of those black children who were educated were boys. This is because boys would continue to care for their birth families into adulthood, while girls would shift their loyalty to their husband's families after marriage. Altogether, this means that educating women simply isn't a priority, and their thoughts and feelings aren't perceived as worthy of consideration either.

Chapter Two Quotes

My father thought I should not mind. "Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it's nothing," he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables."

Related Characters: Jeremiah (speaker), Tambu, Nhamo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When Tambu's parents run out of money to send her to school, Jeremiah tells her that she doesn't need to go in the first place, as an education won't help her be a good wife in the future. Despite the fact that Jeremiah has certainly encountered white settlers and is a victim of a colonial system, he hasn't bought into their definition of success. Instead, he still relies on a traditional way of organizing families in which women are only valuable for what they can bring to a household in terms of food, industry, and babies, not intellectual pursuits—even if those intellectual pursuits might one day make a family money. This also shows that Jeremiah sees Tambu as a tool or a bargaining chip for the future, not as a person in her own right; he dehumanizes her just like Nhamo does.

"When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy [...] As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other."

Related Characters: Mainini (speaker), Tambu, Jeremiah, Nhamo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis



After Jeremiah tells Tambu not to worry about going to school, Tambu goes to her mother about the issue. Unfortunately, Mainini agrees that school isn't necessary, claiming it's far more important for Tambu to learn to sacrifice herself for her family. This shows first that Mainini, like Jeremiah, still operates under a system that sees girls

and women as useful only to their husband and children—it's unthinkable that a woman would become educated because she wants to learn or wants to have a career. This is an attempt to re-center Tambu's priorities to her future that includes only marriage, which isn't contingent on her education at all.

Then, the fact that Mainini mentions "the poverty of blackness" shows that while Tambu doesn't realize it, Mainini is actually very in tune with and aware of the colonial system and the effects it has on black people. She recognizes that because Tambu is black, she'll be hit doubly hard in colonial Rhodesia, as white people are still in control of the government at this time and promote laws that don't allow black people to gain power.

●● He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living. It was a difficult time for him because Mr. Matimba had shown him that in terms of cash my education was an investment, but then in terms of cattle so was my conformity.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Jeremiah, Nhamo, Mr. Matimba

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Tambu explains how Jeremiah gets upset when he catches her reading, as he believes she still wants to be educated. The crossroads that Tambu describes Jeremiah facing is the crossroads of traditional ways of doing things (Tambu's value in cattle) and the Westernized future (Tambu's value thanks to an education). Jeremiah will have to decide where he wants to focus Tambu's energies, since as her father, he's in charge of deciding what kind of woman Tambu will become. In both cases, however, it's worth noting that given what the novel explains about how marriage and bride prices work in Tambu's culture, Jeremiah's return on investment in either case will only come to him for short periods of time: Tambu will only be able to support her family with a job until she marries, and her husband will have no more obligations to Jeremiah after paying her bride price. In this way, it suggests that Jeremiah has something to gain from either decision and must only decide what kind of a return he wants from Tambu. All of this, of course, turns Tambu into a valuable pawn for her family and doesn't


acknowledge her thoughts or desires, which in turn keeps her from being able to make her own decisions.

Chapter Three Quotes

●● Whereas before I had believed with childish confidence that burdens were only burdens in so far as you chose to bear them, now I began to see that the disappointing events surrounding Babamukuru's return were serious consequences of the same general laws that had almost brought my education to an abrupt, predictable end.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Nyasha, Nhamo, Chido

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When Babamukuru and his family return from England, Nhamo "steals" Nyasha and Chido, and Tambu doesn't have an opportunity to speak with them. This, combined with the fact that, being female, Tambu wasn't allowed to accompany Jeremiah to the airport to pick them all up, impresses upon Tambu that her gender will indeed keep her from the things she wants to do. According to Jeremiah, it's only natural that Tambu stay home and engage in preparations with Mainini. This reasoning was the same reasoning that Jeremiah used to justify not paying for Tambu's schooling when they ran out of money—it was only natural for Tambu, as a girl, to set her studies aside in favor of training how to be a good wife. This shows Tambu that she can't just decide to forge ahead in spite of her gender; there's a system at work that will work constantly to keep her down because she's female, and there's little she can do about that system.

●● I was not sorry that he had died, but I was sorry for him because, according to his standards, his life had been thoroughly worth living.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Nhamo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 56



Explanation and Analysis

As Tambu watches her parents and sisters grieve Nhamo's death, she finds she's not actually upset that he's gone; she's sorry that he won't be able to live his very worthwhile life. This begins to show that Tambu already believes that a Western and educated approach to life is far superior to her life on the homestead—it implies that Tambu's life isn't all that worth living, since she's uneducated. This contributes to Tambu's growing sense of her own lack of worth and the idea that she doesn't belong. Notably, Tambu feels so worthless at times in part because she's female, and her education simply isn't as valuable as it'd be if she were male. This then speaks to the larger cultural context that valued men over women as a whole, and only valued women for what they could do as wives and mothers.

Chapter Four Quotes

☝ Today I am content that this little paragraph of history as written by Nyasha makes a good story, as likely if not more so than the chapters those very same missionaries were dishing out to us in those mission schools.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Nyasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

After telling the reader about what Nyasha had to say about the pastel houses in town, Tambu suggests that Nyasha's "history" is fiction, just like what the missionaries were telling students in school. This statement comes from a much older and wiser Tambu, who's well aware of what the mission schools were there to do. She recognizes that the mission schools were intended to help only the black students who were willing to acknowledge and accept the supremacy of the white settlers, and that the history the missionaries are teaching in school tell only one side of Rhodesia's colonial history. By implying that everyone was telling stories of questionable truth about the mission, Tambu as the narrator seeks to deprive the white settlers of some of their power in the reader's eyes.

☝ Its phrases told me something I did not want to know, that my Babamukuru was not the person I had thought he was. He was wealthier than I had thought possible. He was educated beyond books. And he had done it alone. He had pushed up from under the weight of the white man with no strong relative to help him. How had he done it? Having done it, what had he become? [...] I felt forever separated from my uncle.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 64



Explanation and Analysis

As Tambu arrives at Babamukuru's house at the mission and is confronted with his wealth and prestige, she wonders if she truly knows who he is. With this, Tambu recognizes that there is a world beyond the neat one she inhabited before coming to the mission. There, Babamukuru was merely successful and wealthy. What she observes upon her arrival at the mission is that Babamukuru is far more powerful than she ever gave him credit for, given that she believes he bested white men.

In reality, Tambu's thinking is somewhat skewed. Later in her narration, she indicates that she later came to agree with Nyasha that Babamukuru was, in the eyes of white settlers, a "good African" in that he upheld their ideals, promoted their school, and wanted his children to do the same. What Tambu sees as Babamukuru succeeding in besting the white people in Rhodesia is actually Babamukuru being exactly what the white people want him to be, which is someone far less powerful than Tambu, at this point, believes him to be.

☝ This lack of brilliance was due, I discovered years later when television came to the mission, to the use of scouring powders which, though they sterilized 99 percent of a household, were harsh and scratched fine surfaces. When I found this out, I realized that Maiguru [...] must have known about the dulling effects of these scourers [...] By that time I knew something about budgets as well, notably their inelasticity. It dawned on me then that Maiguru's dull sink was not a consequence of slovenliness, as the advertisers would have had us believe, but a necessity.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Maiguru

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Tambu, as the adult narrator, points out some of the clues that later told her that Babamukuru and Maiguru weren't nearly as wealthy as she believed when she first came to the mission. While their house is very large and well-furnished in some places, things like their choice in cleaning products and the broken kitchen window belie their actual financial situation.

These observations help the reader to understand that Babamukuru isn't actually the god that the young Tambu thinks him to be. Though he's smart, successful, and generous, he's also at the mercy of a racist colonial system that denies him any more power than he already has. This shows that there's a ceiling as to how "white" and successful black people can be under the colonial system, given that Babamukuru is one of the most powerful black men in Umtali at this time.

☝ [..] the real situation was this: Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel [...] and forgetting how ordinary humans existed—from minute to minute and from hand to mouth. The absence of dirt was proof of the other-worldly nature of my new home.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Maiguru

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Tambu explains that after her arrival at the mission, she was in grave danger of forgetting what her life on the homestead was like. By setting up this situation in which Babamukuru is a god and Tambu is an angel entering his domain, Tambu suggests that the mission and the homestead are two entirely different worlds. This also helps explain why Tambu goes on to idolize Babamukuru so much, as she does view him like he's a god and therefore deserves the utmost respect and deference.

The danger that Tambu talks about is the danger of becoming arrogant like Nhamo: believing that the homestead is beneath her, along with hard labor and people

who are uneducated. Tambu believes that Nhamo's proximity to Babamukuru's godliness is what made him feel that way, and she believes herself superior to Nhamo and therefore able to remember where she came from.

Chapter Five Quotes

☝☝ "Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they're stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it. They don't like it at all. It offends them. They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them."

Related Characters: Nyasha (speaker), Tambu, Babamukuru, Maiguru, Chido

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79


Explanation and Analysis

When Nyasha and Tambu finally begin talking to each other, Nyasha laments that her parents took her to England at all: she believes it would've been better had she stayed, so that she wasn't so anglicized. Nyasha recognizes that because she spent five of her formative years in England, she's nothing like what her parents expect her to be. In their eyes, she's rude and loose, when according to Nyasha, she's simply behaving in a more English way. However, Nyasha doesn't think she can change the way she behaves. England, she suggests, is a part of her and how she thinks about the world, and she can't just revert to the way she was when she was five or six years old.

☝☝ "I thought you went to look after Babamukuru," I said. "That's all people ever say." Maiguru snorted. "And what do you expect? Why should a woman go all that way and put up with all those problems if not to look after her husband?"

Related Characters: Nyasha, Maiguru (speaker), Babamukuru

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 102



Explanation and Analysis

Tambu is shocked when she learns that in England, Maiguru earned a master's degree in philosophy, as she's only heard that Maiguru went to England to look after Babamukuru. Maiguru's response begins to betray that she's not entirely happy in her life as Babamukuru's wife. Because Babamukuru is still so traditional in many ways, they still adhere to an antiquated family structure that diminishes Maiguru's accomplishments and forces her to care for and defer to her husband. Maiguru sarcastically recognizes that in the eyes of her birth culture, such submission and deference is her purpose in life—her thoughts and desires don't matter, while Babamukuru's do.

Again, though Tambu doesn't fully understand now, this moment shows her that even when women do have access to education, it's not always enough to actually save them from the sexist systems that limit them to the home. In other words, Maiguru's education isn't enough to free her or let her be powerful.

☝ I felt sorry for Maiguru because she could not use the money she earned for her own purposes and had been prevented by marriage from doing the things she wanted to do. But it was not so simple, because she had been married by my Babamukuru, which defined her situation as good.

Related Characters: Nyasha (speaker), Babamukuru, Maiguru

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103-104

Explanation and Analysis


After learning that Maiguru doesn't have control of her paycheck and was forced to give up on her dreams in deference to Babamukuru, Tambu struggles to figure out how oppressed Maiguru actually is. Tambu struggles with separating marriage as an institution from marriage to Babamukuru in particular. Though Tambu doesn't think poorly of marriage as an institution, she recognizes that it's something limiting for women. Marriage means that women must have babies and care for their husbands, two things that Maiguru previously cited she does instead of things she wants to do. On the other hand, Tambu cannot conceive of a world where being married to Babamukuru is a bad thing, given how much she idolizes her uncle. As far as Tambu is concerned, being married to Babamukuru is an honor and a privilege, and Maiguru should feel lucky to be married to

him. Tambu's inability to reconcile the two and acknowledge that being married to Babamukuru is still limiting speaks to the power of Tambu's deference to and idolization of her uncle.

Chapter Six Quotes

☝ Nor surprisingly, since Whites were indulgent towards promising young black boys in those days, provided that the promise was a peaceful promise, a grateful promise to accept whatever was handed out to them and not to expect more, Chido was offered a place at the school and a scholarship to go with it.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Chido

Related Themes:    




Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Tambu explains how Chido happened to earn a scholarship to a prestigious multiracial school in Salisbury. The voice of the older Tambu shines through here, as she recognizes that the missionaries and other white people in Rhodesia only wanted to help black people who would then go on to peacefully and gratefully uphold the systems that keep white people in power. Because Babamukuru is considered a "good African," given his role as the headmaster of a mission school, Chido is also believed to be good, peaceful, and unlikely to rock the boat and try to usurp power for himself and other natives. With this, Tambu shows again how the educational system didn't actually exist to empower and emancipate black people: it existed to indoctrinate them into a system that kept them pinned down and submissive.

☝ The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition [...] Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Nyasha, Nhamo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After Babamukuru beats Nyasha for dancing with a boy, Tambu realizes that all men use their power to subjugate women; it's not something that is unique to Jeremiah and Nhamo. This is shocking for her, as she still believes that Babamukuru is a good and generous person with no faults. By beating Nyasha, Babamukuru turns into a man like any other regardless of his education, his success, or his prestige.

Notably, Tambu also notices that education or income level doesn't affect whether or not a man chooses to victimize women just for being women. Doing so is a way for men to maintain their power over women, and the relative power of a man or of a woman can't save a woman from being beaten. This shakes Tambu, as she believed that education would take her far away from this kind of victimization, though her idolization of Babamukuru does keep her from ever thinking much further about it.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☝☝ Although she had been brought up in abject poverty, she had not, like my mother, been married to it at fifteen. Her spirit, unfettered in this respect, had experimented with living and drawn its own conclusions. Consequently, she was a much bolder woman than my mother [...].

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Mainini, Lucia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tambu briefly explains her aunt Lucia's character. Lucia is bold and opinionated because she's not been forced to give into a husband and hasn't acted with much regard for her father, either. This assessment situates female power and emancipation directly with not being married, as Tambu also implies that Mainini is so powerless and broken because she's been married for so long and from such a young age. Tambu's assessment also suggests that poverty doesn't have to break a woman's spirit, though it can play a part in doing so. Rather, the one true culprit is male domination. This offers some hope for Tambu's future, as she's not yet married—and therefore not yet put down like her mother is—and has time to develop her own thoughts and opinions enough to hold onto them after marriage.

☝☝ But the women had been taught to recognize these reflections as self and 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, of the Maigurus or the Lucias.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Mainini, Maiguru, Lucia, Patience

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

During the fight in the kitchen about whether the men are meddling in business that doesn't concern them (the issue with Lucia and Takesure), Tambu recognizes that the women take sides because they've been tricked into thinking they have to. Tambu sees that because of the years of being dominated by men, and the fact that women are overwhelmingly dependent on the men around them, women divide themselves into two categories: those like Lucia, who stand up to men, and those like Maiguru, who appear to support the patriarchy. However, Tambu understands that this is actually an effect of the patriarchal system that impacts them all: men and women aren't all that different, Tambu suggests, and women aren't all that different from each other; the problem is that because of differences in education and power, different groups see each other as enemies, not allies fighting for the same cause.

☝☝ "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 [...] I am poor and ignorant, that's me, but I have a mouth and it will keep on talking, it won't keep quiet."

Related Characters: Mainini (speaker), Tambu, Maiguru, Lucia, Patience

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After Maiguru excuses herself from the fight in the kitchen, Mainini insists that the other women only listened to Maiguru with such respect because Maiguru is rich. Mainini's outburst, though embarrassing for Tambu, again

suggests that she's more aware of the system that traps her than Tambu thinks she is. Mainini recognizes that because she's female, poor, and black, her opinion matters little to others. Maiguru, on the other hand, has marginally more power because of her education and money. However, Mainini's refusal to stop talking suggests that even women with objectively little power still have opportunities to take it for themselves. In this case, she can take control of the room and mobilize the women to go fight for women's rights to be recognized and listened to by their powerful male family members.

Chapter Eight Quotes

☝☝ Naturally I was angry with him for having devised this plot which made such a joke of my parents, my home and myself. And just as naturally I could not be angry with him since surely it was sinful to be angry with Babamukuru.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Mainini, Jeremiah

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing that Babamukuru wants to throw a wedding for Jeremiah and Mainini, Tambu struggles to organize her thoughts and parse out her feelings about Babamukuru. In her mind, the wedding itself is a way to humiliate Jeremiah and Mainini by making it painfully obvious that they're not as Christian and as "correct" as Babamukuru would like them to be. Tambu also believes that the wedding is an excuse for Babamukuru to show off how wealthy he is, and her parents are only tools that will allow him to do that.

However, Tambu struggles because she still sees Babamukuru as a god. In her mind, a god such as Babamukuru isn't someone that she can be angry with or question—that's not how the mission school or her father have taught her to think about authority figures. In this way, Tambu's unwillingness to question whether or not Babamukuru is truly deserving of her affection and idolization keeps her from thinking critically and understanding that she can be both angry with Babamukuru *and* thankful for all he's done for her.

☝☝ I simply was not ready to accept that Babamukuru was a historical artifact; or that advantage and disadvantage were predetermined, so that Lucia could not really hope to achieve much as a result of Babamukru's generosity; and that the benefit would only really be a long-term one if people like Babamukuru kept on fulfilling their social obligation; and people like Lucia would pull themselves together.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Nyasha, Lucia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

When Babamukuru finds Lucia a job, Tambu is very impressed with Babamukuru, while Nyasha insists that Babamukuru is obligated to do things like find Lucia a job. Here, Tambu lays out how things actually work, which is not at all how she understands the world to work. This shows just how far ahead Nyasha is in her thinking, as she recognizes that Babamukuru represents the order that the white missionaries imposed on the natives of Rhodesia when they colonized the land. She also sees that for someone who is poor and independent like Lucia, there's no hope of her getting ahead unless someone like Babamukuru helps her out.

This in particular dispels the idea that someone only has to work hard to do well in life, which in turn leads back to Tambu. Tambu's academic success is almost entirely thanks to Babamukuru, as he was the one who helped put her through school in the village and now pays her fees to go to the mission school. Like Lucia, Tambu would have no hope of getting ahead if Babamukuru were to stop supporting her.

☝☝ My vagueness and my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. It had happened insidiously, the many favorable comparisons with Nyasha doing a lot of the damage.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Babamukuru, Nyasha

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

As Tambu resolves to go against Babamukuru by refusing to go to the wedding, the older Tambu notes that her reverence for Babamukuru kept her from learning how to think critically. In this situation, she specifically notes that the extreme obedience she shows Babamukuru is something new—remember that Tambu defied Jeremiah to grow her own corn and pay her way through school, something she'd never dream of doing with Babamukuru. However, at the mission, Tambu's idolization of her uncle combined with Babamukuru's belief that Tambu is an ideal young woman make it so that Tambu feels she has no choice but to continue to idolize him and bend to his wishes. Because becoming like him is Tambu's goal in life, and because she recognizes that Babamukuru has the power to help her get there, she feels as though it'd be nearly suicidal to go against him. In other words, Tambu's continued success at school and in Babamukuru's house hinges on her willingness to stay dangerously obedient and not think for herself.

Chapter Nine Quotes

☞ How could I possibly forget my brother and the mealies, my mother and the latrine and the wedding? These were all evidence of the burdens my mother had succumbed to. Going to the convent was a chance to lighten those burdens by entering a world where the burdens were light.

Related Characters: Tambu (speaker), Nyasha, Mainini, Nhamo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 182


Explanation and Analysis

Though Nyasha tries to discourage Tambu from attending the Sacred Heart Catholic school on the grounds that the school would assimilate Tambu into their culture and make her forget who she is, Tambu believes that this isn't true. As far as Tambu is concerned, she's unable to forget the poverty she grew up in, Nhamo's cruelty, and Babamukuru's humiliation of her parents—all of which she sees as the burden of womanhood that Mainini warned her about as a child. Tambu believes that by pursuing this educational opportunity, she'll be able to avoid Mainini's fate while also remembering where she came from.

What Tambu doesn't yet realize is that going to the school isn't actually going to counteract the fact that she's female and black, which were the two things that Mainini said Tambu needed to learn to bear. Babamukuru continues to bring up Tambu's future marriage throughout the rest of the novel, impressing upon her that no matter how much education she completes, her true worth is still the worth of a wife. Similarly, Tambu discovers when she arrives at the school that though the school is multiracial, it's segregated, and the white students aren't always friendly or welcoming to her. Education, unfortunately for Tambu, can't conquer all.

☞ "I don't know what people mean by a loose woman—sometimes she is someone who walks the streets, sometimes she is an educated woman, sometimes she is a successful man's daughter or she is simply beautiful. Loose or decent, I don't know."

Related Characters: Maiguru (speaker), Tambu, Babamukuru

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

For the first time, Maiguru has something to say when Babamukuru asks her for her opinion on the possibility of Tambu attending Sacred Heart. Maiguru points out that calling women "loose" is something that men have used for decades to vilify women for stepping outside the bounds of happy and demure housewives and enjoying any degree of power. With this, Maiguru hopes to tell Babamukuru that Tambu won't be corrupted by the Catholic school if she hasn't been corrupted already—anyone who calls Tambu loose is simply reacting to her level of education or something else arbitrary about her.

Maiguru's decision to stand up for herself and for Tambu represents a turning point in her development as well. Though she's already begun to stand up for herself more by this point, this is the first time that she actively goes against Babamukuru's decision and stands up for what she believes is right. In this particular situation, she uses her relative power to help another woman become, hopefully, more powerful—and in doing so, lays the groundwork for men like Babamukuru to learn to truly respect the women around them.

Chapter Ten Quotes

☞ "Look what they've done to us," she said softly. "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you."

Related Characters: Nyasha (speaker), Tambu, Babamukuru, Maiguru

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

During Nyasha's mental break, she laments that "they" (presumably, white settlers and missionaries) have made it

so Nyasha is neither truly white nor truly black. This illustrates the true consequences of colonialism and existing between two cultures. Nyasha's mental break as a whole encapsulates this, as she becomes so ill in part because of the pressure she feels to impress Babamukuru and the crushing feeling that she'd be doing the wrong thing by giving in to his demands. In turn, because of this, Nyasha is also denied the familial support she craves, as Babamukuru can't bring himself to be proud of his daughter given her proclivity towards English mannerisms, which he finds rude and distasteful. In this way, Nyasha comes to exist in a liminal space between the two cultures and suffers for not properly taking one side or the other.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Kwame Anthony Appiah introduces the novel by repeating its opening line: Tambu tells the reader that she wasn't sorry when her brother died. Tambu goes on to say that she refuses to apologize, and Appiah poses the question of whom the expected reader is. Appiah gives a brief overview of the novel's events: Tambu's brother, Nhamo, learns to despise his sisters as a result of his education, and Tambu wonders why *she* can't be educated. Her parents are dismissive, and Mainini, Tambu's mother, tells her that she needs to learn to carry the weight of womanhood and the "poverty of blackness"—two things that won't be helped by education. Tambu proceeds to fight for her education.

Appiah says that this all shifts when Nhamo dies and, because there are no other brothers, Tambu finally has access to Western education. She struggles to reconcile her moral upbringing with the injustices she observes and experiences because of her gender, and she watches her female relatives also be brutalized by these injustices. Tambu also watches her cousin Nyasha reject her father's controlling nature, which leaves her struggling with dangerous eating disorders. Mainini suggests that Nyasha is plagued by "Englishness," though Tambu persists in her studies.

Appiah notes that in general, people believe that modern African novels are addressed to Western readers. However, he says that *Nervous Conditions* doesn't in any way do this. Dangarembga uses Shona vocabulary with no explanation, and Tambu's assessments of white people are uncomfortable. He suggests that in particular, the book's primary issue—how Western-educated women and their uneducated family members can escape oppression because of their gender and skin color—is a part of a very non-Western context and is unique to the novel.

Appiah insists that, regardless of who the intended audience is, the problems of race and gender are still familiar. He says that Dangarembga writes with the assumption that her novel will make sense to many different people by having Tambu narrate the tale. This, Appiah suggests, is why *Nervous Conditions* has received so much worldwide acclaim.

Appiah's introduction gestures to many of the novel's big ideas and suggests that all of Tambu's enemies (colonialism, sexism, and racism) are interrelated. He also sets up that Tambu is, at least initially, headstrong and independent and believes that she can escape the weight of her enemies simply by fighting hard against them.



The fact that Tambu persists in pursuing her education even after Nyasha's hospitalization indicates that Tambu believes that she'll be able to escape the same fate as her cousin and essentially exist in two worlds: the traditional Rhodesian world, and the white colonial one she sees at school.



By suggesting that the novel isn't written for a white and Western audience, Appiah suggests that the colonial system that Tambu experiences—which is the same one in which the author was raised—is beginning to dissipate, and authors like Dangarembga now don't need to go through Western channels to create art like this novel.



By stepping back and insisting that racism and gender issues are universal, Appiah creates a way into the novel for readers who know little about colonial Rhodesia and offers readers familiar things to look out for as the novel unspools.



CHAPTER ONE

Tambu explains that she wasn't sorry when her brother died and has no intention of apologizing for seeming callous. Instead, she'd like to tell the reader about the events that led up to Nhamo's death and that allowed her to write this story. She insists that the story isn't about Nhamo's death as much as it's about her and Lucia's escape, Mainini and Maiguru's entrapment, and the many rebellions of her cousin, Nyasha.

Nhamo dies when Tambu is thirteen. She and her family expect Nhamo to arrive from the mission by bus, a mode of transportation he detests: he doesn't like the smells or how slow it is. He prefers it when their uncle and the headmaster of the mission school, Babamukuru, drives Nhamo home. Nhamo also suggests often that the school hire a special bus for him and the one other student in their area, but this would still mean that Nhamo would have to walk about two miles from the bus stop to the homestead.

Tambu doesn't understand why Nhamo feels this way. The walk home winds through fields where friends work, through fruit trees, and by the river, which is called the [Nyamarira](#). Tambu explains that there are several spots where children can swim, and others where women do laundry. However, Tambu says that when she was young, the government built District Council houses near where everyone washed, which meant that people began crossing the river there to reach the shops and an ale house. Regardless, Tambu doesn't understand why Nhamo hates the walk and explains that he usually avoids it altogether by staying at the mission for holidays.

Tambu explains that it was Babamukuru's idea to enroll Nhamo at the mission in 1965, as it would allow Nhamo to enter a profession and raise the family out of poverty. By that time, Nhamo was already doing well at the local school. Tambu and Nhamo's father, Jeremiah, quickly saw the sense in this plan. Jeremiah would often tell Nhamo that if he had brains like Babamukuru, he'd be a doctor. Once, Tambu asked Jeremiah to explain how smart Babamukuru is; Jeremiah replied that Babamukuru had been an avid reader and had been given the chance to learn.

By immediately centering the story on women, Tambu makes it clear that her story isn't necessarily about the men in her life. Instead, men act as villains and forces to work against, while the true players are the women striving to dismantle sexist power structures.



Nhamo's suggestion that the mission hire a private bus for just two students suggests that Nhamo is becoming extremely self-important. At this point, it's not clear whether this is just how Nhamo is or if it's a result of his education at the mission, but his desire to be driven shows that he thinks he deserves special treatment and is above walking.



Tambu's love of the walk home shows that even though she wants to leave the homestead and pursue an education, she still finds that there's a lot to love about life there. This indicates that Tambu is living between two worlds, given that she wants to join Nhamo in becoming Western and educated while also wanting to respect and enjoy the pleasures of traditional farm life.



It's important to note that Jeremiah makes it clear that Babamukuru was given the chance to learn. Though he doesn't say anything about himself, the reader learns later that Jeremiah wasn't afforded the same opportunities. This likely impresses upon Tambu that the only barrier to education is simply having or not having access, which simplifies the issue and shows how childishly naive Tambu is at this point.



On this day in 1968, Babamukuru has a meeting and therefore can't drive Nhamo, though Tambu suspects that Babamukuru secretly wants Nhamo to take the bus. She explains that except for Jeremiah, they're all worried about Nhamo's development. Not long after going to the mission, Nhamo stopped coming home for holidays, always citing the need to study. This allowed him to avoid the corn harvest, which is uncomfortably itchy work. However, Babamukuru does make Nhamo come home in the fall for the planting. When he's home, he has to bathe in cold water and can only read by candlelight. The poverty "began to offend him," and he stopped helping with chores—unless Babamukuru was there to watch or help. Tambu doesn't like it when Babamukuru helps, as he looks less dignified, and she also hates having to kill a chicken for his dinner.

In the evening, Mainini goes to her vegetable garden and Tambu returns to the homestead. She expects to find Nhamo, but he's not there. Her younger sisters, Netsai and Rambanai, are playing a game. Tambu isn't worried that Nhamo isn't home; the bus is often late. She reasons that he probably won't come home tonight at all, as that would mean having to carry his own luggage (which is usually little more than a small bag or two) rather than send Netsai to fetch it from the terminal. One bag usually contains tea for Mainini from Maiguru, but Nhamo keeps it for himself.

Tambu knows that Nhamo is just exerting his power when he makes Netsai fetch his luggage. She hates it, especially when Nhamo refuses to watch Rambanai and makes Netsai take the baby with her—which then means that Tambu has to help as well. Tambu is too big for Nhamo to bully, but Nhamo beats Netsai if Tambu tries to stop her from fetching the luggage. This isn't all that's nasty about Nhamo; Tambu still thinks their home was healthier when he wasn't there.

Without a chicken to kill, Tambu turns to preparing the evening meal of sadza and vegetables. Netsai brings Tambu out of her reverie by asking what's wrong. Tambu doesn't want to say that she was thinking of how much she dislikes Nhamo, so she says that it'll be good when he arrives. She gathers the items she needs for cooking and discovers that Netsai already fetched water and washed the cooking pots.

Tambu's suspicion that Babamukuru is also worried about Nhamo's development helps her to believe that Babamukuru is an entirely good person who still clings to traditional ideals despite his education. However, she then complicates this by not liking it when Babamukuru helps in the fields—something that would also indicate his acknowledgement that his family still relies on traditional labor to survive, not intellectual labor like he does. This begins to get at the crux of Tambu's issue of not being able to think critically or in a nuanced way.



The fact that Nhamo saves tea meant for his mother for himself only reinforces how selfish he is, while Mainini's unwillingness or inability to reprimand him for not sharing suggests that gender dynamics underpins this situation. Because Nhamo is male, he can get away with this sort of thing, while Mainini doesn't even have power as a parent (let alone as a woman) to make him be kind.



Tambu's assessment confirms that Nhamo abuses his power as a man in the family. The fact that she hates him for this suggests that Tambu feels these kinds of injustices deeply, implying that she's an idealistic person who believes she shouldn't be trapped by the kind of sexism that Nhamo espouses.



Despite recognizing the injustice of Nhamo's bullying, Tambu still doesn't feel comfortable vocalizing it. Such censorship of her thoughts and feelings suggests that she's still trapped by the sexist system and will be punished for pushing back.



Naïvely, Tambu thinks that when Nhamo gets home, she'll make him catch the chicken, and she'll pluck and cook it. She believes this is naïve because Nhamo has no interest in being fair. Tambu tells the reader that Nhamo didn't mean to be obnoxious; in reality, he was just behaving in the way that was expected of him, and concerns of his female family members aren't important. This is why, when Nhamo dies, Tambu is two grades behind where she should've been. As a young teen, she felt these injustices deeply, which is how she came to dislike Nhamo and her family.

Remember that the novel is narrated by a much older Tambu looking back on her younger self. Insights like this show that Tambu has grown up and developed critical thinking skills, even if she does see that her younger self was righteous in her indignation. When she notes that she came to dislike Nhamo and her family because of these injustices, it indicates that she was a child obsessed with fairness.



CHAPTER TWO

Stepping back in time, Tambu explains how they got to the point where she hated Nhamo. He begins school at age seven, while many other kids didn't begin for another year or two. Babamukuru, however, forces Jeremiah to send Nhamo early. Tambu starts the next year. Unfortunately, despite fair rains, the crop that year is poor, and there's no money for school fees. With Babamukuru in [England](#), there's no chance of asking him for money.

When Tambu isn't able to go to school because of a poor crop, it illustrates the extent of her family's poverty, as well as their dependence on traditional ways of making money, like farming. This in turn keeps them from being able to become successful in any way, as they can't get ahead through farming and also can't educate their children to get ahead in that way.



Tambu asks her family members about the events surrounding Babamukuru's departure for [England](#), as she doesn't remember it. Babamukuru purportedly didn't want to leave the mission, as he'd already left his mother once and by that time had two children. The question of going centered around them, though Babamukuru felt he couldn't say no—doing so would've annoyed the missionaries who helped him get so far already. They even offered Maiguru a scholarship to study as well. Eventually, they decided to go and take Chido and Nyasha with them for five years. Jeremiah worried about having to provide for himself, while Mainini hoped that it would make Jeremiah more responsible at last.

The belief that Babamukuru couldn't say no because he needed to appease the white missionaries indicates that Babamukuru isn't actually as powerful as Tambu would like to think. He's at the mercy of the colonial system and must continue to keep the more powerful white people happy if he wishes to maintain his own semblance of power. Jeremiah's worries show that Babamukuru is the one who supports his family, which he does because he's the patriarch and feels obligated to do so.



At that time, Nhamo knew lots of things: he knew he was going to study like Babamukuru, and that it was his responsibility to educate or care for his sisters. When Jeremiah and Mainini told him there was no money for school fees, he cried. Mainini began selling boiled eggs at bus stops and managed to keep Nhamo in school, which angered Tambu. Jeremiah told Tambu that she shouldn't mind not being in school, since she'd never be able to feed her husband books.

When Mainini takes matters into her own hands, it shows two things. First, it indicates that at this point, she believes that education is the way out. Second, it suggests that she's more independent than Tambu gives her credit for, as she knows she can't rely on her husband to come up with the money.



Tambu thought that this was silly, as Maiguru was educated and didn't serve Babamukuru books for dinner. She went to Mainini and spat that Maiguru was a better wife because of her education, but Mainini calmly insisted that womanhood is a heavy burden. She explained that Tambu needed to learn to carry the burdens of blackness and womanhood with strength. Tambu couldn't make sense of this, as Babamukuru was black and successful, and Maiguru was a woman and successful. These conclusions reached, Tambu announced that she'd go to school.

Jeremiah refused to work and earn the school fees himself, but Tambu had a plan: if he'd give her corn seed, she'd grow corn and raise the fees herself. Jeremiah laughed, and Mainini suggested they allow Tambu to do this, as she'd just learn to fail. Tambu spent the next few months tending her crop, just as her grandmother taught her when she was little.

In addition to teaching Tambu how to grow corn, Tambu's grandmother also taught family history. She moved to the area after getting married. However, "wizards" came from the south and forced people from the land. Eventually, they came upon the sandy homestead. Tambu's grandfather went to a wizard's farm to work, was a slave briefly, and then escaped to the southern gold mines while Tambu's grandmother and her children were thrown off the homestead. Her husband died, leaving her with six children. She walked with her children to the home of the "holy wizards," who took in nine-year-old Babamukuru and educated him. He worked hard and eventually earned a scholarship to South Africa. The message was to endure and obey, and Tambu lapped it up.

Tambu tended her cornfields and completed all her other chores. Mainini began to discourage Tambu to prepare her for failure, and Nhamo didn't help either. He told her that she couldn't go to school because she's a girl. After this, Tambu stopped feeling much concern for Nhamo.

Late in February, as Tambu's crop ripened, the cobs began to disappear. Nhamo asked her what she expected. Tambu decided to go to church on Sunday, craving the games and the friendship. She met up with her friend Nyari, who insisted she missed Tambu—but enjoyed it when Nhamo brought her corn. Tambu immediately raced to Nhamo, tackled him, and was stopped by Mr. Matimba when she tried to tackle him again. Mr. Matimba chastised the watching children and sent them away.

Though defeatist, Mainini's counsel shows that she has a firm grasp of the systems at play in Rhodesia: she knows that as a woman, she and Tambu are at the mercy of the powerful men around them, while the colonial system will punish them for being black. Tambu's assessment of Maiguru allows her to believe that education is the cure for all her problems.



Tambu's desire to earn the money herself shows the strength of her convictions: she believes fully that education will save her, as well as that she can overcome the barriers set out because of her gender if she does it herself and doesn't defer to men.



While Tambu notes that there's a difference between "wizards" (settlers) and "holy wizards" (missionaries), she doesn't pick up on the fact that her grandmother still calls all white people wizards—something that suggests that they're all part of the same colonial system, even if some appear to be kind. However, because the so-called holy wizards save Babamukuru, educate him, and turn him into the successful patriarch he is today, Tambu is able to overlook this and only see the power of education.



Nhamo's assessment, while rude, isn't wrong either: during this time, it was mostly boys who attended school when black children attended at all, as their education was more valuable to their families.



The fact that Nhamo is sabotaging Tambu makes it clear that he's not just casually sexist and antagonistic; his belief that Tambu shouldn't go to school is strong enough to embolden him to make it even more difficult for her to go. Tambu's choice to tackle Nhamo illustrates her fighting and independent spirit, which isn't dampened because of her gender.



Tambu told Mr. Matimba the whole story. He suggested that Tambu sell her corn to Whites in town and offered to take her with him on Tuesday. Jeremiah was incensed and tried to forbid Tambu, but Mainini refused to stand with him: she pointed out that if he didn't let her go, she'd resent him for not letting her help herself.

On Tuesday, Tambu climbed into the truck with Mr. Matimba. He explained to her why the bumps on the road felt bumpier in a car and why he drove on only one side of the road. When they started up into the mountains, she commented that the white people must've been strong to build such a road. Mr. Matimba noted that the black people actually built the road, and it was an awful job. At the pass, he pointed out Umtali. Tambu was terrified when they entered real traffic and encountered stoplights.

Finally, they got out of the car and stopped on a corner. Tambu arranged her corn as Mr. Matimba tried, in English, to flag down an old white woman. Tambu tried not to act disgusted at the sight of the woman's skin. The woman, Doris, took issue with the child labor she was witnessing and insisted that Tambu needed to be in school. Tambu understood almost none of this given her rudimentary grasp of English, but after Mr. Matimba spoke, Doris gave him paper money and chose a few cobs.

Mr. Matimba helped Tambu pack up and explained that he'd told Doris that Tambu was an orphan trying to pay her way through school. Doris gave Mr. Matimba ten pounds towards the cause. When Tambu suggested she'd keep the money at home, Mr. Matimba suggested they give it to the headmaster for safekeeping and then deduct her school fees out of it yearly. Nobody at home believed Tambu earned ten pounds, so Jeremiah went to see the headmaster. When Jeremiah learned Tambu was telling the truth, he insisted the money belonged to him. The headmaster pointed out that it was Tambu's.

Finally, they called in Mr. Matimba. He pointed out that someday, Tambu will be able to earn more than ten pounds per month if she's educated. Jeremiah spat that he'll lose it all when Tambu marries, but Tambu went to school for the next two years, and Babamukuru returned from [England](#) during her second year.

When Mainini stands up to Jeremiah, it suggests that she also takes Babamukuru's story to heart and believes that Tambu should be given access, even if she's going to fail. Again, though defeatist, this indicates that Mainini believes in her daughter.



Mr. Matimba is certainly a part of the colonial education system as a teacher, so it's telling that he implies that white people forced black natives to do the nasty work of building the road. This suggests that even though one goes through the education system, they can learn to think critically about the systems around them.



Tambu's disgust at Doris's skin reminds the reader that because she's been raised in a rural area, she hasn't had a lot of contact with white people. This offers some explanation for why Tambu doesn't think critically about the colonial system; it effectively doesn't exist for her because she doesn't see white people promoting the system at all.



The suggestion to keep the money at the school suggests that Mr. Matimba is aware that he's getting into a tricky situation with Jeremiah by helping Tambu; because Jeremiah doesn't see Tambu as an individual and instead sees her as future income, he doesn't believe she should have access to the money. This argument shows how the colonial system does in some ways deprive men of power.



Jeremiah's anger shows again that he sees Tambu as a means to an end: Tambu will earn him money later when she marries, while her education will only benefit her husband. This shows how the traditional systems allow men to exploit their female family members.



In the lead-up to Babamukuru's return, Jeremiah manages to come up with a significant sum of money through begging to throw a party. Nhamo gets to accompany Jeremiah to the airport and makes a big deal of this honor. Though their travel plans are simple in theory—a bus and then a train—everything is complicated by the fact that the buses often don't arrive when they're supposed to.

Tambu desperately wants to be a part of the travel preparations, and Jeremiah eventually tells her to stop wanting so much, as it's natural for her to stay home and help Mainini with the preparations. This and his other assessments of what's natural annoy Tambu, and she decides that there's no reason to try to please her father since he can't be pleased anyway. This makes Jeremiah even angrier, as he feels she's trying to emulate Nhamo and is becoming a useless woman. Eventually, he leaves her alone.

CHAPTER THREE

Babamukuru arrives in a cavalcade of cars. Netsai, Tambu, and their cousin Shupikai watch the cars approaching from miles away. When the cars get close enough, they run to the cars and dance and sing. Tete Gladys and her husband are in the first car; then Babamukuru; then Thomas and his wife, Patience. When the cars reach the yard filled with celebrating relatives, Jeremiah jumps out of the car and announces Babamukuru's return, and after getting out of her car, Tete Gladys praises Babamukuru.

When Babamukuru steps out of the car, aunts and uncles drown him in hugs and pats. He eventually steps in the house with his siblings and other paternal aunts, while other female relatives remain outside. Maiguru is the last one inside and looks no different than when she left. Nyasha, however, looks very English: she's wearing a tiny dress that barely covers her thighs and looks concerned. Tambu turns away, disgusted by Nyasha's inappropriate dress. She can't pinpoint why she also dislikes Chido, but she dislikes Nhamo when he takes the cousins for himself to speak to in English. Neither cousin will speak to Nhamo, but the whole thing irritates Tambu to no end.

Coming up with the money through begging offers more reasoning why Jeremiah should support Nhamo's education over Tambu's: Nhamo will be obligated to care for his father into adulthood, which would allow Jeremiah to continue to not work.



The decision to disregard what Jeremiah says continues to build up Tambu as an independent woman who's unwilling to listen to authority figures. However, Tambu will later insist that her desires are childish as she doesn't understand why Jeremiah wants her to be a certain way or the struggles she'll face by standing up to him.



Babamukuru's arrival allows the reader to glimpse some of the traditional customs and begin to parse out the hierarchy of Tambu's family. The fact that everyone praises Babamukuru reinforces his status as the patriarch, while also suggesting that at this point, the rest of the family values and thinks highly of his education.



The hierarchy is especially apparent here when paternal relatives are allowed inside, unlike maternal relatives. Note that Tambu isn't even allowed inside—though she's connected to the patriarchy through her father, as a woman, she's not actually afforded any prestige. However, Tambu's disgust at Nyasha's dress suggests that despite her progressive ideals and desire for education, she is at heart very traditional and has definite ideas about how a woman should look.



Tambu decides that the event is ruined because she wasn't allowed to go to the airport and resume her relationship with Chido and Nyasha. She feels as though this is what Mainini was talking about when she mentioned the burden of womanhood. Tambu is afraid, as she now sees that there are forces beyond her control that can stop her education and keep her from her cousins. She flounces to the kitchen to think. She wonders if she likes either cousin or Babamukuru, and wonders if they changed or if *she* did. Deciding that these thoughts are dangerous and unwise, Tambu begins preparing part of the meal.

The other women are pleased when they discover Tambu cooking. Tambu feels superior because she believes Nyasha wouldn't be able to cook such a feast. She realizes that she felt excluded by her cousins, which is a dangerous feeling—being excluded means she isn't necessary, while cooking makes her feel utilitarian and useful. She and the women cook ten gallons of sadza and a small pot of rice on Maiguru's [Dover stove](#) for Babamukuru. The women dish up dinner for the patriarchal relatives.

Before the relatives can eat, Tambu has to carry a water dish for the relatives to wash their hands. She doesn't like this, as she has to know what everyone's status is. Tambu makes many mistakes and Nyasha tries to smile in solidarity. Tambu finds it insulting and ignores her. She's even more upset when Chido, Nhamo, and Nyasha wash—she believes they should be eating in the kitchen with the women.

In the kitchen, the women and children eat what's left of the meal. There's little meat left, but since they don't often get meat anyway, they don't complain. At the house, everyone is extremely happy even without alcohol, as Babamukuru doesn't drink. Tete Gladys begins dancing in the yard and soon, other family members follow. Though Tambu no longer dances like she used to as a child, as she attracts negative attention now as a teen, she invites Nyasha to dance. When Nyasha looks confused, Maiguru explains that Nyasha and Chido no longer understand Shona well.

At this point, Tambu recognizes that she's being denied opportunities because she's female and for no other reason. This is what Mainini was talking about, and this throws another wrench in Tambu's desire for education: it impresses upon her that she might not be able to overcome all her obstacles because she's female. Her decision to put these thoughts aside shows that she already has a tendency to be obedient.



By finding solace with other women, Tambu is able to reaffirm her connection to her gender, even if she also recognizes that it might be her undoing. Essentially, she already exists in gray areas even if she won't admit it. The Dover stove here represents Babamukuru's prestige and Maiguru's prestige through association.



Again, Tambu's sense of being insulted when her brother and cousins wash suggests that she relies heavily on some traditional customs and believes that it's important to uphold them, something that will later come into conflict with her desire to consider things like Nyasha.



The lack of meat for the women and children reinforces the power and prestige of the patriarchal family members. Tambu's assertion that nobody complains indicates that the women in her family are accustomed to this kind of treatment and therefore, it seems normal to them. This begins to show how old power structures become normalized, making it hard for someone like Tambu to recognize what's going on.



Tambu is offended; she never expected her cousins to change so much, and she can't fathom what it means to forget the Shona language. She remembers all the fun she used to have with Nyasha and Chido and feels they've turned into strangers. Suddenly sad, Tambu implores Maiguru to ask them to dance. Though the conversation is in English, Tambu can tell that Nyasha wants to dance but that Maiguru is forbidding her. Eventually, this attracts Tete Gladys's attention, and she tells the children to dance. Chido declines politely, but Nyasha seems to simply turn herself off. Tambu is extremely disappointed.

Babamukuru stays up most of the night talking about his concerns regarding the family's development—he's come to the conclusion that the other branches of the family aren't secure. Everyone listens, as Babamukuru inspires confidence and obedience. He suggests that at least one member of each branch be educated and tells Jeremiah not to be silly when Jeremiah suggests that *all* the children receive an education.

Babamukuru says the real problem is with Jeremiah's branch, as Tete Gladys and Thomas's families are well provided for. He recalls receiving a letter from Jeremiah in 1962 about not having enough money for school fees, but says he was pleased that Jeremiah sent Tambu and Nhamo back to school. He struggles to remember Tambu's name. The family praises Babamukuru's kindness, and then Babamukuru continues: he believes that the best thing to do is to bring Nhamo to the mission, where he can develop his talents. Gladys is on her feet celebrating in an instant, and they all praise Babamukuru.

Jeremiah tells Nhamo the plan the next day. Nhamo feels extremely important and tells Tambu about it as she waters vegetables with water from [Nyamarira](#). He insists that there's nobody else to go to the mission and speaks horribly about Jeremiah. He's also excited to wear shoes and use silverware. Tambu is extremely jealous and finally shouts that during their visit, Babamukuru and Maiguru ate with their hands. Nhamo insists that they eat with silverware and individual plates at home. Tambu says that Nhamo will still be Jeremiah's son and should be grateful, but Nhamo just says he was meant to be educated, and that girls don't go away to school.

Forgetting the Shona language makes it clear that Chido and Nyasha are anglicized beyond anything Tambu thought possible. Her sadness and anger about this suggests that one of Tambu's main issues going forward will be to reconcile her Western education with her traditional customs and even her language.



Jeremiah's suggestion betrays that he mostly wants to impress Babamukuru; he's not interested in thinking critically. This begins to cast him as a changeable and easily influenced person, as making Babamukuru happy will mean that Babamukuru will continue to support him.



Forgetting Tambu's name indicates that Babamukuru doesn't actually care much about particulars or about women; for him, Nhamo is the true star simply because he's male. Notice too that Jeremiah doesn't ever share that Tambu raised her school fees herself. By taking credit for her hard work, he shows again that Tambu is nothing more than a means to a future profit and in this case, a tool to earn praise from his wealthy, successful brother.



When Nhamo doesn't help with the watering, it allows him to make himself look even more masculine and important, as watering vegetables is women's work. His taunts also show that he's more than willing to put women down to make himself feel and look better. Meanwhile, his excitement about silverware and shoes shows that he already idealizes Western culture, which suggests that he's already primed to stop taking pride in his family and the homestead.



Tambu throws a rock towards Nhamo but misses. She begins to charge him, but he runs away, laughing and taunting her. Tambu explains that while she now knows that plenty of people felt the same way Nhamo did, at the time, she simply thought that Babamukuru was a god who had defied the wizards of her grandmother's stories, while the wizards crushed Nhamo and Jeremiah. She can't imagine Babamukuru bullying anyone the way that Nhamo and Jeremiah bully Tambu and Mainini. Tambu is really only angry because Nhamo insisted there was more to his special treatment than just being older and more advanced academically.

Tambu ignores Nhamo for a while after that. Mainini is very upset about it, especially since she's pregnant with Rambanai and has already lost four babies. Some people believe that this is her sister Lucia's fault, as she's unmarried, almost past her prime, and could give Jeremiah more children. Her mother's plight almost makes Tambu stop ignoring Nhamo, but she's saved when Babamukuru comes to fetch him.

Nhamo's absence also means that when Babamukuru comes to visit on the weekends with Nyasha, Tambu is able to try to be friends with Nyasha. Tambu is unsuccessful, as Nyasha refuses all invitations to play or pound maize. Tambu feels that Nyasha grows dimmer every time she sees her, and she feels that [England](#) changed her. One day, Nyasha behaves especially horribly: she refuses sour milk after asking for it. Jeremiah and Mainini are vocal about how horrible she is when Babamukuru isn't around.

When Nhamo returns home after the first year of school, he's different: he no longer remembers the Shona language. He speaks to Mainini in incorrect Shona and in broken English to Jeremiah. However, when something important comes up, Nhamo inexplicably remembers Shona long enough to resolve the matter. This alarms Mainini, who believes he's possessed. Jeremiah insists he's just educated like Babamukuru. Mainini confesses that she wants Nhamo to be educated, but she also wants to talk to him.

This distant and superior Nhamo is the Nhamo they expect home in 1968. When he doesn't arrive, Mainini is upset and declares that he'd never come home if he didn't have to. The family eats dinner, and then they hear a car. It's Babamukuru, looking old and tired. Maiguru is with him, but Nhamo isn't. Mainini starts to shriek and falls, accusing Babamukuru of bewitching and killing Nhamo.

Note that Tambu believes that through a good, proper education—which she seems to feel Nhamo didn't get—a man will be able to rise above bullying and become godlike in his own right. This is why she says that the wizards crushed Nhamo and Jeremiah; education wasn't able to show them the error of their ways when it comes to women, while in the case of Babamukuru, Tambu thinks that education is why he's so kind and generous.



The way that gossips characterize Lucia shows that women are victimized regardless of whether someone buys into colonial ideals or traditional ones, given that it's apparently Lucia's status as a bad woman that's causing Mainini problems.



Notice that Tambu believes Nyasha is just behaving badly for entertainment or because of her time in England. It's worth considering that poor Nyasha is likely experiencing major culture shock after being in England for five years and is struggling to adapt to a place that now feels strange and distant.



Jeremiah's ability to speak English with Nhamo suggests that he also had some education as a child. This is likely why Tambu places so much emphasis on trying and taking opportunities: her father's laziness likely tells her that if someone only works hard, unlike him, it's possible to become like Babamukuru.



The decision to accuse Babamukuru of killing Nhamo betrays that Mainini no longer believes in the power of education to lift up her children. Now, she sees it as something that turns her children into Westernized strangers and can even kill them.



Once they get Mainini into the kitchen, Babamukuru tells them what happened. Nhamo complained of a pain in his neck a few days ago; suspecting mumps, the doctor kept Nhamo overnight for observation. Babamukuru interrupts his story to ask Jeremiah if he received the messages he left at the Council offices. Jeremiah didn't get them. Continuing, Babamukuru says that the next day, Nhamo's health went sharply downhill, and then he died.

Babamukuru comforts Jeremiah with Christian platitudes, but Jeremiah insists that they must be overwhelmed with jealous spirits. He leaves to tell the neighbors and let them spread the news. Tambu finds that she's not sad about Nhamo; she's mostly sad *for* him because his life had been so worth living.

They bury Nhamo the next day. After a while, Babamukuru brings up the plight of Jeremiah's branch of the family. He suggests that Tambu come to the mission to be educated so she can support them until she marries. Mainini is stricken with grief; she doesn't want another of her children sent to a place of death. Tambu goes to the mission anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tambu can barely describe her feelings as she gets into Babamukuru's car. She feels as though she has everything laid out before her and needs only to care about Mainini and to show her sisters that they too can escape circumstances and do well. Tambu expects to find a well-kept version of herself at the mission, one who doesn't have to deal with smoky kitchens or trips to [Nyamarira](#) for water. She believes that she'll develop in such a way as to make Babamukuru proud, which she believes is the best way.

Tambu remembers her first car ride to sell her corn and thinks about what life will be like at the mission. She wonders if she'll sleep with Nyasha or with Anna, Maiguru's house girl. Tambu is uncomfortable with the possibility of sleeping with Nyasha, as Nyasha is morose, and Tambu disapproves of her. She thinks that Nyasha has no right to be so unhappy and ungrateful. Regardless, Tambu believes her blankets will be fluffy, and she won't have chores before school. Her books will live on a bookcase, her clothes will stay clean, and she'll have access to a tub.

Babamukuru's aside about the messages left at the offices is another way for him to make Jeremiah look checked out and irresponsible and, hopefully, inspire him to do better. For Mainini, this story impresses upon her that Babamukuru and the doctors at the mission aren't to be trusted with her children.



Tambu's emotional response implies that like Nhamo, she prioritizes education and Western ideals: his death is only a tragedy because he was living a Western life, not a traditional and impoverished one.



The fact that Tambu only gets this opportunity because Nhamo died reinforces her inferiority as a young woman. Further, this opportunity has little to do with her and everything to do with helping her family, again minimizing her personhood and desires.



Because Babamukuru is the one responsible for giving Tambu this chance, she feels she has no choice but to idolize him and do exactly as he tells her to do. At this point, this isn't an issue for her as she believes Babamukuru can do no wrong, but the fact that she's willing to subsume her identity to become what he wants her to be foreshadows a grim future.



The fact that Tambu can consider the possibility of sleeping with Anna indicates that she doesn't think of herself as being particularly deserving. It also suggests that Tambu doesn't see herself as being much different from Anna, given that Anna is likely also from a poor family and is in Babamukuru's service to help raise her family up out of poverty.



Despite having heard stories about the grandness of Babamukuru's house, Tambu is still shocked when they turn up the drive. She thinks of her own home as being grand, as it has a living room, windows, and two bedrooms. Babamukuru's house is so large, though, that Tambu doesn't recognize it as a house. It's white, which Tambu later learns from Nyasha is because early settlers believed that the paint kept houses cooler. In the surrounding town, missionaries live in other white and colorful houses, while educated Africans live in unpainted brick buildings.

Tambu's spirits begin to fall when she notices a smaller house by the grand one; she fears she won't get to live in the big house. Then, she discovers that the second "house" is a garage for the cars. This is disturbing for Tambu, who fears that Babamukuru is wealthier and more educated than she thought was possible. She begins to feel depressed. She reasons that she's only here because Nhamo died and because Babamukuru is a kindhearted relative, and decides that she's too provincial to live here anyway.

Tambu descends into self-pity and then worries about it, but nothing can lift her spirits. Then, as she follows Babamukuru to the house, two huge dogs appear out of nowhere and bark. Tambu yelps as Anna comes around the corner of the house, explaining that the dogs are tied. She shows Tambu into the back door, and Nyasha immediately jumps on Tambu with hugs and kisses. Tambu is surprised at this enthusiasm and listens to Nyasha talk about the cake she's baking for Chido. As she does, Tambu inspects the kitchen.

Though Tambu thinks at the time that the kitchen is grand, Tambu the narrator explains that the kitchen betrayed that Babamukuru and Maiguru were on a budget. The linoleum was old, the stove had only three plates, and a pane of glass in a window was missing. The paint wasn't coordinated, and the sink was dull. Later, Tambu discovered that this was because Maiguru likely couldn't afford a gentle cleaner that would keep the sink brilliant.

Anna shows Tambu to the living room to wait for Maiguru, who is resting. Tambu hopes Maiguru isn't ill and sits on a sofa. Tambu takes in the glamour of the room, which far surpasses both the kitchen and the dining room. She thinks about the pretty china cups she saw in the dining room and hopes she'll never have to use them. Later, she's thrilled to discover that they have that effect on everyone.

The white house reinforces Babamukuru's status as a powerful and educated man, while the other educated Africans that live in unpainted brick houses suggests that Babamukuru is an outlier. For Tambu, this tells her that Babamukuru is even more powerful than she ever imagined—no other black men can hope to match him, and white missionaries can't either.



Tambu hadn't understood just how wealthy a person can be, which is a side effect of growing up in such poverty. She essentially will go through her own version of culture shock as she moves to the mission, just because of the stark difference in income between Babamukuru and her family at home.



Notice that Anna greets Tambu warmly, and that Tambu doesn't mention Anna using an honorific—this indicates that Anna hasn't yet assumed her role as a servant to Tambu in addition to the rest of the household. This helps to smooth Tambu's transition into the house, as it allows her to think that things won't be so different after all.



Again, it's telling that only the mature Tambu who narrates can make these sharp observations; the young Tambu is still experiencing shock at her new surroundings. The older Tambu's observations suggest that despite the trappings of power and wealth, Babamukuru isn't as well off as Tambu thinks he is.



The hope that Maiguru isn't ill because she's lying down betrays Tambu's provincial roots; in her world, the only reason to lie down during the day is for illness, as there's too much work to do to take time for resting. This again shows Tambu that Maiguru lives a very different and more Western life.



Overwhelmed, Tambu tries to keep herself from getting distracted like Nhamo did. She tries to ignore the glamour and instead, thinks of Mainini and her sisters. Tambu begins to judge Nhamo less harshly, as she sees how the grandness seduced him.

Tambu the narrator says that the situation was far more dangerous than the reader might imagine; the true issue was that she viewed Babamukuru as a god. Because Babamukuru was a god to her, his house was heaven, and Tambu was therefore at risk of forgetting how everyone else lives. She believed the lack of dirt was proof that the house was heaven, but knows now that even that was an illusion: the buses outside left a thin layer of dirt over everything.

Tambu jumps when she hears a shrill siren go off. She stands up and looks out the window and watches students stroll around outside. Anna explains that it's the school bell. Maiguru appears and greets Tambu strangely with a high-five. Tambu sinks to her knees and greets Maiguru respectfully, but Maiguru asks her to sit on a chair so they can have tea. Anna brings in the tea, and Tambu smiles at the tea sieve. Maiguru explains what it is and says the tea wouldn't be drinkable without it, but Tambu thinks it's just interesting. Tambu struggles to decide what to eat, as she's never had so much choice in sugary treats. Before this, she'd only had cake at Christmas and Easter when Babamukuru brought cake. Maiguru invites Tambu to eat as much as she likes.

Tambu takes a small biscuit, which seems to worry Maiguru. She offers sodas and Tambu tries to reassure her by taking a gulp of tea, but is surprised that the tea is so hot. Nyasha bursts into the living room and offers a simple "hello" when Maiguru tells her to greet Tambu. Nyasha explains she already greeted Tambu and then leaves to clean up. Tambu finds Nyasha's behavior rude and embarrassing.

Maiguru gives a little laugh and says that Chido and Nyasha are too anglicized and are struggling to learn how to act at home. She explains that they're trying to teach the children proper manners, but it's taking time. Finally, Maiguru leads Tambu into the hall and knocks on a door before opening it. Nyasha is inside on one of the two beds, engrossed in a novel. After a minute, Maiguru asks what Nyasha is reading. Nyasha lifts her book, and Maiguru insists it's inappropriate.

By starting to empathize with Nhamo, Tambu shows that she is capable of thinking critically. However, she didn't idolize Nhamo, which is what allows her to do this here.



The dirt from the buses, like the dull sink and the peeling linoleum, betray that Babamukuru and Maiguru's wealth is a show as much as anything else. In reality, they're at the mercy of the colonial system that keeps them down, just as their beautiful home can't escape the thin veneer of dust.



The tea sieve acts as another symbol for the Westernized life that Babamukuru and Maiguru live, as it's something that would be seen as a luxury in Tambu's life on the homestead. The sugary cookies and cakes also make it clear that she's in an entirely different world. Because of these shocking differences, Tambu falls back on being respectful and deferential in order to cope. This is all a symptom of her sense that she's undeserving and unworthy—the only way she can feel deserving of the cookies is to be obedient.



Tambu's embarrassment on Nyasha's behalf shows again that she still adheres to traditional ways of doing things and believes that Nyasha's behavior is unacceptable. Tambu's own sense of obedience keeps her from acknowledging why Nyasha might behave like this.



Maiguru's explanation indicates that the family's time in England wasn't an entirely good thing, as it's apparently why Nyasha is so rude. It's worth noting that while Maiguru implicates Chido as well, he doesn't suffer nearly the way Nyasha does—further proof that the colonial system punishes women more than men.



They argue for a moment, and then Nyasha pointedly ignores Maiguru. Maiguru motions to the other bed and tells Tambu that she'll sleep there. Tambu is worried. Part of her feels intrigued by Nyasha, but the other believes that Nyasha isn't good for her. Tambu fears that Nyasha will ruin her life plan. As Tambu's anxiety ramps up, she blames it on Nyasha's rudeness. Maiguru shows Tambu her clothes and toiletries. Tambu is especially taken with the two casual dresses and the underwear. Leaving the room, Maiguru asks Nyasha to help Tambu get settled.

Choosing to blame her anxiety and her fear on Nyasha shows that what Tambu fears at this point is freedom and independence. Nyasha represents a lifestyle in which it's unthinkable to be so deferential to respectful, which goes against everything Tambu has been taught. Because Tambu sees deference as the key to her future, Nyasha then becomes the enemy.



CHAPTER FIVE

For a while after Maiguru leaves, Nyasha pointedly reads and ignores Tambu. Eventually the girls begin looking sideways at each other and finally, Nyasha laughs. They talk about school and then, Nyasha says seriously that she's glad they'll be friends. She admits that she was worried since Tambu was rude when she returned from [England](#). Tambu, speaking in Shona, says she was just disappointed that Nyasha and Chido only spoke to Nhamo. Shyly, Nyasha admits that she was frightened, as she'd forgotten what home was like. Tambu tells the reader that this is how their friendship began, and says that her relationship with Nyasha was much like a love affair—it was the first time she loved someone that she didn't approve of.

By characterizing her relationship with Nyasha as a more adult love affair, Tambu acknowledges that Nyasha is the one who eventually taught Tambu how to think critically and see shades of gray. Loving someone that she doesn't fully approve of is something that requires Tambu to live with ambiguities and questions, which in turn will bring her towards maturity as an adult.



Morosely, Nyasha says that she and Chido shouldn't have gone to [England](#), as Babamukuru and Maiguru are now "stuck with hybrids for children" and don't like them. Tambu tells Nyasha that she should still be respectful to Maiguru. Nyasha says bitterly that Maiguru doesn't want to be respected; if she did, she'd have nothing to complain about. Tambu is sure that Nyasha is wrong, as Maiguru is kind and concerned for everyone.

The girls view Maiguru through entirely different lenses. Tambu sees her as a traditional, self-effacing wife, while Nyasha sees her as a more Western woman who likely wants to be free of the constraints of marriage. This is indicative too of how each girl sees the rest of the world.



Tambu doesn't have a chance to explain this to Nyasha, as Anna appears and kneels in the door. Nyasha snaps at her to stand up, but Anna tells the girls that supper is ready and then disappears. Nyasha deems Tambu clean enough to go to dinner but shows her the toilet anyway. Tambu squats on the seat and then heads towards the dining room. She's concerned about how early it is; she fears that she won't stay full.

Again, Tambu's concerns about not being full after eating dinner so early come from a life of poverty and food scarcity. Though she expects she'll be well fed here, she doesn't know what that means or what that feels like. This turns dinner into another cultural experience for her.



Tambu enters the dining room. The table is covered with serving dishes, and Nyasha sits at one end, reading. Nyasha puts her book away when Maiguru comes in. Seated, the women say grace, and then Babamukuru arrives, annoyed that they started without him. He grunts in response to their queries about his day, and then Maiguru begins to help Babamukuru serve himself. Babamukuru gets to the third dish and discovers that Anna forgot to make gravy. Nyasha leaps up to make it, and Maiguru puts the rest of the food in the warmer.

Maiguru shows Babamukuru Nyasha's copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Babamukuru insists that his daughter won't read such an inappropriate book and takes it away. When he returns, Maiguru says that she was going to let Nyasha read it, but Babamukuru reprimands her for spoiling the children. Nyasha returns with the gravy and Maiguru insists that Babamukuru serve himself fresh food. Nyasha rudely starts to serve herself before Babamukuru is through and insists that she doesn't like cold food.

Tambu eyes the meal and is concerned, as the food looks interesting, and she knows that food should be filling, not interesting. None of it will go down right, and she struggles to use her knife and fork. After a few minutes, Maiguru rings a bell and asks Anna to bring sadza and a spoon for Tambu. Tambu finds all of this embarrassing.

Nyasha realizes that her book is gone and wonders if she forgot it somewhere. She pushes back to go check in the bedroom, but Maiguru scolds her to stay put and to not talk about the book. Nyasha accuses her mother of taking her book and then immediately apologizes. However, she becomes increasingly distraught until Babamukuru steps in and scolds her. Nyasha talks back and leaves the table, ignoring his angry protests. After she leaves, Babamukuru mutters that there's something wrong with Nyasha to behave like that. Maiguru comforts him and points out that he *did* take her book. Tambu, feeling very uncomfortable, finishes her meal and excuses herself.

Nyasha invites Tambu to come outside so she can smoke a cigarette. Tambu is aghast and feels that Nyasha is beyond redemption, and she insists she wants to stay inside and read. In reality, she's terrified that Babamukuru would die of shock or kill Nyasha if he saw the cigarette. Nyasha waves at her bookshelf and heads outside.

Babamukuru's unwillingness to speak to his dinner companions suggests that he might not be as wonderful and godlike as Tambu thought he was. His callousness implies that he doesn't see them as appropriate or worthy dinner companions, while his objection about the lack of gravy shows that he expects the world to work in whatever way he wants it to.



The exchange between Maiguru and Babamukuru about Lady Chatterley's Lover shows that Maiguru has little power in their relationship. She doesn't have the power to parent her children as she sees fit and certainly doesn't feel comfortable advocating for her children, as it seemed she might when she originally let Nyasha keep the book.



Receiving sadza and a spoon singles Tambu out as poor and provincial, as she's never used silverware before. This shows her that in order to compensate, she'll need to be even more obedient so that instances like this are less noticeable.



It's telling that Babamukuru allows Maiguru to take the blame for taking Nyasha's book, as it suggests that he feels as though being the villain like that is beneath him. It also means that he doesn't have to reprimand Nyasha until she becomes particularly belligerent—in other words, he allows Maiguru to do the dirty work of parenting and enforce his rules.



Smoking cigarettes marks Nyasha again as a lesser woman, which will help Tambu to start to think of herself as superior. The fact that she thinks of Babamukuru indicates that she's already leaning hard into the belief that she needs to impress him.



A few minutes later, Anna kneels in the doorway and tells Tambu that she's wanted in the living room. She uses an honorific to address Tambu, which Tambu finds distressing. She thinks that Anna never used to use it and really shouldn't, since she's older than Tambu. Tambu is also perplexed that Anna went from a talkative person to someone who barely talks. Tambu believes that the change must be her fault and it makes her feel strange and unfamiliar. She roughly tells Anna to just talk to her, but Anna gets up and leaves without responding.

Tambu nervously walks into the living room. When Babamukuru asks her to sit, she initially sits respectfully on the floor in the corner. When he asks her to sit on a seat, she struggles to choose where to sit: there's room on the sofa next to Maiguru and an armchair next to Babamukuru, but both would be too close to her uncle to be respectful. Tambu decides to take the chair across from Babamukuru and spends the next two minutes questioning her decision.

Babamukuru talks about how he often spends evenings in his office instead of at home. Tambu thinks that he looks impressive when he talks like this; she notes that throughout his life, he's had the power to organize his world however he likes, and everyone listens to him. Tambu feels immense gratitude as he tells her how much he's sacrificing to take the evening off to speak to her and pay her school fees. In closing, he explains that Tambu will need to be a good student and become a good woman so she can have a good future and raise up her family. He asks Maiguru if she has anything to add. She doesn't, so Babamukuru excuses Tambu.

As Tambu returns to the bedroom, she vows to be like Babamukuru: hardworking, straight, and true. Nyasha is already in bed and asks Tambu to turn off the light, saying she can't sleep with it on. Tambu's ability to sleep with light makes her feel superior, so she pulls off her dress and jumps into bed. When Nyasha asks about the light, Tambu ignores her but recognizes she also doesn't know how to turn it off. Nyasha climbs out of bed, calls Tambu a peasant (though Tambu hears "pheasant" and feels even more offended) and shows her how to switch the light on and off.

This change in Anna indicates that Tambu is now part of the upper echelons of the household, whether she recognizes or accepts it or not. When Tambu thinks it's her fault rather than recognize that it's just a symptom of being a guest in Babamukuru's house, it shows that Tambu is inclined to try to shape herself and blame herself rather than interrogate the structures that are actually responsible.



The agony that Tambu feels shows her struggling to reconcile living in such a Western house with what she knows about how to respect her elders. This shows her struggling against the Western culture that to a degree downplays the need to respect.



Note that Babamukuru doesn't seem to see any irregularities with asking Tambu to be both a good student and a good future wife. The two things he asks her to be represent two different cultures: a student is questioning, independent, and more Western, while a proper wife is none of those things. In this way, Babamukuru sets Tambu up for failure, especially given her tendency to see things as black and white and not engage with the nuances.



At this point, Tambu sees Nyasha as being everything that Babamukuru doesn't want. She's opinionated and too anglicized—in other words, she won't be a good wife someday. The fact that Tambu lets this make her feel superior shows that Tambu still adheres to the traditional gender roles and sees Nyasha's uncertain marital future as something to be ashamed of.



After Nyasha gets back into bed, she notes that Tambu didn't put her bedclothes on and says she'll have to do it in the dark. This makes Tambu's smugness disappear, and she suddenly feels inadequate. Tambu falls asleep quickly and then dreams of Nhamo. He dribbles a ball through a cornfield and eats cobs. Tambu, watching from a desk at the end of the field, begs Nhamo to stop but discovers that she's holding a cigarette. The dream turns to a nightmare when Nhamo accuses Tambu of deserting her husband. Babamukuru and his vicious dogs come to take Tambu back to her husband.

Tambu wakes up halfway to the bathroom. She runs herself a bath and scrubs herself three times just to enjoy feeling clean. Tambu finishes her bath when Maiguru knocks and then generously runs Nyasha's bath for her. Tambu makes note of what Nyasha is wearing and finds what must be bedclothes when she returns to her room. After Tambu dresses, she admires herself in her school uniform. She's shocked to see that she's pretty, and when Nyasha returns from her bath, she confirms this assessment.

Tambu struggles to eat at breakfast. She's impatient to be at school where she knows she can succeed. She watches Nyasha eat bacon and eggs and refuse porridge on the grounds that it might make her fat. Maiguru worries over Tambu and finally, gives her a shilling to buy buns at break. This is a lot of money and Tambu is embarrassed, but she puts it in her sock and decides to bring it home at lunch. She does her best to imitate Nyasha's walk on the way to school.

Addressing the reader, Tambu says that this is the beginning of her period of reincarnation. She devours Nyasha's library of nineteenth-century novels. Nyasha is dismissive, as she's interested in history and current events. However, Nyasha still makes suggestions, and, on the weekends, she paints Tambu's nails and cooks with her. Soon, Tambu realizes that Nyasha doesn't have many friends at school. Girls make fun of Nyasha behind her back and accuse her of acting too white, proud, and loose.

Fortunately, Tambu escapes Nyasha's fate. Though she quickly becomes fluent in English, she doesn't have a British accent. Boys are uninterested in her, and she refuses to accompany Nyasha to school dances. The teachers love Tambu as well. All of this is very strange for Tambu. The only normal thing is that she continues to do well in school, as Babamukuru and Maiguru give her the time and the space to study.

Pointing out that Tambu didn't put on pajamas allows Nyasha to turn the tables and feel superior, as she essentially points out that Tambu doesn't know how to properly conduct an evening routine in a wealthy Western home. Tambu's nightmare betrays that she's already caught between the Western school system and the traditional system, given that she dreams both of being in school and of neglecting a family.



For Tambu, the bath and the Western clothes help her feel superior and like a new person, not the dirty girl she left on the homestead. However, the fact that this shift happens through external means suggests that an internal shift will take longer and be far more difficult to make, if she makes it at all.



Though Tambu doesn't say outright, it's a Western thing for Nyasha to be concerned about becoming overweight. This indicates that Nyasha's "hybridization" may have direr consequences than just her father's disapproval, and suggests too that Western culture and ideals can be dangerous and alienating.



The accusations of the other girls at school suggest that they're more like Tambu than they're like Nyasha, as they're also threatened by how Western Nyasha's behavior is. However, the time she spends with Tambu painting nails and reading introduces Tambu to Western ideas in a nonthreatening way, thereby beginning Tambu's transformation.



Remember that Tambu's family wasn't particularly keen on anything she did. The positive attention from her classmates and teachers allows Tambu to feel as though this where she belongs, which in turn allows her to believe that Western culture as presented by the mission school is good.



With so much food at hand, Tambu becomes plump and begins to menstruate. Mainini had already given Tambu reusable napkins. However, Tambu finds that washing them is embarrassing and is even more mortified when Nyasha offers her tampons. Nyasha teases her that it's better to lose her virginity to a tampon than a man and says that men keep hymens as trophies. When Tambu finally realizes that Nyasha was just teasing, she starts to use the tampons and finds she likes them. Nyasha assures Tambu that despite the expense of tampons and the fact that nice girls don't use them, Maiguru would rather buy them than have either girl get pregnant.

Tambu thinks that Nyasha is perplexing: she has everything and should be content, but she isn't. Nyasha believes that Maiguru is trapped and miserable, which Tambu doesn't understand at all. Tambu says that she and other students find Nyasha superior; adults think she's a genius; and Babamukuru and Maiguru worry about her. Tambu privately agrees with her aunt and uncle and reasons that thinking critically is dangerous.

Despite this belief, Tambu engages in her own thought experiments. She thinks of Anna, who used to be interesting and is now just boring. Tambu also wonders about Maiguru, who seems to have every reason to be content in her beautiful life. Maiguru may be lonely, but Tambu reasons that none of the other women on the mission want to talk to someone so highly educated.

Tambu discovers how highly educated Maiguru is one Sunday. After church, Tambu meets up with Nyasha to chat with friends. Nyasha pointedly ignores her parents, as she still struggles to greet people properly and embarrasses Babamukuru. However, Tambu and Nyasha stand with Babamukuru and Maiguru on days that he drives to church so they can hitch a ride.

One morning, Tambu listens to her headmaster compliment Babamukuru on Nyasha, who he says will bring home a master's degree just like Maiguru. He also compliments Tambu, and the news that Maiguru has a master's degree piques Tambu's interest. Nyasha is slow and hesitant in greeting her former headmaster, which angers Babamukuru. On the drive home, he reprimands her for not being polite and then refuses to let her talk during dinner.

Maiguru's willingness to buy tampons suggests that she's more progressive than Nyasha would like to give her credit for, especially since it's likely she's keeping these purchases a secret from Babamukuru. This suggests that in some situations, Maiguru will defend the young women in her care and give them what they need to succeed and feel comfortable, even if it means going against her husband or traditional ideas of womanhood in the process.



The fact that the teachers (and by extension, the colonial school system) thinks that Nyasha is a genius suggests that the true issue is that she behaves in a white and Western manner. This begins to situate her in a place in between being properly black and African and being white.



Tambu's thoughts about Maiguru's loneliness suggest that she does think there are some negative consequences to being so highly educated, but she notably seems to think this is a fair tradeoff given how beautiful and easy Maiguru's life seems.



In the case of not being able to greet people properly, Nyasha finds that her time in England is separating her from her native culture. This again shows that the colonial system that sent her to England in the first place can wreak havoc on life here at home and turn Nyasha into a stranger.



For Babamukuru, having Nyasha behave properly reflects well on him and has little to do with Nyasha herself. This again shows that what Babamukuru cares about most is making himself look good. Like Jeremiah with Tambu, Babamukuru sees Nyasha as a means to an end, not an individual in her own right.



After dinner, Tambu finally asks Maiguru if she actually has a master's degree. Maiguru is flattered, though sarcastic when Tambu notes that people only say that she went to [England](#) to look after Babamukuru. Tambu, still awed, comments that Maiguru must earn lots of money and is aghast when Maiguru says she never receives her salary. Maiguru tries to force herself to look happy, but doesn't succeed. She sighs and explains that she had to choose between self and security. She says that the worst part is that nobody thinks of what she gave up. Tambu thinks it's a shame that Maiguru never got the opportunity to reach her full potential.

Tambu feels sorry for Maiguru because everything she said was reasonable: she's being prevented from reaching her full potential or using the money for her own desires because she's married. This is all complicated in Tambu's mind, however, because Maiguru is married to Babamukuru, which means that the marriage can't be bad. Tambu also can't quite figure out who her uncle is. He's seldom around, and when he is, they never laugh or even talk.

CHAPTER SIX

One of the most shocking things about the mission is the number of white people. They're all missionaries, and therefore different than the "wizards" that Tambu's grandmother experienced. These ones want to give and spread God's light in Africa, not steal emeralds. Tambu says that the natives treated the missionaries like deities. Today, she says, there are fewer white people and they're expatriates, but they're treated much the same since they're still white.

As a teen, Tambu likes the missionaries much better than she liked Doris. However, some of them are very strange: they speak Shona more than English, and a few of them have children who grow up speaking Shona and learn English in school. The majority of missionaries, however, send their children to the Government school in town. This presents other issues, as the missionaries pray *against* the government.

Though Maiguru never says where her salary goes, she implies that not getting it is worth it because she has her stable life with Babamukuru. That security, she suggests, is more meaningful than having money and being alone. The fact that nobody talks about Maiguru's degree indicates that even when a woman does receive an education, it doesn't mean that education has the power to make the women seem worthy and important to their relatives.



All the clues point to the possibility that Babamukuru isn't actually a god. His kindness is questionable when it seems as though people are afraid to talk around him, and it's implied that he's the one controlling what happens with Maiguru's paycheck. Tambu's obedience, however, won't allow her to question any of this.



With this assessment, Tambu indicates that no matter what kind of white people come to Rhodesia or Africa as a whole, they're still considered superior to the black natives. This is a consequence of colonialism, and the school system allows them to teach children to think this way.



The government at this point has declared itself independent, but has done so keeping a white government. Knowing this, Tambu says that the missionaries actually want Rhodesia to be led by the black natives, not the white settler minority. Regardless, both the missionaries and the settlers are part of the colonial system.



One of Nyasha and Tambu's missionary friends, Nyaradzo, has two older brothers. They attend a special school in Salisbury where, purportedly, both black and white children can go. However, there are more white than black students, as the fees are so high for black children. Most students at the mission, except for Nyasha, want to go to schools like this. While Nyasha and Tambu agree that there would be more "life" in the form of cultural activities, Nyasha remains firm in her belief that "life" would come with consequences. Fortunately for her, Babamukuru can barely afford to send Chido, so sending her is out of the question. Tambu secretly wants to go to a multiracial school.

Chido goes to school with Nyaradzo's brothers. Nyaradzo's father arranged for Chido to take the entrance exam and drove him to Salisbury himself. Chido, being a promising and peaceful boy, was given a scholarship. Nyasha believes that Nyaradzo's father pulled strings to make this happen.

During Tambu's first year at the mission, Nyasha sits her first set of public exams. The exam would screen her out of the school system, though she doesn't have to worry much since Babamukuru is the headmaster. Nyasha maliciously threatens to fail her exams to make Babamukuru look bad, but she works harder than ever at studying and grows thin and drawn. When Tambu talks to her about it, Nyasha confesses that she's nervous and afraid. The only one who isn't worried about Nyasha is Babamukuru, who thinks her constant studying is proof that there's hope for her. Nyasha passes, though they don't learn this until after the Christmas holidays.

Tambu is very excited for Christmas, as Babamukuru is allowing her to stay at the mission for a few days and then accompany his family to the homestead. This means that she'll get to spend time with Chido, who is handsome and kind. By the time Chido arrives home from school, Nyasha is sleeping and eating again, and they're all looking forward to attending the school Christmas party. The evening gets off to a bad start, however, when Nyasha is ready first, and Babamukuru doesn't recognize her. He thinks that her dress is too skimpy and only backs down when Maiguru admits that she bought it for Nyasha.

The high fees for black children is a way for the white people in charge of the school to be able to say that they support black education and will allow black natives to be educated—if only they can overcome barriers that, for many, are impossible to overcome. The consequences that Nyasha fears are presumably assimilation, which suggests she has more respect for traditional ways of life than she's let on.



The fact that Chido got the scholarship because he's peaceful suggests that those at the school believe that he'll peacefully uphold the colonial system, even if they educate him in it.



When Nyasha takes these exams so seriously, it suggests that, like Tambu, she sees education as her ticket out of the less savory parts of her life. Doing well on her exams is a way to curry favor with Babamukuru and, for a while, appear as though she's a good daughter. The fact that Babamukuru is happy about Nyasha's studying reinforces how much stock he puts in education, since he seems unaware of how ill the exams make her.



Though Tambu never describes Nyasha's dress, it's likely too Western for Babamukuru's taste, which only reinforces for him that Nyasha isn't a good girl in the traditional way he'd like her to be. With this, Babamukuru tries to make Nyasha fit into a very narrow definition of what a good woman is, while Nyasha attempts to expand the definition and take control of it.



Chido, Tambu, and Nyasha giggle all the way to the school hall. Tambu isn't excited for the dance; it's loud and hot, and she still doesn't love dancing. She spends the first ten minutes feeling anxious until she finds her friends. Dancing safely in a group, Tambu begins to feel the music and discovers that she's a good dancer. She shows off for her friends and then dances with everyone she can. By ten o'clock, Tambu is exhausted and relieved when Chido says it's time to go. Nyasha is reluctant, and her dance partner walks her home, the two of them dancing the entire way. At the top of the drive, her date remembers a new dance he has to teach her.

Chido and Tambu wait for Nyasha for a while before slowly walking down the drive. Chido insists that they can't go inside because Babamukuru is still awake, so they peek in the window. They come face to face with him, and he ushers them inside. Chido tries to say that Nyasha is talking with friends and will come soon, but Babamukuru walks out of the house. Tambu and Chido race to their rooms. Ten minutes later, Nyasha walks into the bedroom and starts to change.

Babamukuru comes in a few minutes later and wants to know why Nyasha was out so late. When she says she was talking to friends, he catches her in the lie and says that she was out with a boy. Nyasha doesn't immediately back down and admits that he was teaching her a new dance. This shocks Babamukuru, and he asks Tambu to leave the room, but Tambu can feel the atmosphere growing dangerous. She wakes up Maiguru and when they return to the bedroom door, they find Chido there as well. He whispers that Nyasha is a fool for standing up to Babamukuru.

Inside the room, Babamukuru accuses Nyasha of being indecent, but she refuses to cave. She says that whatever Babamukuru is accusing her of, she did it. This makes Babamukuru even angrier. Nyasha insists that because she doesn't worry about her behavior, he doesn't need to worry either. Chido tries to step in, but Babamukuru accuses him of letting Nyasha act like a whore. Nyasha asks calmly why she should worry about what others say when her own father calls her a whore. Babamukuru strikes her across both cheeks and sends her flying onto the bed. He says he's going to teach her a lesson so she won't disgrace him.

When Tambu discovers that dancing isn't so bad, it suggests that she's also becoming more anglicized and in tune with Western ways of doing things, though her desire for an early night shows that she's still in tune with traditional conventions of what time a girl should be home. Notice too that she's willing to listen to Chido and respect his authority; this implies that she knows she's expected to listen to male family members.



All three teens know that Babamukuru won't be happy with Nyasha, as they recognize that staying out late to spend time with a boy isn't something that a conventionally good girl would do. When Chido and Tambu run away, it suggests that they fear Babamukuru more than even Nyasha does, even when they're not the ones in trouble.



Tambu sees in this situation that Nyasha is the exact opposite of her: in addition to behaving in this uncouth and Western manner, she's also willing to boldly stand up to male family members who, under normal circumstances, would require the utmost respect. The sense that the atmosphere is dangerous indicates that this time, Nyasha has crossed a line and will pay the price.



Nyasha's insistence that Babamukuru doesn't need to worry, since she's not concerned shows that Nyasha desperately wants to be in control of her life and her body. Babamukuru's violence is then an attempt to seize control of his daughter's body, thereby subjecting her to a patriarchal system in which her desire for bodily autonomy is nothing more than a dream.



Nyasha backs away, begging Babamukuru to not hit her. Babamukuru hits her again and Nyasha punches back. With this, Babamukuru throws her to the floor, hitting her and banging her head into the floor, while Nyasha screams and fights. Maiguru and Chido try to pull Babamukuru off of Nyasha, but he insists he'll kill Nyasha and then hang himself. He threatens to kill her if she doesn't go away. Silently, Nyasha walks outside. Tambu follows her and they sit by the servants' quarters. Nyasha smokes a cigarette.

Tambu thinks that Babamukuru's behavior is shockingly similar to Nhamo's treatment of her: both she and Nyasha are victimized only because they're female. Tambu thinks that even heroes like Babamukuru do this, and even though Nyasha is too strong-willed and disrespectful, she's still in trouble merely because she's female and therefore inferior. Tambu the narrator says that if she'd been more independent, she might've come to a conclusion but instead, she didn't want to think too hard. She was afraid that she'd discover that she didn't recognize herself, so she tries to be as good as possible to stay on track.

Tambu can't understand why Nyasha feels so threatened at the mission and suggests that she wait until she's older to fight. Nyasha believes she'd forget what she's fighting for if she waited. She says that she was comfortable in [England](#), and that's turned her into a whore now. She thinks that she needs to make sure she's adjusting to the right things, and says she's done being inferior and good.

Chido joins the girls and calls them back inside. He puts out Nyasha's cigarette and begs her to not upset Maiguru anymore. Nyasha asks if anyone cares about her needs, but Chido says that she's the daughter. When Tambu and Nyasha get back to the house, Nyasha walks right past Maiguru's outstretched arms.

Nyasha spends the next week alone and withdrawn, while Babamukuru spends the week out of the house. He lectures Nyasha and gives her fourteen lashes. Tambu worries about Nyasha, as she senses that Nyasha isn't just sulking because she didn't get her way. Tambu doesn't quite understand why Nyasha is upset, as she has a very clear view of right and wrong thanks to Sunday school, but she's worried that Nyasha is retreating and detaching from the world.

Although Babamukuru is concerned that Nyasha's perceived promiscuity is going to make him look bad, he's not at all worried that beating or even killing her will have the same effect. This shows that there's a major double standard at play, where women are punished for minor infractions while men can literally get away with murder.



Earlier, Nhamo made sure Tambu knew she didn't get to go to school just because she's female. This allows Tambu to see that her gender is what people see before anything else, and that men will persecute her for it no matter what she does. This is also why Babamukuru beats Nyasha despite her good grades; her grades aren't good enough to outweigh her improper behavior elsewhere.



Nyasha believes that she's simply acting in a way that's more English, which doesn't do her any favors in Rhodesia. This begins to show how damaging the colonial system can be, as it punishes Nyasha for engaging with it to this intense degree.



Chido's insistence that Nyasha is the daughter again puts Nyasha in her place: as a woman and as a child, her needs literally don't matter. All that matters is her unflinching obedience.



Tambu's mention of taking the teachings from Sunday school very seriously doesn't help her critical thinking skills, as she implies that she's learning that things are black and white there. Nyasha, on the other hand, recognizes that Babamukuru can be both a generous benefactor and a horrible father, whatever the church might say about him.



Maiguru sees this as well but doesn't know what to do. One day, as she and Tambu eat lunch alone, she tells Tambu that Babamukuru was waiting up to let the dogs out on the night of the dance. She insists he wanted to make sure they were home, and now, Maiguru says she's afraid because his and Nyasha's feelings are so intense. That night, Tambu talks at Nyasha in the dark and tells her about her cornfield, Jeremiah and Nhamo, and what Maiguru said. Nyasha insists that she's not a plaything for Babamukuru to control. When Nyasha starts to cry, Tambu climbs into bed with her.

Nyasha starts her period the next day, nine days early, and tells Tambu that she wishes she'd had sex. The girls giggle. Tambu worries for Babamukuru now that Nyasha is better, though she admires Nyasha's resilience: Tambu believes that if *she'd* hit Jeremiah, she would've killed herself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On December 23, Babamukuru, Maiguru, Nyasha, and Tambu go to the homestead for Christmas. Chido gets out of going. Nyasha pouts about having to go, which makes Tambu fear another bloody scene. Maiguru tries to talk to Nyasha, but Nyasha insists that family isn't important since Thomas and Tete Gladys aren't coming for Christmas. Maiguru is sharp with Nyasha and looking back, Tambu believes that this is because Maiguru didn't want to go either.

Babamukuru insists that Nyasha has to go and everyone prepares for a fight. Surprisingly, Nyasha agrees and the family heads off with Anna and as much food as will fit in the car. Maiguru grumbles that a half an ox is too much meat. Her grumbling at Babamukuru is unusual, so Tambu wonders if he actually did buy too much meat. Maiguru says that her issue is that when Babamukuru provides so much food, everyone expects her to cook and serve it. Babamukuru chuckles, says that Maiguru has Nyasha and Tambu to help, and then happily reminisces about his boyhood.

The homestead looks rundown. The thatched roofs are falling in, there are holes in the walls, and the once sanitary latrine is coated in excrement. Tambu asks Mainini a few days into the visit why she doesn't clean the toilet, but Mainini shrugs and tells Tambu to clean it. Tambu does with Nyasha's help, but they use the bushes anyway.

While it's possible that Babamukuru genuinely cares about the wellbeing of his children and Tambu, he clearly struggles to make this known in a way that doesn't alienate his charges. This suggests that he's a victim of the patriarchal system as much as Nyasha is, as he's also deprived of a loving relationship with his daughter due to what the system requires of him.



The admission that Tambu would've killed herself for hitting her father shows the profound power of the patriarchal system: it makes women feel unable to stand up for themselves and unworthy of life when they do.



The older Tambu's belief that Maiguru didn't want to go either suggests that Nyasha isn't the only one who struggles to deal with what the patriarchal system insists is the correct way for women to behave. Maiguru has no choice but to go with Babamukuru, which makes it even harder to make Nyasha go.



When Babamukuru brushes Maiguru's concerns off, it shows that he doesn't think much of what's required of women at a family gathering like this. As far as he's concerned, Maiguru occupies a place of honor since she's the most senior wife on the property, while all she sees is that she has more responsibility and burdens than she ever wanted.



The state of the homestead reminds the reader of how poor Tambu's family is. It became clear when Tambu lived at home that Mainini was tired and overworked; without Tambu to help, it's likely just too much for her to handle.



When Babamukuru's car rolls up outside the house, only Rambanai and Netsai greet their visitors. Netsai explains that Mainini is lying down, while Jeremiah and Takesure are out. Babamukuru is shocked; he apparently asked that Takesure and "that girl," Lucia, leave the homestead a while ago. Lucia herself appears and explains that Takesure and Jeremiah are drinking. Babamukuru ignores her, but Lucia continues. She asks where Babamukuru wants her to go and laughs about going anywhere with Takesure.

Tambu wishes Lucia would be quiet, as her situation is serious: Tambu's maternal grandparents have always been very poor, and it didn't help matters when Mainini got pregnant and went home with Jeremiah. This meant that Mainini's parents couldn't claim a high bride price for her, and Lucia was deemed a witch for not also marrying. Nineteen years later, after Nhamo's death and yet another miscarriage, Mainini asked that Lucia come to the homestead to help. At the same time, Babamukuru sent Takesure to the homestead. He has two wives already and isn't finished paying off either, but he doesn't like being married and doesn't want to work. Soon, Lucia was pregnant with Takesure's baby.

Lucia insisted that the baby is Jeremiah's, which Jeremiah says isn't true: he waited to have sex with Lucia until after she was pregnant. Regardless, he still thinks it'd be wonderful to take Lucia as a second wife, as she's bold and spirited. He thinks he's powerful enough to control her, given that he already broke Mainini's spirit. He attempted to make this case to Babamukuru and cited that if Lucia's baby is a boy, it'd be very good. Babamukuru, however, wouldn't hear of Jeremiah having two wives and living in that kind of sin. He insisted that Takesure and Lucia leave, and Jeremiah, fearing Babamukuru, agreed to make them. Lucia's presence is proof that Jeremiah didn't obey Babamukuru.

Lucia greets Maiguru warmly and then leads her to the house, while Babamukuru unlocks the trunk. He imperiously asks Lucia to help carry things and to be respectful, but Maiguru brushes off his reproach. They all carry provisions inside, and then Mainini calls out from the bedroom. Tambu goes to her and tries to deal with Mainini's displeasure that Tambu didn't greet her first thing. She asks the polite questions about Mainini's health and wonders how she can behave so differently with Mainini than she does with Babamukuru and Maiguru. She wonders briefly if she'll start standing up to Babamukuru like Nyasha, but pushes the thought away.

It's worth noting that Lucia never suffers beatings or even much pushback from Babamukuru throughout the novel, even though she's just as vocal about her desires as Nyasha is. This likely has to do with Lucia's age (she's over 30) and possibly, the fact that she's uneducated and is therefore unthreatening.



The way that Tambu tells the story, both Lucia and Takesure come off as lazy and unmotivated. While Takesure's later actions confirm this assessment of him, Lucia simply looks like a woman who wants to control her life and has made the best of her situation. However, when Tambu seems to take issue with Lucia's role in this, it shows that Tambu still takes the patriarchal system seriously and will act in ways that perpetuate it.



Jeremiah's willingness to take Lucia as a second wife indicates that no matter how much he respects Babamukuru, he's in no way a Christian. This explains some of why Babamukuru sees Jeremiah and his family as the weakest link of the extended family: he doesn't fully buy into the same ideals (like the colonial system, working honestly, or education) that Babamukuru does.



When Tambu begins to notice the differences between speaking with Mainini and speaking with her aunt and uncle, it shows that her time at the mission is making it so she has to start code switching when she returns home. In other words, Tambu behaves in a more Western manner when she's at the mission, but knows she needs to revert to a very traditional way of being when she comes home. This shows her that she is changing, even though she vowed not to.



Babamukuru and Maiguru enter the room. The adults greet each other, and Mainini makes rude comments about believing that her in-laws wouldn't come. When Mainini notices that Maiguru is sitting on the floor, she sends Tambu to fetch a chair. Nobody wants to sit on it but finally, Nyasha moves to the chair. Everyone scolds her for not properly greeting Mainini, so she gets down to hug her aunt. Mainini teases her about her full breasts and asks when Nyasha is getting married. The adults talk about Nyasha's future, which annoys Nyasha. Finally, Lucia interrupts and begins the formal greeting process.

Tete Gladys and uncle Thomas surprise everyone by deciding to come for Christmas after all, which wreaks havoc with the sleeping arrangements. The eight unmarried women end up sleeping together in the tiny outside kitchen while the married couples take private rooms. Tambu explains that the holiday wasn't truly a holiday: there were 24 people to feed, fetch water for bathing, and do laundry for. Tete Gladys, being a patriarchal relative, isn't expected to help, and four of the thirteen women are under age four, so it falls to Maiguru, Nyasha, Tambu, and the three house girls to do all the work.

Mornings begin with heating water for the adults to wash, which takes hours. Then, they cook breakfast and boil tea on Maiguru's [Dover stove](#). After cleaning up, the girls have to fetch water from [Nyamarira](#). When the girls get home, it's time to cook the next meal or wash dishes. Maiguru works constantly, as, being the senior wife, it's her responsibility to make sure that the food lasts for the full two weeks. This means that she has to ration out the meat, which is only a problem because it won't all fit in the small refrigerator. It starts turning green after a few days. When Tete Gladys insults Maiguru's cooking, Maiguru begins cooking a special pot of refrigerated meat for the patriarchal family members.

Just after the new year, Babamukuru calls a family meeting to discuss the issue of Takesure and Lucia. It includes only the patriarchal family members and Takesure. Babamukuru begins by going over the facts. He then asks Takesure why he didn't leave after he was told to do so, and Takesure says he would've left if Lucia hadn't refused to go with him.

Meanwhile, the women and children sit in the outdoor kitchen, furious. Mainini rants that the patriarchs are going to make it seem like Lucia impregnated herself on purpose and says it's unfair not to include Lucia. Patience agrees and Lucia, boiling with rage, tries to get Maiguru to take a side. Maiguru sidesteps and refuses. Tambu notes that none of the women could recognize that by taking these extreme sides, their fear of the situation and of their differences make it even harder to relate to each other.

The choice to move to the chair is extremely rude on Nyasha's part, as it elevates her higher than anyone else in the room. Acquiescing and properly greeting Mainini shows that Nyasha is capable of choosing her battles and being obedient, though her displeasure with the marriage talk suggests that she's still not sold on a traditional image of womanhood as sold to her by these family members.



It's worth keeping in mind that for this holiday, the fact that Maiguru, Nyasha, and Tambu are all educated or are being educated doesn't excuse them from work. The only thing that gets a woman out of work is being patriarchal, which indicates that in this system, men inherently have more power than any woman can hope to gain through other means.



Tambu never mentions that Maiguru also eats the special refrigerated meat; this shows again that in this situation, she's trapped by the fact that she's not a blood member of Babamukuru's family. This tells all the women that men are better and more powerful, while women are powerless and must be obedient at all times. The only way that Maiguru can feel superior is by using her [Dover stove](#), which, thanks to her time in England, she likely finds easier to use than the hearth.



Because Lucia isn't invited to this meeting, she doesn't have the opportunity to defend herself or tell her side of the story. This gives Takesure the opportunity to shift all the blame onto her, showing again that as a man, he has all the power.



Maiguru's refusal to take a side likely comes from feeling put upon and being forced to deal with Babamukuru's family when she doesn't want to. In other words, she is likely angry at the patriarchy as well, but in a different way than Mainini and Lucia are. It's also worth noting that the novel uses "patriarchy" to refer to the male family members, not to the societal construct as a whole.



Maiguru distantly says that the matter doesn't concern her, as neither Lucia nor Takesure are her family. Mainini asks why Maiguru is even in the kitchen if she's not going to side with the women, but Maiguru reminds Mainini that she invited her. She insists that Lucia and Takesure will have to deal with the consequences and excuses herself to go to bed. After Maiguru leaves, Mainini sneers that Maiguru is proud, unfeeling, doesn't care for Tambu and killed Nhamo.

Lucia tries to calm Mainini, but Mainini won't have it. Mainini insists that Lucia doesn't know how to restrain herself, since she slept with Takesure and Jeremiah. Then, Mainini insists that the women only listened politely to Maiguru because she's educated and rich. Mainini says that she also has a mouth and she won't be quiet, and accuses Maiguru of being a witch and stealing children. Mainini turns on Tambu and says that if Tambu is too good to eat vegetables or use the latrine, she can go to Maiguru and eat meat.

Lucia manages to convince Mainini to go to the house to listen in on the meeting, and the two of them leave. Patience follows and Tambu wants to follow, but she's afraid of seeming disloyal to Nyasha. Nyasha is gone, and Tambu doesn't know when she left the kitchen, but she's glad to not have to explain her mother's words. Later, Nyasha insists that both Mainini and Maiguru are suffering, though Tambu insists that Maiguru can't suffer.

Maiguru passes through the meeting and Babamukuru gives her permission to continue through to the bedroom. The rest of the women gather and whisper outside. Takesure resumes his tale and says that Lucia refused to leave with him. Lucia tries not to laugh. Babamukuru takes Takesure seriously until Takesure accuses Lucia of bewitching Jeremiah's children. Lucia stomps into the room, calls Takesure a fool, and grabs him by both ears.

With Takesure's head held at waist height, Lucia addresses Babamukuru. She asks if Takesure is truly a man when he spews this nonsense, and makes Takesure admit that he's never seen her practicing witchcraft. Throwing Takesure back on the sofa, Lucia says she didn't leave because Jeremiah is a terrible husband to Mainini. She says he wants everything but doesn't want to work for it, and she couldn't bear to leave her sister with him. Lucia says she's going to leave and take Mainini with her, and refuses to stay and talk about it.

The belief that Lucia and Takesure aren't family shows that marriage in this culture doesn't actually bring women into a man's family. This is another way of disempowering women, as it also appears to deprive them of their own birth families while also denying them power in their married families.



Mainini doesn't believe that she and Maiguru have anything in common, which means that the women can't work together to achieve a degree of power over Babamukuru. When she also turns on Tambu, she shows that she thinks the true culprit is education as it allows an educated person to discredit people who aren't.



Again, Tambu fully buys into the patriarchal system that says Maiguru's duties of feeding everyone are an honor: in her mind, there are no downsides to being Babamukuru's wife. This blinds her from seeing the other ways that a person can suffer and narrows her point of view.



When Lucia inserts herself into the meeting, it shows that there are ways for women to gain power over men—they just have to insist on being listened to, as Lucia does. Though this should offer some hope for Nyasha, it's worth keeping in mind that Nyasha is still young and marriageable, and therefore her obedience is valuable.



As far as the reader has seen, Lucia's accusations against Jeremiah are true: Jeremiah doesn't have to work hard or be kind to keep Mainini under his thumb, and Babamukuru is around to provide for his children. This shows how this patriarchal system doesn't force men to be kind or reasonable people, but rewards them anyway.



Back outside, Tambu worriedly tells Lucia that if she takes Mainini, Tambu will have to come back to the homestead. Lucia laughs and assures her this will pass. In the house, Babamukuru reprimands Jeremiah for making such a mess. Tete Gladys suggests that this would all be fixed if Jeremiah would behave sensibly. Takesure suggests medicine while Jeremiah lists the problems of the entire family and suggests they hire a medium to drive out the evil.

Babamukuru is incredulous and disappointed that Jeremiah would make such a sinful suggestion. Calling the room to attention, Babamukuru says that he has a solution: the issue is that Jeremiah and Mainini are living in sin, so he wants to throw a church wedding for them so they can be married before God and stop God from punishing the family.

The next morning, Tambu shares everything she heard with Nyasha. Nyasha is pleased for Lucia and amused about the wedding. She asks about the ceremonies that Jeremiah proposed, but Tambu can barely describe them since they don't perform them anymore. Tambu tells the reader that she saw this as progress, but Nyasha doesn't see it the same way. Nyasha makes comments about the horrors of people becoming colonized and their debate ends. Tambu carries breakfast into the living room, where Gladys and Maiguru are giggling about Babamukuru's reaction to Lucia inserting herself. Gladys asks whether a wedding or a cleansing is a better cure for Jeremiah's self-indulgence and dissolves into laughter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tambu doesn't find the proposed wedding funny. She experiences panic attacks every time she thinks of Mainini as a bride, and she also experiences attacks when she thinks of Babamukuru. She's angry with him since she sees the wedding as a plan to make a joke of her parents, but Tambu believes she can't be angry with Babamukuru since he's her benefactor.

To distract themselves, Tambu and Nyasha make clay pots. Nyasha takes this hobby very seriously, while Tambu welcomes it just for the distraction. However, she's unable to banish thoughts of the wedding and eventually admits to herself that she doesn't want it to happen, though she can't pinpoint why. She thinks that she *should* like the idea of her parents no longer living in sin, as sin is now a powerful concept in Tambu's mind after a year at the mission school. Tambu thinks that if her parents are living in sin, than she and her sisters are too. Tambu tries to tell herself that sin only affected people long ago.

Again, Jeremiah's suggestion of a medium indicates that he's not a Christian at all. Because of his poverty and his lack of education, local religion holds way more sway for him than God does. Notably, Gladys, the sole woman present, has the most no-nonsense solution, but also the one that seems the least likely to happen.



Babamukuru's anger shows that he also expects obedience from his male family members, not just Nyasha and Tambu. With this, it shows how Babamukuru's education allows him to feel superior to everyone else, male or female.



The inability to explain the cleansing ceremonies that the medium would perform indicates that Tambu is losing touch with her traditional roots—which is something that's happened thanks to the family's relationship to education, missionaries, and religion. This again shows that one of the main consequences of colonialism is that native people are coopted into a system that vilifies their traditional beliefs and then makes them forget those beliefs by never allowing the traditions to happen.



For Tambu, the issue is twofold. Unlike Nhamo, she still respects her parents and doesn't want to see them humiliated. However, she can't conceive of being angry with Babamukuru because he's so kind to her in other ways.



When Tambu doesn't fully support the wedding after a year of learning about the horrors of sin, it indicates that she is, in important ways, not falling prey to the same things that Nhamo did. That is, she doesn't look down on her parents for not being married in the Christian sense, and she recognizes that that way of being married is just as valid as being married in a Christian ceremony.



Gradually, the relatives leave. Tambu stays at the homestead for the three weeks until term begins. She's upset that she won't be able to see Nyasha for that time, as she now relies on Nyasha to help her with her worries. Tambu feels as though she's vague, even though she also feels like she's following a clear path towards education and development of her family. Nyasha, however, has introduced Tambu to the possibility that there are other roads to take, and Tambu wants to explore those roads.

After waving goodbye to Babamukuru, Maiguru, and Nyasha, Takesure invites Lucia to sleep with him that night. She refuses, reminding the men of her plan to take Mainini away, but Jeremiah and Takesure only laugh at her. Tambu feels bad for Lucia, whom she recognizes is serious. Lucia knows that leaving will have consequences but isn't afraid. She's waiting for Mainini to make a decision, but because Mainini's father and husband have controlled her mind her entire life, she can't. Eventually, Mainini decides to go through with the wedding and Lucia, unashamed, moves back in with Takesure.

Tambu is disappointed with Lucia, especially since she fears that her relationship with Takesure will only increase the amount of sin the family has. She implores Lucia to do something, but Lucia gently says that she'll leave when it's convenient. With this, life settles back to normal. Takesure gets hit by lightning one afternoon and then refuses to help Tambu fix the thatch roof of the kitchen. Lucia helps instead. When Babamukuru arrives to fetch Tambu, he compliments Jeremiah on his good hard work fixing the roof, and Jeremiah accepts the praise.

Life at the mission proceeds as usual. Nyasha and Babamukuru continue to fight constantly. Next to Nyasha, Tambu looks like the perfect woman because she hardly speaks and never questions things. Babamukuru points this out to Nyasha often, but she's not offended. She doesn't understand how much Babamukuru is ashamed of having a daughter like her, and because she doesn't think she's a person to be ashamed of, she has no idea how he feels.

In March, Mainini comes to the mission hospital and has her baby, a healthy boy. Coincidentally, Lucia arrives on the bus a few hours after he's born, and soon the entire family arrives to celebrate. That night, Babamukuru drives everyone but Lucia home. Lucia takes the opportunity of being in the house to tell Babamukuru that Takesure isn't a good man. Babamukuru is upset that Takesure didn't leave after the meeting in January. Lucia only notes that life on the homestead makes it difficult to do useful things.

Tambu's recognition of what Nyasha is doing for her—introducing her to shades of gray and to ambiguity—shows that she really has Nyasha to thank for being able to oppose the wedding at all. Nyasha herself then becomes a symbol for independence and specifically, for independent thought.



Jeremiah and Takesure laugh because it's unfathomable to them that a woman like Lucia would actually defy men. They're far more used to women like Mainini, who've never had the opportunity to think for themselves and are therefore easy to control. This continues to draw connections between Lucia and Nyasha, and shows that independent thought isn't actually dependent on education or Westernization.



Tambu's fear of sin shows that the mission is still having an impact on her and how she thinks about the world, but there are places where she's willing to draw the line. When Jeremiah accepts the praise for Tambu and Lucia's work, it again shows that as far as he's concerned, the women of his household exist to make him look good and to benefit him; their individual contributions matter little.



Though Tambu is a perfect woman according to Babamukuru, it's worth noting that she's not being a particularly engaged student. Part of learning is asking questions, which Tambu isn't willing to do because she's afraid of the answers complicating things.



Because Mainini's baby is a boy, he will automatically be Babamukuru's favorite niece or nephew. Fortunately for Mainini, having given birth to a boy means that she'll now be more valuable to Jeremiah, which may encourage him to treat her better.



The next day, Lucia reminds Babamukuru that she only came to the homestead to help Mainini and then suggests that if she could find a job, it would solve their problems. Babamukuru asks what kind of job Lucia could do, and she answers that she could do anything that doesn't require education. The next day, Mainini and the baby come to the mission house. Though Babamukuru insists on taking the women home, it's not until four days later that he finds the time. He tells Mainini to pack and Lucia to stay—he found a job for her cooking at the girls' hostel.

Lucia celebrates and sinks to her knees to thank Babamukuru for his generosity. Mainini joins and then Maiguru does, and Tambu wants to as well. Nyasha kicks Tambu under the table and tells her to not join in, but Tambu thanks Babamukuru anyway. Tambu remains impressed with Babamukuru and tells Nyasha so all evening. Nyasha explains that someone like Babamukuru is obligated to do things like find Lucia a job. Tambu tells the reader that Nyasha thought about things in a historical context and while Tambu tried to wrap her head around it, she couldn't understand that Lucia wouldn't be able to do better in life unless Babamukuru kept supporting her.

Eventually, Nyasha and Tambu take their argument to Lucia. Lucia says that Babamukuru wanted to be asked, so she did, and now everyone is happy. She's especially proud because she's able to attend night classes and go to school for the first time.

Babamukuru schedules the wedding for the end of September. He extends the house to accommodate guests and names Tambu and Lucia bridesmaids. One day in August, Babamukuru fetches Mainini, Tambu, Nyasha, and Lucia to take them to the dressmaker's shop. Lucia, Nyasha, and Tambu discuss the dresses, but Mainini isn't interested. Babamukuru is shocked when he discovers what the cost will be, so he attempts to make Maiguru give Mainini her wedding dress. Maiguru is angry and finally agrees to lend Mainini her veil and oversee the purchasing of the dress fabric. Maiguru grouses that Babamukuru didn't care so much when *they* got married.

For several weeks, Maiguru forgets to purchase the cloth and finally, Nyasha heads up the expedition. When they deliver the fabric to the dressmaker, she also changes their patterns. A week before the wedding, they pick up the dresses. Tambu tries hers on and feels beautiful. Nyasha chuckles that the wedding will be sweet, but this hurts Tambu's feelings. Tambu knows that the wedding is just a ridiculous performance, and she doesn't want to be a part of it. She only half acknowledges this and tries to pretend it's not happening.

With a job, Lucia will be able to contribute better now that she seems to be a part of Mainini and Jeremiah's family. This shows that there are other ways for a woman to get ahead than just education: employment of any sort, provided they have control over their paychecks, can help empower them to support their families and control their lives.



Nyasha recognizes that Babamukuru is one of a line of "good Africans" who give back to their communities by empowering women like Lucia. In other words, it falls to him to help Lucia, as the missionaries either can't or won't. Further, because Babamukuru is so successful, it's considered his responsibility to perform these services and care for others. All of this goes to show that Babamukuru isn't necessarily kind; he's doing what's expected of him.



Having access to education means that this opportunity may give Lucia more than just a job; like Tambu, she may also get access to the prestige of white culture.



The attempt to make Maiguru give up her wedding dress indicates that Babamukuru is only interested in the image of the wedding, not actually doing something that's going to be meaningful for Jeremiah and Mainini. This is reinforced by Mainini's lack of interest in choosing dress fabric or patterns. She's doing it for Babamukuru because, as a married woman, she has no choice but to do what the men in her family tell her to do.



Tambu recognizes that what Babamukuru really wants is to create the illusion that his entire family is made up of good Christians like himself. In this way, he's making a joke of Jeremiah and Mainini's traditional beliefs and bullying them into a ceremony that they don't believe in and won't appreciate. All of this will also allow him to show off his wealth to the friends and family in attendance.



Tambu knows she can't just tell Babamukuru her feelings, so she tries to tell herself that the wedding is wonderful and her parents will love it. She can't make herself believe it, however; Mainini doesn't care and Lucia doesn't either. Tambu can't sleep for nights on end and feels she has no choice but to follow through.

The Thursday before the wedding, Babamukuru tells Tambu that he'll take her home so she can help with preparations. She politely agrees, but she knows something is wrong with her when she doesn't fight back. She knows now that because she idolized Babamukuru, her ability to think critically was stunted, and she felt unable to say anything. Tambu thinks Mainini is right: she is unnatural, as she's willing to laugh at her parents when Babamukuru asks her to.

The next afternoon, Tambu goes home with her friends and doesn't come back to the mission until well after dark. Nyasha is asleep, and Tambu wakes up Maiguru by trying to knock on the window. Maiguru scolds Tambu, but Nyasha says nothing. The morning of the wedding, Tambu discovers that she can't get out of bed. Nyasha thinks that Tambu is sick, but Tambu knows that she just doesn't want to get up. She lets Nyasha think she's sick or paralyzed.

Nyasha tries to coax Tambu out of bed, but Tambu feels herself slipping out of her body. She finds herself sitting on the foot of the bed, watching Nyasha talk to her own lifeless form. Tambu watches Maiguru walk in and then Babamukuru, who looks annoyed. Tambu feels that Babamukuru can't reach her where she is and is very pleased with herself. Babamukuru rants that Maiguru needs to get Tambu up, and that Tambu is ungrateful and spoiled. Slowly, Tambu slips back into her body and says that she doesn't want to go to the wedding.

Babamukuru rages for a while and threatens to throw Tambu out of his house if she doesn't agree to go. Tambu decides his threats don't matter; what matters more is that she's sure of her decision and isn't going. With this decision, she also knows that she's giving up her right to Babamukuru's charity. She begins to pack her suitcase until she realizes that none of the items in it are hers. Nyasha tries to soothe Tambu and assures her that Babamukuru won't throw her out. When Maiguru calls for Nyasha, she goes.

Remember that Tambu's idolization of Babamukuru makes her feel as though she can't go against him. This shows that such unwavering obedience can make a person compromise on their beliefs to the point of becoming ill.



Tambu is remembering how she stood up to Jeremiah as a child when she wanted to go to school. She can't stand up to Babamukuru because, up to this point, he's provided her everything she wanted—namely education and proximity to white culture—that Jeremiah tried to keep her from.



When Tambu feels as though she has to feign illness in order to get out of going, it shows the consequences of her obedience: she literally cannot find the words to stand up for herself and assert her independence, and it's easier to pretend she can't actually obey.



The out-of-body experience reinforces how difficult this is for Tambu, as it brings the split she feels inside herself into reality. By stepping out of her body, Tambu is able to take pleasure in her independence and remember that it's a good thing that will get her far and, momentarily, can escape Babamukuru's wrath.



Nyasha's attempts to comfort Tambu and tell her that things will be fine show that Nyasha is able to stand up to Babamukuru in part because she trusts that he won't actually kill her or throw her out. This indicates that their relationship is stronger than one might have thought as she doesn't fear retaliation too badly.



Later, they tell Tambu that the wedding was wonderful. Jeremiah and Mainini were beautifully dressed, there was a lot of food, and some people even managed to sneak in beer. Babamukuru gifted the couple their house and promised to build a second house for himself for his visits. When Tambu sees the photographs she thinks she should've gone, but takes solace in having made her decision and stood by it.

The day after the wedding, Babamukuru calls Tambu to the sitting room. He calmly tells Tambu how disappointed he is. He whips her fifteen times and sends Anna on a two-week leave so that Tambu can assume her chores as punishment. Tambu performs the chores with grateful delight and feels as though they're the price of her new identity. Nyasha is angry about the severity of the punishment and wants to help, but Tambu is too afraid of Babamukuru to let her. However, Sylvester quietly helps Tambu and though Tambu suspects Babamukuru knows, he says nothing.

On Saturday, Nyasha decides to help with the laundry. As they scrub the white clothes, Lucia stops by to visit with Farai. She assumes that the shirts belong to boyfriends and is very angry when she learns that Tambu is being punished for refusing to attend the wedding. She marches into the house, demands to see Babamukuru, and bluntly tells him that Tambu shouldn't be punished, especially when he never asked Tambu or Mainini if they wanted Tambu to be there. Babamukuru is uncharacteristically patient with her but insists Tambu needs to learn obedience. He notes that Maiguru would never disobey him like that. Lucia points out that wives are obliged to obey, but some unmarried women don't know how.

Babamukuru finds this funny and laughs after Lucia leaves. Maiguru, however, explodes. She tells Babamukuru that she's tired of him taking her money to feed his family and throw weddings, she's tired of being a housekeeper for his ungrateful family, and she's tired of women like Lucia telling her what to do. Listening outside, Tambu and Nyasha are worried, especially when Maiguru says that she's not happy.

It's telling that Tambu feels so comforted by having made a decision and stuck by it. This shows her that independence isn't a bad thing, even when it's independence from Babamukuru, which will hopefully help her develop her sense of self and learn to think critically.



Sending Anna on leave with no warning is rude and suggests that the terms of her employment may not be in her best interest. While Tambu is no longer an interesting figure for Tambu, this adds more evidence to the novel's assertion that Babamukuru isn't actually someone that Tambu or the reader should idolize. He, in other words, doesn't use his power for good.



As far as Babamukuru is concerned, the most important thing for Tambu to learn is how to be obedient and submissive so she may grow up to be a good wife one day, like Maiguru. Again, this goes against what Nyasha insists is the role of a good student, which is to think critically and question everything. Babamukuru essentially prioritizes the patriarchal system over Tambu's education, and makes it clear that her education will only be available to her as long as she obeys him.



The discovery that Maiguru's paychecks go to feed Tambu's family reinforces the earlier clues that women exist only to serve their married families: Maiguru's desires don't matter in the slightest to her husband; she's just a tool that he can use to support his family.



That night, Tambu and Nyasha wonder whether Maiguru will leave or not. Nyasha seems to be in awe of her mother. Surprisingly, Maiguru does leave early the next morning, and Babamukuru doesn't try to stop her. Tambu thinks Babamukuru is still hurt, but Nyasha believes he didn't think Maiguru would actually follow through. Nyasha also isn't bothered much by Maiguru's departure, as she's excited for Maiguru to find freedom and doesn't believe she's being abandoned. She tells Tambu that she feels trapped by Babamukuru, just like Maiguru does, and now that Maiguru has gotten out, she knows that doing so is possible. However, they do believe Maiguru will return to her life at the mission and feel discouraged by that knowledge.

The suggestion that Nyasha would feel abandoned certainly comes from Tambu, who still on some level believes that wives should serve their families unquestioningly. Nyasha's ability to think outside of this system indicates that she's able to comfort herself by relying on theory and her extensive education. This essentially allows her to think about Maiguru's departure conceptually rather than personally, which means that Maiguru becomes a symbol of freedom and independence.



Babamukuru does his best to pretend that nothing is wrong. On Thursday, Chido calls with news that Maiguru is at her brother's home. Nyasha is upset that Maiguru went to a man and dithers over whether to tell Babamukuru. Feeling she has to, she waits up for him that night and passes on Chido's message. Babamukuru drives away minutes later and returns with Maiguru in the morning. Maiguru smiles more and seems more sensible, but Nyasha struggles: she wishes Maiguru had had more time away, but she's secretly glad her mother is home.

After Maiguru's return, Nyasha finds that her delight in the theoretical boons that Maiguru would receive by leaving aren't enough to make her wish entirely that Maiguru were still gone. Nyasha is, essentially, still human and loves her mother, which colors how she thinks about both Maiguru and the theory of female emancipation.



CHAPTER NINE

One day late in the term, the teachers send students outside to study for their upcoming examinations. While Tambu and her classmates are outside, the Catholic nuns arrive. Tambu and her friends know that the Catholic church is superior to their own Protestant one because the nuns dedicate their lives to serving God, so they're very disappointed to see that the nuns look exactly like their Protestant missionaries. The nuns do smile beautifully at the children as they perform a dance and a play, and Tambu recites a poem at record speed.

Notice that the Catholics are better because they devote themselves to God more fully than the protestants, not because they do anything else better or differently. This speaks to the power of God to influence how individuals like Tambu and her friends think; their time at Sunday school has made them believe that their goal should be to be as close to God as possible.



Then, the nuns ask the students to sit for a test of "general knowledge and general ability." The students find this very unfair. After the test, the nuns speak to the students one by one and ask them questions about their parents and friends. Later, Tambu learns that the nuns came to recruit students for their own mission school. A few girls know how the Catholics operate: after a certain level the nuns persuade students to join the order by offering scholarships, so many girls join but then get pregnant to avoid actually taking vows.

The exchange of scholarships for new novices in the order shows another way that white settlers try to colonize the natives: by making them involved in the Church like this, it makes them complicit in the colonial system and even makes sure that they promote the system, just like Babamukuru does as the headmaster of the mission school.



Despite the rumors, everyone wants to go to the Catholic school. It's a prestigious multiracial girls' school with beautiful uniforms. The school is offering two places for all the African girls Tambu's age in the country. Because Tambu has been unwittingly "preparing" for the test for two years, thanks to Nyasha's extensive library and interesting thought experiments, she's accepted and offered a scholarship.

Tambu is thrilled, but Nyasha is disappointed. She insists that being educated at the Catholic school would assimilate Tambu into their culture. Tambu believes she's just being jealous when she says that the mission school is better, as it's common knowledge that the European schools have better teachers and equipment. Tambu believes that she won't forget the wedding, Nhamo, and the latrine, as those things are evidence of the burden of womanhood that crushes Mainini. Tambu believes going to the school will lighten those burdens.

Babamukuru agrees with Nyasha: he cites the fact that he needs to provide for Dambudzo, the only boy in Tambu's family, and insists that spending too much time with white people is bad, citing Nyasha as an example. He says that the mission will best prepare Tambu for marriage, which makes Tambu lose interest. He asks Maiguru if she has anything to add and surprisingly, she does. She doesn't believe that Tambu will be corrupted by the school and points out that twenty years ago, when she was at school in South Africa, everyone said that the women were loose because they were prejudiced against educated women. Today, she says, she doesn't even know what loose even means as it refers to so many evils, but that Tambu is decent and that won't change.

Babamukuru takes Tambu to the homestead for Christmas vacation the next day. He doesn't stay to discuss the Catholic school. Tambu waits impatiently for Christmas so they can discuss her schooling, but unfortunately, nobody comes to stay: Maiguru refuses to cook for two dozen people again, so Babamukuru drives to the homestead daily. Mainini is secretly thrilled, as she doesn't want to share her house or her [Dover stove](#).

On New Year's Eve, Babamukuru and Jeremiah discuss Tambu's future. Babamukuru weighs the pros and cons but finally says that Tambu should go. Tambu feels dizzy and numb; this will be a step away from poverty, but also from her beloved river [Nyamarira](#). She tells herself that the cost will balance, and it'll be worth it to buy her sisters dresses and make sure that Mainini is plump again.

The fact that Nyasha essentially prepared Tambu to do well on this test does raise the question of why Nyasha herself wasn't accepted. This suggests that Tambu is better at existing in the colonial system, if only because she doesn't find it as oppressive as Nyasha does.



Tambu's insistence that she won't forget Mainini's burdens of womanhood does indicate that she hasn't yet forgotten her mother and where she came from, as Nhamo did. However, this also proves one of the novel's main points: that one's gender is inescapable and will color everything a person does and how they're treated. In other words, Tambu can't forget because she's female.



The note that Babamukuru is now obliged to support Dambudzo's future education reinforces that Tambu was merely a second choice—and is now even a third choice—to receive an education because she's female. When Maiguru stands up to Babamukuru, she does so by pointing out that he, like every other man in the world, vilifies women for being female. By standing up for Tambu, Maiguru ensures that Tambu will have experiences that she didn't and may be able to go further in her quest for emancipation than Maiguru did.



For Mainini, acquiring Maiguru's Dover stove is a way for her to feel superior over her sister in law, given that the stove is only used to cook special meals and was only used when Maiguru was around. This again shows that there's more ways for women to become powerful than through education.



When Tambu mentions Nyamarira, it again shows that she hasn't forgotten Mainini or her promise to remain grounded unlike Nhamo. Notice too that she wants to become educated to support her family—she's bought into the vision of what proper womanhood looks like.



Tambu loses herself in daydreams about her pretty new uniform and runs to tell Mainini. She finds Mainini in the kitchen, cooking on the hearth in spite of the [Dover stove](#). Tambu shares the good news, but Mainini sighs bitterly. She asks if Babamukuru is trying to separate her from her children and send them to slaughter. She also says that if she were a witch, she'd curse Babamukuru.

Over the next few days, Mainini deteriorates. She barely eats and doesn't wash, and Dambudzo develops diarrhea. Worried about his son, Jeremiah takes the bus to the mission and comes home believing that Mainini is bottle feeding Dambudzo and not sanitizing the bottles properly. He suggests getting a medium, but Tambu refuses as she's afraid that Mainini will actually curse Babamukuru. Eventually, Jeremiah sends for Lucia. Lucia ignores Takesure and sets to work setting Mainini right.

First, Lucia walks Mainini to [Nyamarira](#). To make Mainini get in the water and wash, she puts Dambudzo on a boulder in the river and threatens to leave him. Mainini wades in, washes herself and her baby, and Lucia washes their dresses. The women then have to sit and wait for the dresses to dry, during which time other happy women stop to chat and visit. In the evening, Lucia cooks a meaty stew just for Mainini, and the women sleep together in the kitchen. Lucia stays for two more days to feed and talk with Mainini and then heads back to the mission. Mainini seems fully recovered after a week.

In the third week of January, Babamukuru refuses to fetch Tambu, so she takes the bus to the mission. Tambu has only one night at the mission before going to Sacred Heart. Tambu is impatient to talk with Nyasha, who is still in class when she arrives. However, by early evening, Nyasha hasn't come home. Tambu runs to the netball field where she sees her friends playing. They all watch her coolly and ignore her, and Tambu doesn't understand why. They only talk to Tambu when she fails to make a goal. However, one of Tambu's friends rudely says that she's wasting their time with the game, since they don't play netball at Sacred Heart.

Several of the other girls ask Tambu to write and ask her to not forget them. Tambu wonders why everyone thinks she's going to forget them as she wanders through the school to look for Nyasha. She finds her in her classroom, studying, and Nyasha barely greets Tambu. Tambu sits down and waits. Finally, Nyasha says that it's been good having Tambu around and that she'll miss her. They head home for supper in silence.

The choice to not use the Dover stove and to use the hearth instead shows that for Mainini, her sense of superiority that she gains from the stove comes from just having it—having that symbol of whiteness and wealth—and doesn't depend on actually embracing what it stands for.



Again, it's telling that Jeremiah is more worried about his son than his wife—it shows how everyone is encouraged to prioritize men and boys, even within a marriage. Tambu's fear that Mainini will curse Babamukuru shows that she hasn't yet given up on her traditional beliefs, given that she thinks they're valid and reasonable to worry about.



By making Mainini participate in daily life, Lucia reminds Mainini of what her role is as a wife and a mother: to love, nurture, and care for her children, and to care for herself well enough that she'll be able to do that. Mainini's return to wellness indicates that there's comfort in being reminded of what her version of womanhood looks like, even if Tambu looks down on it.



Tambu's friends are clearly jealous that she gets to go to the Catholic school; her inability to recognize this outright only reinforces that she's still a naïve child at this point. Notably, Tambu's excitement about school means that she no longer recognizes that there are limits to her education and what she can accomplish as a woman. As far as she's aware, she's going to succeed now because and in spite of her gender.



What everyone else realizes is that the Catholic school is a shiny new thing for Tambu, which means that the mission will soon look drab and boring in comparison. These are the consequences that Nyasha spoke about earlier, and now, Tambu has the mission as well as the homestead to potentially forget.



Babamukuru isn't in a good mood. He takes offense to Nyasha's late arrival, accuses her of spending time with boys, and won't allow her to skip dinner. Nyasha eats a few bites, but Babamukuru insists she eat all of it. Nyasha shovels her food into her mouth and Babamukuru excuses her. A few minutes later, Tambu excuses herself and waits in the bedroom, listening to Nyasha gagging in the bathroom. When Nyasha comes into the bedroom, she admits that she made herself vomit and doesn't know why. Nyasha says that Babamukuru might be right to dislike her, but she can't bring herself to give into him.

Tambu puts her arm around Nyasha as Nyasha talks on. She laments that Tambu is leaving, as now, she won't have anyone to laugh about Babamukuru with. She says that she tries to see things from his point of view, but she can never make herself be good and obedient for long.

CHAPTER TEN

Tambu feels the same kind of excitement on the day that Babamukuru drives her to Sacred Heart as she did on her first day at the mission. She feels as though things are coming together and she's entering a world where her burdens will be light. Maiguru and Nyasha also accompany Tambu to school, which annoys Babamukuru. Maiguru bakes a beautiful chocolate cake and on the way to Sacred Heart, she insists they stop so she can buy Tambu snacks. Tambu and Nyasha laugh that the food will make her fat, even though they don't actually find it funny.

The grounds are expansive and green, with trees and a pond filled with real goldfish. Dozens of fancy cars wind their way up to the roundabout by the dormitories. Nyasha notices that the finery is a lot for Tambu, so she delicately asks if this is the right place. Babamukuru snaps at Nyasha.

Tambu, Babamukuru, Maiguru, and Nyasha join the throng of students and parents. Tambu is disappointed to see that the only other black people are porters. A nun greets them at the door and leads them to the room where the African students live. Though large, the room isn't big enough for the six beds in it. The nun can't remember whether Nyasha or Tambu is attending. Tambu wishes she were wearing her uniform, but because she's getting hers secondhand, she doesn't have it yet. Babamukuru asks why there are six beds when students are supposed to sleep four to a room, and the nun proudly explains that they have more Africans than usual this year.

Nyasha clearly has an eating disorder, which allows her to control one aspect of her life when the rest of it seems so out of control. Her admission that Babamukuru might be right to dislike her indicates that her sense of self-worth is starting to crumble, and she's taking Babamukuru's criticisms to heart, which is perhaps contributing to her disordered eating.



Nyasha appears to be trying to turn herself into someone she isn't in Tambu's absence. Her failure to be obedient and good suggests that trying to be obedient when one is naturally independent can be extremely dangerous.



Laughing about getting fat is especially unfunny given Nyasha's eating disorder, which is already affecting her weight. For Maiguru, buying snacks is an acceptable way to show Tambu that she supports her and wants her to do well, thereby creating a sense of community and sisterhood centered around education.



The finery that Tambu describes makes it clear that Sacred Heart is a school where extremely rich students go; this certainly makes Tambu feel even more of an outsider than she did when she first arrived at the mission.



The segregated dorm rooms reminds the reader that at places other than the mission school, Rhodesia has instituted its own version of apartheid. The nun's pride that they have six students and inability to see that the housing situation is racist and dehumanizing speaks to the success of the segregation, as she's able to believe that they're doing a good thing by having black students at all.



Babamukuru and Maiguru make Tambu's bed while Tambu unpacks. Then, they say goodbye. Babamukuru is brisk, Maiguru is cheerful, and Nyasha seems determined to be happy. The girls promise to write and visit.

As the term progresses, Tambu barely notices that Nyasha doesn't visit. She throws herself into her studies. The white students take a while to warm up to Tambu but fortunately, the library is huge and welcoming. Tambu spends much of her time reading and doesn't miss home.

Nyasha writes often. Her letters are long and entertaining, consisting mostly of family news and school gossip. She doesn't write about herself much until several weeks later, when Tambu receives a serious letter. Nyasha writes that she misses Tambu and has no friends at school, as they think she's a snob and too smart. To cope she's dedicating herself to her studies, which seems to please Babamukuru. Nyasha also writes she's trying not to anger Babamukuru, and he regularly refuses to let her visit Tambu.

Tambu feels bad and vows to write, but she never does. Nyasha writes another bubbly and happy letter that mentions she's started a new diet that will make her svelte and sensuous. Tambu receives few letters during the second half of term but it doesn't worry her. Before she knows it, Babamukuru picks Tambu up at the end of term. He refuses to talk at all on the way to the mission. Nyasha looks very thin when Tambu arrives. Tambu goes to the homestead the next day and at the end of the holiday, goes straight back to Sacred Heart. Because of this, she doesn't see Nyasha until August.

In August, Nyasha is skeletal and frail. She barely acknowledges Tambu and remains absorbed in her books. At dinner, she drinks two glasses of water and devours her food as fast as she can. Babamukuru and Maiguru look relieved, but Tambu hears Nyasha vomiting later. Afterwards, Nyasha returns to her books. She wakes Tambu up early in the morning to help her with a math problem she can't solve. She'd made a silly mistake and laughs, saying she's not concentrating hard enough.

This tense but civil goodbye is a testament to Babamukuru's power to control his family members. Nobody thinks to step out of line and recognize that this situation is difficult for all of them.



When Tambu doesn't miss Nyasha, it suggests that she's getting a lot of what Nyasha gave her from the library and from her classes. This suggests that now, Nyasha is the one who is unnecessary, just like Tambu felt at the beginning.



Again, when Nyasha makes Babamukuru happy by throwing herself into her schoolwork, it shows that Babamukuru prioritizes education over anything else—even his daughter's health and emotional wellbeing. This is, again, because he sees that her value to him comes from her ability to make him look good in the future.



It's telling that Tambu isn't concerned by Nyasha's new diet; it suggests that even though Tambu was worried when she was at the mission last, she isn't taking Nyasha's eating disorders seriously. However, she's able to feel this way because she, like Nyasha, dedicates herself to her studies, which suggests that education can help someone escape from all sorts of ills or unpleasant thoughts.



The relief that Babamukuru and Maiguru feel indicates that they also don't take Nyasha's eating habits seriously and possibly, don't know that she's throwing everything up. Her inability to solve this math problem suggests that her lack of nourishment is affecting her mental functioning, which means that even Babamukuru should be concerned—she can't do well in school without proper nutrition.



Babamukuru wants to take Tambu to the homestead the next day, but Tambu feels she can't leave Nyasha and needs to refuse Babamukuru. She telephones his office, but he doesn't answer. Tambu makes plans to confront him directly, but knows she can't follow through. At lunch, Nyasha refuses to leave her room, which angers Babamukuru. Maiguru comforts Babamukuru, and they say that it's not so serious, since Nyasha eats at supper. Tambu knows the situation is very serious and manages to ask Babamukuru if she can stay to be with Nyasha. Surprisingly, he agrees. Tambu believes it's proof that Babamukuru is good.

Nyasha becomes weaker every day. She studies fourteen hours per day, weaves when she walks, and wakes Tambu up at night with questions about homework. One evening, Nyasha passes out onto her dinner plate. Believing she's making a scene, Babamukuru sends her to her room.

Late that night, Nyasha wakes Tambu up, asks to get into bed with her, and when Tambu moves over, Nyasha declines—she just wanted to see if Tambu would let her. Nyasha sits on her bed and becomes agitated. She says that "they" have done this to her and to everyone else, and they've taken everyone away as well. Growing angrier, she says that "they" have deprived everyone of their identities and make them grovel. Tambu touches Nyasha, which sends her into a fit of rage. Babamukuru and Maiguru come running as Nyasha shreds her books, breaks things, and then suddenly calms down. She asks Maiguru to hold her and says that she's not one of them, but she's not like her parents either. The next morning, Nyasha tells Tambu that she has more rage inside her and needs to go somewhere safe.

Babamukuru drives Nyasha into Salisbury the next morning on the advice of Maiguru's brother. Maiguru's brother makes Nyasha an appointment with a psychiatrist, but the psychiatrist insists that Africans don't become ill with Nyasha's symptoms, so she must be faking it. Babamukuru is ready to go home, but Maiguru's brother insists they stay. They find another psychiatrist who checks Nyasha into a clinic to rest for a few weeks. Maiguru stays, but Babamukuru drives back with Tambu to drop her off at the homestead. The drive is silent.

At the homestead, Mainini snorts that it's the "Englishness" that's done this to Nyasha, and it's liable to kill all of them. Tambu knows that Mainini believes she's a victim as well. Tambu takes these words to heart and wonders for a few days if she's being careful enough not to succumb to whiteness and prosperity. Her fear turns into guilt and she has nightmares about Nhamo and her cousins. Tambu is finally able to push the thoughts away and return to Sacred Heart, happy about her education.

Again, the fact that Tambu struggles to do the right thing and tell Babamukuru about the seriousness of Nyasha's disordered eating speaks to just how strongly Tambu idolizes him. She doesn't want to tell him that he's not actually in charge of his world and can't control Nyasha, as that might jeopardize Tambu's place of relative safety. This is all reinforced when Tambu believes that Babamukuru allows her to stay just so that he can be kind.



Here, Babamukuru gets angry with Nyasha because she's not conforming to his idea of what she should be like. This is because he's seeing that he can't control all the women around him.



The "they" that Nyasha talks about are presumably white settlers and colonizers. Her rant then becomes about the consequences of colonialism, which has made Nyasha unrecognizable and shameful to her parents, yet has denied her access to being truly white or European. This alienation is what she sees as the true crime of colonialism: because of it, Nyasha exists somewhere in between black and white and just as Tambu cannot find that gray space in between the two poles, Nyasha can't pick a side.



When the psychiatrist insists that Africans can't develop eating disorders, he essentially refuses to acknowledge that Nyasha has developed a "white" disorder. This is another way in which the racist colonial system punishes black natives and tries to make them seem less than human: by insisting they don't get sick the same way that white humans do.



Mainini likely isn't wrong; Nyasha's exposure to Western culture has made her, in a number of important ways, more English than African. This is why she suffers from a disease that, according to psychiatrists, African people don't suffer from, and this is why she seeks to break out of the black and white systems in front of her.



Tambu the narrator says that she was able to push the thoughts away then, but before too long, her mind began to question things and refuse to be brainwashed. Eventually, Sacred Heart no longer looked like her ticket to a better life. The process has been long and difficult and led her to write this story.

When Tambu realizes that Sacred Heart was an arm of the colonial system that sought to bring Tambu into the fold, it shows that she does learn how to think critically and accept that not all education is good.



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