



Babamukuru

The central male presence in the novel, Babamukuru is a cold and enigmatic figure who is difficult to penetrate. While the book's point of view is decidedly female, Babamukuru enacts the pressures and duties placed on men attempting to raise their families' status and to shake off the specter of poverty. Babamukuru's intelligence, ambition, and accomplishments are often taken for granted by others, as it is the others who reap the benefits of his hard work without attaining a full understanding of the sacrifices involved. His dual roles as parent and administrator are often at odds. He uses his job as headmaster to avoid any form of emotional intimacy with the women who share his home with him. His relationship with Nyasha is especially fraught, since her general conduct and academic performance at the mission school reflect his abilities not only as a father but also as a leader.

From his earliest days, Babamukuru is the pawn of those who have offered him assistance and opportunity. He feels he has no choice but to accept the charity that the administrators at the mission school extend to him. After completing his education in South Africa, he does not want to pursue a higher degree in England, and he realizes that the hope of a brighter future for his extended family rests solely on his shoulders. Babamukuru stoically accepts his duty, even if he risks being viewed as a haughty authoritarian or unsympathetic bully by dictating what direction his family will take. He may not wish to be the leader, stern taskmaster, and voice of moral guidance in his family, but if he does not accept that role, his relatives will not be able to alter their circumstances on their own. Partly because of Babamukuru's story and life experiences, Tambu realizes there are multiple interpretations to the choices that individuals make and the motives behind those choices.

Maiguru

Maiguru is a complex, often contradictory, and multilayered character who grows increasingly concerned about the development of her children and their responses to the various cultural traditions, both Western and African, with which they have been raised. Her fears and anxieties are rooted in her own experience of trying to reconcile attitudes and behaviors that come from two very different worlds. Her conflicting attitudes suggest the deep divide that exists in her perception of herself as a woman and as an African. When the family returns to Rhodesia, Maiguru wishes her children to retain the mark of distinction and difference that they have achieved from living in a Western society. She defends the fact that they have lost their ability to communicate fluently in Shona, their native tongue. After the family has settled back into life in Rhodesia, Maiguru's reactions and attitudes change, and she grows concerned at how Anglicized her children have become. Only when her daughter is severely ailing in the final stages of the novel does she realize the dire consequences of these conflicting cultural pressures that have been placed on her children.

When the family returns to the homestead for the holidays, Maiguru, highly educated and accustomed to earning her own living as an educator, is reduced to a traditional role as domestic drudge. During subsequent holidays, Maiguru refuses to attend the celebrations. Even more boldly, Maiguru confronts her husband about her lack of respect and recognition in the family, an action that leads to the even bolder move of her leaving the house altogether. Although she returns to the family fold, Maiguru has evolved into a realistic model of modern womanhood for the young girls in her care. She represents a

subtle but emerging voice of feminist dissent, a woman ahead of her time who attempts to enact change in gradual and realizable ways.

Nyasha

Highly intelligent, perceptive, and inquisitive, Nyasha is old beyond her years. Like the other female characters in *Nervous Conditions*, she is complex and multifaceted, and her dual nature reflects her status as the product of two worlds, Africa and England. On one hand she is emotional, passionate, and provocative, while on the other she is rational and profound in her thinking. Nyasha is admired by Tambu for her ability to see conflict and disagreement not as threats but as opportunities to increase her understanding of herself and the world. She uses the various experiences life presents her with as a chance to grow, learn, and improve. Initially, she thrives in her state of unresolved and often warring emotions and feelings, and she sees any inconsistencies in her feelings or her world as opportunities for greater self-development.

Nyasha's precocious nature and volatile, ungrounded identity eventually take their toll, and isolation and loneliness are her reward for being unconventional and fiercely independent. She is unpopular at the mission school, but this unpopularity is due more to her willfulness than the fact she is the headmaster's daughter. Her inner resources and resolve are highly developed, but they can sustain her only so far. Over the course of the novel, the elements that define her and the aspects of her personality she most cherishes become the source of her unrest and ultimate breakdown. Nyasha begins to resent her outspoken nature and the constant spirit of resistance she displays, particularly to her father. The transformation leads to self-hatred, a dangerously negative body image that results in an eating disorder, and mental illness. Nyasha becomes a symbolic victim of the pressures to embrace modernity, change, enlightenment, and self-improvement.

Tambu

Throughout *Nervous Conditions*, the adult Tambu looks back on her adolescence and her struggle to emerge into adulthood and formulate the foundation on which her adult life would be built. There are essentially two Tambus in the novel, and the narrator Tambu successfully generates tension between them. Tambu is a crafty and feisty narrator. She explores her own conflicted perceptions not only as a teenager but as an adult reexamining those years, a dual perspective that gives the novel richness and complexity. Tambu introduces herself to the reader harshly, proclaiming the fact that she is not upset that her brother has died. As the presiding voice in the novel, she can manipulate how she is represented and perceived, but under the tough exterior is a hardworking girl who is eager to please and eager to advance herself. Her self-portrayal, with its unflattering as well as praiseworthy elements, represents the adult Tambu's effort to convey the challenges faced by impoverished yet talented women in central Africa in the 1970s. A figure of those tumultuous and ever-changing times, Tambu emerges not as a flat and one-dimensional symbol but ultimately as a fallible and triumphant human presence.