

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.

Themes

The Pervasiveness of Gender Inequality

[Tambu](#) was born a girl and thus faces a fundamental disadvantage, since 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.

The Influence of Colonialism

The essential action of the novel involves Tambu's experiences in a Western-style educational setting, and the mission school both provides and represents privileged opportunity and enlightenment. Despite Ma'Shingayi's strong objections, Tambu knows the only hope she has of lifting her family out of poverty lies in education. However, the mission school poses threats, as well: Western institutions and systems of thought may 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 forms the backbone and central conflict of *Nervous Conditions*.

Tradition vs. Progress

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, and she shows both men behaving rather irrationally. Jeremiah foolishly endorses a shaman's ritual cleansing of the homestead, while 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.

Motifs

Geography

Physical spaces are at the heart of the tensions Tambu faces between life at the mission and the world of the homestead. At first, Tambu is isolated, relegated to toiling in the fields and tending to her brother's whims during his infrequent visits. When she attends the local school, she must walk a long way to her daily lessons, but she undertakes the journey willingly in order to receive an education. When the family cannot pay her school fees, Mr. Matimba takes Tambu to the first city she has ever seen, where she sells green corn. Tambu's increased awareness and knowledge of the world coincides with her growing physical distance from the homestead. The mission school is an important location in the novel, a bastion of possibility that becomes the centerpiece of Tambu's world and the source of many of the changes she undergoes. At the end of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's life has taken her even farther away from the homestead, to the convent school where she is without family or friends and must rely solely on herself.

Emancipation

Emancipation is a term that appears again and again in *Nervous Conditions*. Usually, the term is associated with being released from slavery or with a country finally freeing itself from the colonial power that once controlled it. These concepts figure into the broader scope of the novel, as Rhodesia's citizens struggle to amass and assert their identity as a people while still under British control. When the term *emancipation* is applied to Tambu and the women in her extended family, it takes on newer and richer associations. Tambu sees her life as a gradual process of being freed of the limitations that have previously beset her. When she first leaves for the mission school, she sees the move as a temporary emancipation. Her growing knowledge and evolving perceptions are a form of emancipation from her old ways of thinking. By the end of the novel, emancipation becomes more than simply a release from poverty or restriction. Emancipation is equated with freedom and an assertion of personal liberty.

Dual Perspectives

Dual perspectives and multiple interpretations appear throughout *Nervous Conditions*. When Babamukuru finds Lucia a job cooking at the mission, Tambu is in awe of her uncle's power and generosity, viewing it as a selfless act of kindness. Nyasha, however, believes there is nothing heroic in her father's gesture and that in assisting his sister-in-law he is merely fulfilling his duty as the head of the family. In addition to often wildly differing interpretations of behavior, characters share an unstable and conflicting sense of self. For Tambu, her two worlds, the homestead and the mission, are often opposed, forcing her to divide her loyalties and complicating her sense of who she is. When she wishes to avoid attending her parents' wedding, however, these dual selves offer her safety, protection, and an escape from the rigors of reality. As her uncle chides her, Tambu imagines another version of herself watching the scene safely from the foot of the bed.

Symbols

Tambu's Garden Plot

Tambu's garden plot represents both tradition and escape from that tradition. On one hand, it is a direct link to her heritage, and the rich tradition has guided her people, representing the essential ability to live off the land. It is a direct connection to the legacy she inherits and the wisdom and skills that are passed down from generation to generation, and Tambu fondly remembers helping her grandmother work the garden. At the same time, the garden represents Tambu's means of escape, since she hopes to pay her school fees and further her education by growing and selling vegetables. In this sense, the garden represents the hopes of the future and a break with the past. With a new form of wisdom acquired at the mission school and the power and skills that come with it, Tambu will never have to toil and labor again. Her mother, however, must water the valuable and fertile garden patch despite being exhausted from a long day of work.

The Mission

For Tambu, the mission stands as a bright and shining beacon, the repository of all of her hopes and ambitions. It represents a portal to a new world and a turning away from the enslaving poverty that has marked Tambu's past. The mission is an escape and an oasis, a whitewashed world where refinement and sophistication are the rule. It is also an exciting retreat for Tambu, where she is exposed to new ideas and new modes of thinking. The mission sets Tambu on the path to becoming the strong, articulate adult she is destined to become.

The Ox

In the family's lengthy holiday celebration, the ox represents the opulence and status Babamukuru and his family have achieved. Meat, a rare commodity, is an infrequent treat for most families, and Tambu's parents and the rest of the extended clan willingly partake of the ox. At the same time, they secretly resent such an ostentatious display of wealth, since the ox is a symbol of the great gulf that exists between the educated branch of the family and those who have been left behind to struggle. [Maiguru](#) closely regulates the consumption of the ox and parcels out the meat over the several days of the family's gathering. Eventually the meat starts to go bad, and the other women chide Maiguru for her poor judgment and overly strict control of its distribution. At that point, the ox suggests Maiguru's shortcomings and how, in the eyes of the others, her education and comfortable life have made her an ineffective provider.

Important Quotations Explained

1. I was not sorry when my brother died.

The novel begins with this shocking confession from [Tambu](#). Tambu has had a murky, often ambivalent relationship with her brother, Nhamo. He represents everything she is denied and the principal failing of the social structure and family hierarchy into which she has been born. Simply because he is a male and the eldest, he is the sole repository of the family's hopes and ambitions. Tambu, regardless of her intelligence, talents, and abilities, must be satisfied with a secondary role, an understudy whose sole job it is to support and assist Nhamo as he makes his way in the world. With his sudden and unexpected death, Tambu's life takes a dramatic turn for the better. She is offered his place at the mission school, and because of his death, she is able to write the story she is beginning in the novel's opening paragraphs.

2. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.

These words are spoken by Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, in Chapter 2. They underscore the harsh reality faced by many Africans, particularly African women. Ma'Shingayi is arguing that being black and female is a double burden and that the two obstacles are too considerable to surmount. What sets her apart from Tambu, however, is how she qualifies this statement. Rather than exhort her daughter to be strong and rally against the prevailing conditions that conspire to keep her down, Tambu's mother encourages her to passively accept the forces she feels are too powerful for her to control. This passage shows the differences not only between the two women but between the older, more traditional beliefs and the new attitudes emerging in a more contemporary Africa.

The passage also reveals the conflicting thoughts and attitudes of many of the novel's female characters. While Ma'Shingayi presents herself as the model of humble acquiescence, she rails against the laziness of men and grows increasingly jealous of her brother- and sister-in-law, whose educations have afforded them greater economic mobility and a more comfortable lifestyle. Ma'Shingayi is a prime example of how reality and ideology, or theory and practice, grow increasingly conflicted in the novel.

3. "What it is," she sighed, "to have to choose between self and security."

[Maiguru](#) speaks these words in Chapter 5, after Tambu has questioned her about her past, her education, and what happens to the money she earns at the mission. Maiguru's words succinctly

summarize the sacrifices she has made in order to raise a family and subscribe to a more traditional notion of a woman's role in African society. Maiguru goes on to tell Tambu of the possibilities she witnessed while living in England, glimpses of the things she could have become had she been free of restrictive gender roles and the expectation that she would play the part of the subservient provider. She feels there is no recognition or appreciation of the compromises she has made and, similar to Tambu's mother, stoically bears her burdens in silence.

Maiguru's sacrifices, of putting her husband and her family before her own needs and ambitions, are viewed by [Nyasha](#) as a costly compromise to her mother's dignity and honor. Tambu remains undecided and does not take sides in this debate, as she understands her own compromised and precarious position in her uncle's household. Later in the year, when Nyasha and her father have a violent argument, Tambu realizes firsthand her need to choose security over self and remains noncommittal. She stifles and censors any opinion she may have on the issue, hiding comfortably instead in the role of a "grateful, poor, female relative."

4. It's bad enough . . . when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end.

Nyasha makes this pronouncement in Chapter 7 as part of her ongoing role in which she challenges and shapes Tambu's perceptions and modes of thought. Slowly, Tambu has become seduced by her exposure to the colonialist-influenced "new ways." Despite the fact that Tambu is opposed to the humiliation her parents will suffer by having to endure a Christian wedding ceremony, she agrees with [Babamukuru](#)'s insistence that the ritual, and not the traditional cleansing rites, be performed. Nyasha quickly dismisses Babamukuru's position, warning Tambu of the dangers inherent in assuming that Christian ways are necessarily progressive ways.

Nyasha's words gesture to another preoccupation in Dangarembga's work. Rhodesia has been placed under British control, and the life of the nation has been clearly altered by this foreign influence. Without the opportunities colonialism has created for them, Babamukuru and his family, as well as Tambu, would not be in their positions of privilege and power. At the same time, the novel is narrated through the lens of African lives and the inner workings and struggles of one extended family. The African and the colonial cannot coexist without eventually influencing, even colliding, with each other. Slowly, the effects of colonialism has trickled down, infecting Tambu and Nyasha's family. Nyasha's observations foreshadow the nervous breakdown she will soon suffer as she feels colonialism infiltrating not only her nation and people but her own identity as well.

5. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion.

Tambu closes her account, in Chapter 10, with these words. She has actively sought advancement, winning a scholarship to the convent school, but she begins to question what it has cost her sense of self and her ailing mother, heartsick at the thought of another of her children being altered by their desire for a Western education. Her school and the nuns who run it are no longer the sun on her horizon, as she puts it. Her use of the word *brainwashed* is telling, denoting a radical shift in her thinking. In this

passage, Tambu seems to be speaking for Nyasha, who is also depressed and ailing, saying the words that Nyasha, in her compromised state, can no longer say for herself. Tambu exhorts herself to no longer be passively influenced by the people and institutions around her. She is firm in her resolve to question.

This evolution of perception and thought, which could be considered an epiphany, allows Tambu to write her own story. She is freed of the need to be dutiful and grateful and can become her own person and seize control of her own voice and destiny. Her education has been more than learning the rudiments of reading, writing, and mathematics—it has helped her refine her perceptions and recognize and embrace her personal liberty. This expansion and certitude have finally grounded her and helped her resolve the often contradictory forces that had buffeted and unsettled Tambu throughout her life.