

Characters

Babamukuru

- Is the Central patriarch in the novel
- Represented as a man with considerable power
- Well educated and the headmaster of the missions school
- Was taken in by the missionaries as a young boy
- His status and financial resources allow him to make important decisions for the members of his extended family
- Although he is also the victim of racial oppression by the missionaries who regard him as a boy who should be grateful for his education
- He suggests that Nhamo go to school at the mission to provide for his family not even considering Tambu because she is a girl
- When Nhamo dies, she is given the opportunity to take his place
- Her uncle believes that she will assist the family before she goes into her husbands home
- He still expects her to conform even with an education, like his wife did.

What influence does he have on the females in his life?

- They lean on him for life decisions like Tambu going to school or Lucia getting a job.
- They worship him as their leader: evident when he comes home from England and gets a celebratory welcome, he is treated like a king.

- They fear him if they do not obey. Tambu fears his wrath when she refuses to go to her parents wedding.

-Tambu and Babamukuru's relationship

- She worships him and believes in his guidance at the mission school
- She is completely dependant on his continuing good will as displeasing him could result in her forfeiting her chance to an education.
- He never misses an opportunity to impress upon her that he was paying for her school fees, for the house she was living in and food she was eating
- Tambu's "heart swelled with gratitude" for the "sacrifice" pg88 (leaving work to bring her to the mission school)
- Tambu realises that he expects passivity and unquestioning acceptance from a good daughter

-Nyasha and Babamukuru's relationship

- Refuses to be the silent obedient daughter her father expects her to be
- She challenges her fathers authority and he is shocked at her audacity "his voice cracked in disbelief pg85
- He always reminds her of his economic power over her

-Maiguru and Babamakuru's relationship

- Maiguru is intellectually highly qualified yet she is not treated this way in Babamukur's household
- They are married
- She pampers his male ego rather than questioning it.
- She calls him Daddy-dear and fusses over him, agrees with everything he says

- She conceals her own inward dissatisfaction in order to keep up the image of the well to-do black family
- It is her money that keeps Tambu in school and supports the family
- She is no different from the other woman in the family and must cook and clean and go on her knees in gratitude when Baba finds Lucia a job
- She holds the plate in front of him with both hands for him to dish up

-Lucia and Babamakuru's relationship

- She wins his respect for her forthright and outspoken manner
- She gets him to serve her own ends, and thus turns the patriarchal system on its head pg175
- She tells him tambu has been punished too harshly for missing her parents wedding and that he must stop, he agrees. Which is uncharacteristic of male patriarchy
- She gets Baba to listen which is more than any of the other females have done

-Tambu's mother and Babamakuru's relationship

- She sees him as the patriarchal leader but is upset with him for taking her son away from her
- She blames him for her son Nhoma's death

-Jeremiah and Babamukuru's relationship

- In Babamukuru's presence he is servile and fawning, lauding his siblings' accomplishments.

- Babamakuru suggests that Nhoma go to school to provide for the family, insinuating that Jeremiah, who is the father of both children and by definition the man of the house, is not able to provide for his own family.
- His brother is Babamakuru and is the head patriarchal figure in the family,
- He provides for the Shona tribe and Jeremiah has to fall in line with whatever he is told to do as this was the patriarchal way of the Shona people.
- Babamukuru tells him that he has to marry Tambu's mom in a proper ceremony, he agrees and does not protest anything his brother suggests.

Tambudzai

- She is the first person narrator of the novel
- On the first page we learn that she had a brother who dies when she was 13 and she was not sorry about this
- Her interpretations and judgments of events is not reliable
- What she says is affected by her own perspective, context and interests
- She is concerned that boys are given educational opportunities before girls
- She is extremely driven to be educated even though her parents are more interested in her brothers advancement

- She paints the imaged of control and woman's desire to escape from that control in the fist paragraph with words like "escape" and "entrapment"
- She describes herself as a young girl wanting to find another self
- 'I am not sorry that my brother died', says Tambu. This opening remark is a very powerful and impactful statement.
- One gains insight into the character of Tambu and a better understanding of the pressures women face through oppression.
- Most people would feel saddened by a sibling's death but not Tambu.
- In order for her to move forward and progress her brother had to die.
- Her lack of concern at this tragedy attests to the seriousness of her oppressive situation.
- His death meant she could realize her dream of getting an education.
- Tambu through her good grades is given the opportunity to attend a convent.
- While at the convent she notices a lot of differences in the way people are treated.
- It opens her eyes to another perspective on life.
- When she reflects back she wonders why she ever viewed people in awe. When everyone was the same and should be treated equally.
- She worshipped her uncle for a long time but in the end realized that he too was oppressive.
- He gave opportunities but with limitations and these were further enhanced by his patriarchal views on life.

- She faces triple oppression, race/gender and economic status

Nyasha

- Moved to England, has a British education
- She finds it hard to return to Shona society
- Refuses to conform to her father's ideas of womanhood

Ma'shingayi

- Does all the physical labor on the homestead
- Wants to keep her children close to home, especially after her son dies
- Suffers from severe depression after Tambu leaves for the mission

Nhamo

- Tambu's arrogant older brother
- He likes to torment Tambu with the fact that he can have an education and she cannot because she is a woman.
- After a year at the mission school, he pretends to forget how to speak his native language, Shona.
- He is patriarchal and sexist
- Forces his sisters to fetch luggage and steals Tambu's maize
- He dies from a mysterious illness in 1968.

Lucia

- Sister to Tambu's mom
- Was ordered out the village by Baba with her lover Takesure, she refuses and says if she has to leave she will take her sister with her.
- She avoids marriage which could draw her into the patriarchal system
- She takes advantage of her relative freedom to live according to her own wishes, even though she is brought into dispute
- She enjoys bodily pleasure but avoids dependence on the male
- Her supportive relationship with other woman prevents her from alienating herself from her family.
- She enters into the spirit of the wedding and relies on instinct and is able to revive Tambu's mother
- Has freedom to act both in accordance with her conscience and independent of patriarchal conventions
- Lucia is uneducated in the sense that she had never attended school during her childhood years.
- Much of her early life is a mystery as the novel is an autobiography of the main character and protagonist, Tambu
- Lucia resists oppression in the most dramatic bold manner during a meeting held by the patriarchy, concerning her and Takesure.
- Lucia is not invited to sit in on the meeting to protest her 'innocence' but intruded all the same.

- She does not hesitate to challenge the hierarchy by stampeding into the room and grabbing hold of Takesure's ear. She "warns" Jeremiah to stay in his chair if he "preferred Takesure with ears".
- This scene is highly inspirational and significant.
- It is inspirational in that the other women aside from Maiguru and Nyasha are outside observing with fits of hysterics. They are witnessing how the patriarchal system can be challenged.
- Tambu gains most from this due to her age.
- She observes first-hand how Lucia resists oppression.
- Although the novel does not allude to it, she may well have used this memory subconsciously to assist in her own rebellion of not attending her parents wedding.
- She gets a job cooking at the school and starts grade one

Maiguru

- Expect her to be a shining example of woman's emancipation
- But as the narrator point out, she is trapped and ironically indicates the way to failure rather than success
- She adopts, by virtue of advanced education and financial security, the value and habits of white culture
- She rebels for a few days but is no match for her strong willed husband

Themes

Gender Inequality

Gender is a social constrictio

- Particular societies expect woman and men to fulfill certain roles and exhibit certain characteristics
- Tambu was born a girl and thus faces a fundamental disadvantage
- Traditional African social practice dictates that the oldest male child is deemed the future head of the family.
- All of the family's resources are poured into developing his abilities and preparing him to lead and provide for his clan.
- When Nhamo dies, the tragedy is all the more profound since no boy exists to take his place.
- Tambu steps into the role of future provider, yet she is saddled with the prejudices and limitations that shackled most African girls of her generation.
- Her fight for an education and a better life is compounded by her gender.
- Gender inequality and sexual discrimination form the backdrop of all of the female characters' lives. In the novel.
- Inequality is as infectious as disease, a crippling attitude that kills ambition, crushes women's spirits, and discourages them from supporting and rallying future generations and other female relatives.

- Women were forced to eat in the kitchen at the homestead and not with the men

British colonialism/ colonization

- Colonialism is the practice by which the powerful country controls another country or countries.
- This is evident in Tambu's experiences in a Western-style educational setting.
- The mission school both provides and represents privileged opportunity and enlightenment.
- Tambu knows the only hope she has of lifting her family out of poverty lies in education.
- A threat that the mission school poses is to cruelly and irreversibly alter native Africans who are subjected to them.
- Nyasha, who has seen firsthand the effect of being immersed in a foreign culture, grows suspicious of an unquestioning acceptance of colonialism's benefits.
- She fears that the dominating culture may eventually stifle, limit, or eliminate the long-established native culture of Rhodesia—in other words, she fears that colonialism may force assimilation.
- The characters' lives are already entrenched in a national identity that reflects a synthesis of African and colonialist elements.
- The characters' struggle to confront and integrate the various social and political influences that shape their lives.

- In the novel colonial power made its mark in many spheres of the indigenous people's lives
- Villages were moved to less fertile areas to make way for farms/ cattle ranches/massive plantations of gum trees
- Ma Shingayi and Jeremiah welcome the fruits of colonialism through the success of Babamakuru and what he can do to lift their branch of the family from poverty.
- Ma Shingayi also opposes colonialism, in particular the effect that she believes it has had on Maiguru, Nyasha and Chido. This is fuelled by the death of Nhamo
- Tambu's mother thinks that Nyasha's bulimia and subsequent mental breakdown are a result of her exposure to Western culture, or "Englishness" and is afraid of the same thing happening to her daughter.
- This "Englishness" initially drives a wedge between Tambu and Nyasha.
- Nyasha and Chido cannot speak Shona, and Tambu cannot speak English -
- Tambu does not approve of Nyasha's revealing clothing.
- When Tambu moves to the mission, she has a much easier time obeying Babamukuru than Nyasha, and is often appalled at Nyasha's insolence.
- Looking back and telling her story, Tambu is able to recognize the way the colonial education system created a culture of subjugation - where

Africans learned to believe that they were inferior, and then aspired to live by Christian values.

Tradition

- Underpinning *Nervous Conditions* are conflicts between those characters who endorse traditional ways and those who look to Western or so-called “modern” answers to problems they face.
- Dangarembga remains noncommittal in her portrayal of the divergent belief systems of Babamukuru and his brother Jeremiah
- She shows both men behaving rather irrationally.
- Jeremiah foolishly endorses a shaman’s ritual cleansing of the homestead,
- Babamukuru’s belief in a Christian ceremony seems to be rooted in his rigid and unyielding confidence that he is always right.
- As Tambu becomes more fixed and established in her life at the mission school, she begins to embrace attitudes and beliefs different from those of her parents and her traditional upbringing
- Nyasha, ever the voice of reasonable dissent, warns Tambu that a wholesale acceptance of supposedly progressive ideas represents a dangerous departure and too radical of a break with the past.
- Baba often visits his family and provides for them as this is important and keeps with Shona tradition which is family and unity

Race

- Nyasha has taken on certain Western values because she grew up in England, leads her classmates to shun her because "she thinks she is white".
- She clashes with her parents for the same reason, even though they took her to England and enrolled her in a missionary school.
- The contrast in Nyasha's identity leads her to become internally divided and drives a wedge between her and her parents.
- Tambu, who has not had much interaction with white people before coming to the mission, is surprised that she actually likes some of them.
- However, looking back on that time, she describes the white missionaries with an air of sarcasm: "We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise."
- All of the racial tension in the novel stems from Tambu and Nyasha's generation
- Questioning their society as they move towards discovering a postcolonial identity.
- Also Baba is a victim of racial oppression by the missionaries who regard him as a boy who should be grateful for his education

Nervous Conditions explores the trials associated with the colonization of Rhodesia in the 1960s and the resultant conflicts with traditional Shona culture. This conflict is especially evident with regard to the

Western Missionary schools and their influence on the identities and culture of the indigenous people. The novel is narrated by Tambudzai, or Tambu, and is her account of her quest for liberation through education. However, the means of achieving that liberation through the western Missionary schools, which serves as a proponent of colonialist ideology, also pose a threat to her cultural identity. Western education and the adoption of the English language were viewed as a mark of distinction, however their attainment often created contradictory beliefs and strife for the bearer.

Patriarchy

- Patriarchy refers to a system of practises and structures in which men have more power than woman and are able to use their power to dominate and oppress women
- Patriarchal distribution of power effects all the main female characters
- Shona culture is patriarchal in nature
- Men make and implement the rules and woman obey
- From an early age children are sensitised to their roles in society
- Boys are taught they are stronger, more intelligent and more important than girls and woman and that females need to be looked after
- Nhamo's conversation with Tambu "don't you know that I am the one that has to go to school" it is ingrained in him that he is better than her

- Nhamo has been socialised into a system that is both sexist and patriarchal and he continues to enrich these behaviours and beliefs in his relationship with his sister.

Identity

- The central focus on this book is the identity of Tambu
- She struggles to make sense of her life in the various contexts she experiences
- She struggles to understand who she is
- Both the first paragraph and the last paragraph suggests that this story explores the contexts within which Tambu finds herself
- She mentions the death of her brother and the oppression of all the woman in the novel
- She mentions that through her experiences “something began to assert itself” she began to question things and refused to be brainwashed
- Her self conscious search for identity reveals the complexities of the “I” position
- Her concrete and categorical self changes as she tries to understand her cousin Nyasha
- Nyasha is the small part of herself that is adventurous and explorative
- Everything about Nyash spoke of alternatives that could wreck Tambu’s linear plans for education and for a clear-cut sense of identity.
- Nayash causes Tambu to feel contradictory emotions and this leads her to see that her own life can contain contradictions.

- The plan to attain a coherent sense of self becomes elusive as she builds a closer relationship with her cousin
- Tambu's struggle for self identity evolves into an awareness of her complexity
- She realises her identity composes of shifting selves, she is obedient and hard working but also rebellious, adventurous and strong willed
- She begins to realise that "I" is not a unifies subject or fixed identity but is infinite layers