

And They Didn't Die Study Guide

And They Didn't Die by Laretta Ngcobo

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Plot Summary

And They Didn't Die is a novel of the apartheid in South Africa by formerly exiled South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo. The novel follows the life of Jezile, a young wife in the small village of Sigageni. Jezile's husband is forced to work in the larger city of Durban, making it nearly impossible for Jezile to conceive the child that would complete her role as wife. Jezile takes the situation in her own hands, setting a precedence for her behavior that will take her from a rural wife and mother to an incarcerated protestor to a murderess. *And They Didn't Die* is a comprehensive view of the woman's role in the apartheid and resulting turmoil that defined the life of Africans in South Africa for more than thirty years.

Jezile has only been married for a year, but she has not seen her husband in the majority of that time because he is forced to work in Durban to provide for his family. When her husband, Siyalo, comes home for a brief visit each year, Jezile has high hopes that she will be able to conceive, fulfilling her role in the Majola family. However, each time Siyalo comes home, it is the wrong moment in Jezile's cycle to achieve pregnancy. Finally, after three years of trying and failing, Jezile takes things into her own hands in order to protect her marriage. Jezile visits a doctor and then goes to the offices of BAD, Bantu Affairs Department, to seek permission to visit her husband in Durban. Jezile is granted permission, but only under the condition that she will take a pass. Jezile and the women of her village have chosen not to take the passes in protest of the governments control over the people. However, Jezile is desperate and she makes the choice to put her future family first.

Jezile spends a happy few weeks with her husband. During this time, Jezile sees the horrible conditions the white government forces the African work force to live in. Also during this time, Jezile witnesses and even takes small part in the protests taking place in the city. Toward the end of her visit, Siyalo insists that Jezile return to their village early but refuses to tell her why. When Jezile returns, she is filled with embarrassment for having taken a pass. Jezile admits her actions to Nosizwe, a female doctor and the leader of the women's prayer group. Nosizwe is angry with Jezile, but allows Jezile to talk to the group about the protests she saw. Jezile feels humiliated, but is later allowed to repair her betrayal by burning her pass with many others during a protest.

Months after giving birth to her first child, Jezile comes home one night to find her husband has returned early from Durban. It turns out that Siyalo has been active in protests in the city, but his employer learned of this and fired him. After being unable to find another job, Siyalo has been refused the right to work in Durban ever again. The following day, Jezile goes to a protest in Ixopo against he passes for women. This results in arrest and a six month prison sentence. Jezile's child, S'naye, is left with her father and grandmother. Unfortunately, there is no milk to feed the baby. When Jezile is released from prison, five months pregnant, she discovers that her daughter has nearly starved to death. Jezile falls into a dark depression, causing a rift between herself and her husband as well as her mother-in-law.



Siyalo, in a desperate move to save his daughter, begins stealing milk from a local white farmer's cows. For weeks this scheme works, and S'naye regains her health. However, Siyalo is spotted by one of the African workers and is arrested. Siyalo is sentenced to ten years in prison, leaving Jezile desperate to provide for her two young daughters. When a road crew comes into the area to repair the roads, Jezile gets work making them beer and washing the white foreman's clothing. When the crew must move on, the white foreman asks Jezile to work in his home. Jezile goes, even though it means leaving her children behind for an unforeseen amount of time. Jezile is unhappy in the work, but it pays well. One night, a few months after her arrival in the white household, Jezile is raped by her white boss. Unable to face the idea of going home again, Jezile stays. Jezile ignores her pregnancy until she goes into labor. The child is born with white features, catching the attention of the local police because his conception and birth are illegal in South Africa. Jezile's boss puts her on a train and sends her home only a few days after the child's birth.

Jezile's situation causes great embarrassment for the Majola family, even leading to her mother-in-law's ex-communication from the church. Jezile returns to her mother's village where she is happily received. However, when Siyalo gets out of jail seven years later, his people come and take his children from Jezile as is the tradition of their people. The girls grow up and the youngest becomes active in the apartheid protests. One night both girls come to visit Jezile. When Jezile returns from helping the youngest find a secret path out of the village, she finds a soldier raping her oldest daughter, S'naye. Jezile kills the soldier, then goes to Siyalo to tell him before he can get the wrong story from someone else.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Lauretta Ngcobo was born in South Africa but went into exile in London during the 1960 political upheaval. Ms. Ngcobo returned to South Africa in the 1990s where she began working for the Inkatha Freedom Party. This is Ms. Ngcobo's second novel.

In Chapter 1, Mr. Pienaar becomes upset that the women in Sigageni are emptying the dipping tanks in protest against government mandate. Mr. Pienaar runs his truck toward a group of women to show his unhappiness, causing the women to celebrate the fact that their small protest has finally gotten some result. Among these women is Jezile, a newly married woman who feels the disapproval of her mother-in-law even as the other women of the village praise Jezile for her leadership. Jezile has felt MaBiyela's disapproval for months now, ever since Jezile failed to become pregnant. For three years Jezile has failed to become pregnant, in part because her husband's yearly visits home from the city have been at the wrong time in Jezile's cycle. Jezile sees how frequent pregnancies have hurt her friend, Zenzile, but she still believes that a baby would cement her marriage and make her in-laws happy.

In Chapter 2, Jezile decides to take matters into her own hands. Jezile knows that she needs to be with her husband over a long period that includes her most fertile days. Jezile writes a letter to Siyalo to tell him she plans to visit. Jezile then forges a letter from Siyalo and visits a doctor. At the BAD offices, Bantu Affairs Department, Jezile shows both letters. The clerk at first refuses to give Jezile the requisite permission to visit her husband, but finally agrees if Jezile will get a pass. Jezile and her prayer group, a group of women who get together once a week to organize protests against the government as well as worship, have agreed to not get passes. However, Jezile must make the choice between her family and her politics. Jezile picks her family. Out of guilt and shame, Jezile works hard to provide MaBiyela all the firewood she could need before she leaves.

In Chapter 3, Jezile arrives in Durban where her husband works. When she arrives in the city, Jezile learns that her husband had arranged to get a rent house for the month, but was cheated out of it at the last second. They are forced to spend the night in a crowded hostel. The following day, Siyalo is able to get the rent house, which turns out to be just a room in a small, overcrowded home outside of Durban. One night, Siyalo tells Jezile about the hardships of the Africans who live in the city, how they are forced into poor sections of the town where the housing is inadequate. At this same time, riots break out in the city. Jezile and another woman staying in their rented house go to the protests and witness some of the aggression between the Africans and the white government. Then one night, Siyalo comes home late and tells Jezile she must leave Durban earlier than planned. Before she leaves, Jezile visits Zenzile's husband and uses some money he gave her to buy Zenzile and four children food.



Chapters 1-3 Analysis

These early chapters introduce Jezile, the heroine of the story. Jezile is a young and newly married woman who has spent a total of about two and a half months with her husband even though they have been married for three years. Siyalo, Jezile's husband, is forced to work in the city to provide for his family. However, the government does not allow these men to bring their wives and children with them to the city, therefore they are restricted to once yearly visits. These visits do not coincide with Jezile's fertile time, therefore she has been unable to conceive a child. This places a great deal of pressure on Jezile because fertility defines a woman and Jezile appears to her in-laws as though she is infertile.

At the same time Jezile struggles to get pregnant, the reader becomes aware of the burden the government's regulations have on the women of South Africa. Zenzile, Jezile's childhood friend, has given birth to four children in six years, leaving her sick and unable to care for her family. One of her children has died, but Zenzile discovers that she is pregnant once more. Zenzile is depressed, unhappy, and the symbol of what many women in her situation are forced to deal with. Just the same, despite the fact she risks the same fate, wants a child bad enough to defy the traditions and her prayer groups desire to protest against the government.

The situation in South Africa in the early fifties is difficult. Jezile is forced to do things that she does not want to do, such as live without her husband and carry a pass with her at all times. The defiance against the dipping tanks for the cows shows the reader from the very start that these women are unhappy with their situation and willing to put themselves at risk to make it right. This sets the tone for the rest of the novel.



Chapters 4-5

Chapters 4-5 Summary

In Chapter 4, Jezile returns home to much fanfare. Jezile goes to visit Zenzile and to give her both the money and food, telling Zenzile that it all comes from Zenzile's husband, Mthebe. Zenzile is pleased, given new hope that her husband has not forsaken her in the big city. A short time later, Nosizwe, a local female doctor and activist, comes to talk at one of the women's prayer meetings. Jezile goes early to tell her about the pass. Nosizwe is deeply disappointed in Jezile and lectures her about what her choice means to the rest of the women. However, Nosizwe allows Jezile to share her experiences with the Durban riots with the rest of the women after giving her own lecture on the changes the government wants to implement on the people.

In Chapter 5, a few months has passed. Jezile, who has become aware of her own pregnancy, visits Zenzile. Zenzile is alone. The children have been sent to stay with Zenzile's mother until her new baby is born. Zenzile plans to have her baby in her mother's home as well. However, Zenzile goes into labor in the middle of the night, a month too soon. Jezile arrives to find Zenzile's mother-in-law caring for her. Zenzile begs Jezile to take her to the hospital. Jezile agrees to pay for it and a car is called for. However, before the car can arrive, Zenzile gives birth to a still born infant and dies herself a few minutes later. At the funeral, Jezile finds herself angered by the reaction of Zenzile's husband and his family, people who did not show concern for Zenzile until it was too late.

Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Jezile comes home after having achieved her goal. However, Jezile is so filled with guilt for having taken a pass that she forces herself to confess to Nosizwe, her friend and leader. Nosizwe is more angry with Jezile than Jezile is with herself, causing Jezile to feel as though she no longer has a place in the protest movement against the government. However, Nosizwe turns around and asks Jezile to speak at the meeting, leaving Jezile somewhat confused and ashamed. Jezile will hold on to these feelings for a long time and they will motivate her to act in specific ways as the plot continues to develop.

Zenzile is a young woman, more than likely in her early twenties just like Jezile. However, Zenzile has had four children and is expecting another in only six years of marriage. This has left Zenzile desperate to feed her children and physically exhausted. Therefore it is no surprise when this latest pregnancy leaves her exhausted and unable to care for her children. The modern reader might see Zenzile's situation a tragic consequence of the times, but the reader must also see that Zenzile's situation is also caused by the government's lack of concern for these women and the lack of medical care available to such women. Even Zenzile's own mother-in-law is reluctant to allow

Zenzile to go to a hospital, in part out of fear of the cost. There seems little concern for this poor and struggling woman or her growing family.



Chapters 6-7

Chapters 6-7 Summary

In Chapter 6, Jezile has reached the end of her pregnancy and is beginning to struggle to get her work done. During this time, the officials from BAD come to speak to the community about the dipping tanks and the passes. The officials insist that the women are ruining their farm land by not farming it correctly and with too many grazing cows. The officials insist that each family can only have six cows. The officials then insist that the women must carry passes and that they will come to the village to hand them out personally. A short time later, the government removes the village chief from power. They attempt to replace him with Counselor Duma, a trusted member of the community, but when he refuses they choose a man unknown to the community.

In Chapter 7, Jezile gives birth in the hospital out of fear of losing her life as Zenzile did. MaBiyela is not happy when she learns the hospital staff did not save the placenta for Jezile, the planting of which is a tradition in their village. However, the joy of the new child, a daughter called S'naye, overshadows the disappointment. A short time later, Siyalo comes home for his annual leave. Early the following year, the women of Sigageni learn that the government will come soon to give the women passes. The women vow to refuse. On the appointed day, the women gather at the dipping tank and burn the few passes that had been accepted before, including the one Jezile took to go to Durban to conceive her child. A short time later, the women gather to create a list of demands to be delivered to the government in Ixopo, the nearest city. After this meeting, Jezile goes home to find Siyalo waiting for her. Siyalo tells Jezile how he was involved in some protest organization in Durban. The police became suspicious of him, eventually causing him to lose his job. Siyalo was unable to find a new job and was forced out of the city by the government with a stamp in his pass that will not allow him to work in Durban ever again.

Chapters 6-7 Analysis

The government intrudes on the tiny village where Jezile lives and announces that the people are to blame for the lack of good soil and animals. The people of Jezile's village know this is unfair because they know it has as much to do with a lack of water and the resources to care for their land properly. Then the government replaces their chief with someone they can control, leaving the people without their final buffer against the government. The reader can only suspect that this will lead to trouble somewhere down the line. Point in case, the government comes to force the women to take passes, but the women fight back by burning the few passes they have already been forced to take.

Jezile has her baby in the hospital out of fear of dying like Zenzile did. This causes friction between her and her mother-in-law, showing the reader once again that Jezile is a determined woman who will do whatever it takes to take care of herself and her family.

Therefore, when Siyalo comes home and tells Jezile he has lost his job due to his own political beliefs and actions, she is frightened, but the reader believes that she will survive.



Chapters 8-9

Chapters 8-9 Summary

In Chapter 8, Jezile attends a protest in Ixopo where the women plan to give the police a list of demands. Even though the women are not violent or otherwise cause trouble, the police arrest them and take them to prison in the far away city of Pietermaritzburg. The women are frightened, but they stand strong to their beliefs. The following morning, each woman is sentenced to six months in prison. These women are divided into work groups. Each group is expected to break up rocks all day long. Nosizwe, who is a doctor and has never done such hard work before, suffers. However, she is determined to keep up, even though she must accept the other women's help. Early in their sentence, the guards determine that Nosizwe is a leader of the women, so they separate her, forcing her to remain in a cell alone. Later, the guards begin forcing the women to undress in front of one another to bathe. The guards also began taking some of the younger women out of their cells and raping them.

During her prison sentence, Jezile finds herself encouraged to be a leader among the women. Jezile must keep the peace between the country women and the city protesters who also are serving time in the jail. Also during this time, Jezile discovers that she is pregnant with her second child, a result of Siyalo's early return the night before her arrest.

In Chapter 9, Siyalo is at home during Jezile's prison sentence with a child he barely knows. S'naye was still on the breast at this point, therefore Siyalo has no way to feed his child. For the first few days, Siyalo and his mother feed the child with milk from one of their cows. However, the cow becomes ill and they are forced to put it down. S'naye is frustrated, unable to sleep out of hunger and a need for her mother. Siyalo soon becomes depressed, unable to either care for his daughter or provide for his family.

Chapters 8-9 Analysis

Jezile remains determined to prove her loyalty to the group of women who are protesting against the government. Jezile goes on a protest and allows herself to be arrested. The women are all sentenced to six months of hard labor. Jezile takes this punishment with pride, convinced she is doing the right thing. As part of this, Jezile becomes a leader among the women, helping to keep their courage up as well. For the first time, Jezile has put the needs of the whole before the needs of her family. Unfortunately, by doing this, Jezile has left her seven month old child without the life giving milk she desperately needs. This sets up a new set of circumstances that are sure to motivate Jezile into action as the novel continues to develop.

At the same time Jezile is doing what she believes is right, her husband Siyalo finds himself unable to provide for his family because he has been banned from working in

the city and unable to care for his child who is in desperate need of milk he cannot buy her. This causes Siyalo to fall into a dark depression that will define him for some time to come.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Jezile is released from prison a month early. Jezile and the other protestors who live in her village arrive home by bus without the knowledge of their family and friends. Jezile goes home to Siyalo and is quickly reunited with her daughter. However, Jezile is shocked by the baby's sickly appearance and immediately blames her mother-in-law. Over the next few weeks, Jezile throws herself into her child's care, trying in vain to save her life. In fact, Jezile does not tell her husband about her pregnancy because she feels as though she has failed in some way. MaBiyela discovers Jezile's pregnancy and tells everyone that the child is not her son's. Jezile is upset by this and confesses all to Siyalo. Siyalo does not doubt the child is his, but Jezile's desire to hide the pregnancy from him causes tension in their marriage. The tension breaks when a rain storm comes that spring, breaking a drought. However, the rain is not enough to make it possible to plant and sustain a field of crops, causing Siyalo to once again descend into a deep depression.

S'naye has grown thinner and weaker and Jezile herself has lost a great deal of weight despite her pregnancy. In fact, Jezile has been forced to work in her pregnancy, helping to build a new house for Counselor Duma and his wife, MaNgidi, in exchange for fire wood. Siyalo knows something must be done, but he does not know what. Embarrassed and shamed, Siyalo attempts to get a job, but is foiled by the stamp in his pass refusing him the right to work in Durban. On the way home, Siyalo sees the cows on the white farmer's land and wonders why some have all and some have none. This causes Siyalo to imagine how he could take a few pints of milk and no one would ever know. The following day, Siyalo sneaks up to the white man's farm and watches the routine with the cows. Around mid-morning, Siyalo milks one of the cows while they are out to pasture. At home, Jezile initially refuses the milk, but Siyalo makes a strong argument against her refusal. Between Siyalo's argument and S'naye's dire condition, Jezile relents. Within weeks, S'naye begins to recover, gaining weight and even smiling from time to time. Jezile feels shame when she is forced to hide their good fortune, but loves her child so much that she cannot tell Siyalo to stop. Then one day Siyalo does not come home, leaving Jezile to give birth alone out of shame.

Siyalo is caught milking the cows and is arrested. Jezile and MaBiyela are able to get a lawyer through Nosizwe. The lawyer argues that Siyalo committed his crime out of desperation due to the restrictions placed on Africans by the government, but the judge finds Siyalo guilty anyway. Siyalo is sentenced to ten years in prison, leaving Jezile alone with two daughters to care for.



Chapter 10 Analysis

Jezile returns home from prison to find her absence has caused her child to become malnourished. Jezile initially blames her mother-in-law, but soon learns about the death of the cow and the lengths the family was forced to go to to care for the baby. Jezile is saddened by this, convinced her child will die without milk. Ironically, there is plenty of milk around, but Jezile and her family cannot afford to buy it because Siyalo's political beliefs have caused him to be unable to get a good paying job in Durban. It is a situation that is in part caused by the difficult restrictions placed on these people by the government. Siyalo cannot work, but the drought leaves him unable to work the farm, either. If there was irrigation or if the Africans were free to go into the cities to work without passes, Siyalo would be able to care for his family easily. However, there are restrictions and there is no irrigation, therefore Siyalo must sit back and watch his family fall apart because of a lack of food.

Siyalo is a good man who does not want his child to die. S'naye's very cry causes Siyalo a great amount of grief every time he hears it. Siyalo feels he has no choice but to steal from the white farmer, stealing so little milk that no one would ever have known if Siyalo had not been seen by one of the farmer's African employees. Siyalo has saved his child, but now must pay for it with ten years of his life, leaving Jezile worse off than she was before.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Jezile quickly finds herself without money and without food for her children. Jezile is befriended by a group of women who are also, for one reason or another, without husbands. These women encourage Jezile to work with them in the gardens of Counselor Duma's home. When Jezile gets her pay for this job, she buys powdered milk for her children, taking up more than half her wages and leaving her once again with little money. That fall, Jezile has her new baby, Ndondo, baptized in the church. Later that winter, Jezile attends her first prayer meeting in several months only to find that Counselor Duma has come to beg the women to share with him their political views and advise him of their future actions. The people no longer trust Counselor Duma, however, because he is paid by the government and appears to place their interests before the people.

A short time after Counselor Duma's visit to the prayer meeting, there is a meeting with Chief Siyapi. Siyapi is haughty and uncompromising, causing the people to become unruly. The police come to the village after this episode and begin intimidating the community. Eventually another meeting is called with Siyapi. However, Siyapi does not show up. The people go to his home and burn it down. The people also burn down the home of Counselor Duma. The military is called in and they begin raiding homes in the middle of the night, raping the women and harassing the men. A group of men begin fighting back, creating the Mountain Committee and creating their own government. The women remain in their homes while the men hide in the mountains, but they care for these men by bringing them food and delivering messages from the mountains to the village and back.

Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, Jezile finds herself alone to care for her children. However, there are a group of women who are also without husbands and alone in their struggle to care for their children. These women support Jezile, helping her to make her way alone despite all the hardships she faces. It is a difficult time in Jezile's life, but she is a survivor.

At the same time, the political upheavals in the country are beginning to make themselves known in Jezile's small village. The chief, Chief Siyapi, has announced to his people that those without land will be relocated. This upsets people and the men feel they must come home to protect what is theirs. This leads to a struggle with the government that ends with the murder of Siyapi, his family, and Counselor Duma and his wife. The military comes in to quiet the people, but they continue to fight through the Mountain Committee, a group of Africans who create their own government and fight the government from a hiding place in the mountains. The political atmosphere is heating

up and Jezile is doing her part despite her own misfortunes and her own struggles, showing the reader just how strong this woman truly is.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

In Chapter 12, a friend of Jezile's, Momawa, tells her about a road crew setting up their tents nearby. Jezile goes with Momawa and offers to help the men with whatever they might need, including brewing beer for them. The white foreman asks Jezile if she will do his laundry for him as well. Jezile works brewing beer and doing laundry for the men for six months. Jezile finds herself often afraid to be alone with the white foreman. However, when he talks to her and asks her to come to his home to be a servant for his wife, Jezile feels as though she has no other options. Even MaBiyela tells Jezile that she must take the job to care for her small children. Jezile takes a train to Bloemfontein the following day. When they finally arrive a full day later, the white foreman, Mr. Potgieter, takes her to his home. Mr. Potgieter's wife treats Jezile almost like an animal that first night, forcing her to eat outside and presenting her with a work schedule that leaves Jezile with no time for her own personal needs. However, Mr. Potgieter is kind, expediting Jezile's need to get a pass and often giving her small gifts. One night, a month or two into Jezile's employ, Mr. Potgieter is waiting for Jezile in her room. Mr. Potgieter confesses that he is in love with Jezile and then he rapes her.

Jezile is shamed by Mr. Potgieter's actions, but she is afraid to return home because she knows no one will believe she did not bring the rape on herself. Over the next few months, Mr. Potgieter tries to win Jezile's affection, but fails. Mrs. Potgieter also becomes kinder, especially after it becomes obvious that Jezile is pregnant. However, when Jezile gives birth to a son and it becomes obvious that the child is half white, the police become involved because relations between whites and Africans is illegal. Mr. Potgieter quickly puts Jezile on a train back to her home village.

In Chapter 13, Jezile goes to her mother's home. Jezile tells the story first to her mother and then to her mother's people. They decide Jezile should return to her husband's family. When Jezile tells her story to the Majolas, it is decided that Jezile should retain custody of her two eldest children until Siyalo returned from prison. Jezile knows Siyalo can take her children from her, but she believes that he will trust her version of the story and not destroy their family. However, they have seven years to wait. A few months later, MaBiyela and Jezile are ex-communicated because of Jezile's white child. Suddenly aware of the pressure her circumstances have on MaBiyela, Jezile decides to return to the home of her mother.

Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Jezile gets a good job, first working for the road crew and later working in the home of a white family. However, it all goes wrong when the white man decides that he is in love with Jezile and he forces himself upon her. Jezile has no control over the situation. She could not fight him off or injure him because she would be blamed and imprisoned.



Jezile could not call for help because there was no one to hear. Afterwards, Jezile cannot go to the police, or even her own people, because no one will believe her side of the story. It is a difficult situation that is again brought on by the laws of the country that are designed to suppress and undermine the humanity of an entire people. Jezile can only deal with the reality of the situation by ignoring the child growing inside of her until the day it is born.

Jezile is sent home to her people, but she is so frightened of facing her husband's family that she goes to her mother first. Jezile is accepted back because, despite past difficulties, the Majola family believes her over a white man. However, having a white child causes a great deal of trouble in the village and Jezile is soon forced to leave. This is the least of Jezile's troubles, however. Jezile, a rape victim, a woman left alone in poverty by her husband's circumstances, now faces the loss of her older children if her husband should decide she was unfaithful to him. Jezile must wait seven years for a decision. During these seven years, she hopes and prays that her children will remain in her care.



Chapters 14-15

Chapters 14-15 Summary

In Chapter 14, Jezile lives with MaSibiya for a time, but is aware that her small family is a burden on the older woman and requests a home of her own. For some time Jezile lives in a house on her mother's property where she makes dresses and does other sewing to make money for her children. In time, the chief of MaSibiya's village gives Jezile some land of her own. The children grow bigger and healthier everyday thanks to Jezile's small but regular income. The boy is named Mazwi, but he gains the nickname of Lungu, white, because his skin remains pale. When the girls are ten and twelve Jezile learns that Siyalo has gotten out of prison. A week later, two men come from the Majola family to take away S'naye and Ndondo. Jezile is overwhelmed for grief for a time, but knows that she must survive for Lungu.

In Chapter 15, Jezile saves for Lungu to go to boarding school while Siyalo sends first S'naye and then Ndondo to separate boarding schools. S'naye studies to be a nurse while Ndondo becomes a political activist at her school. During a protest that began over something no one has ever been able to discover, Ndondo is targeted as a leader and sought by the police. However, Ndondo manages to escape, crossing the border into another country. At the same time, Jezile has sent Lungu to the same boarding school for coloreds that Siyalo works at in Ixopo. During a protest there, the police open fire and Lungu is shot, causing him to be paralyzed. This does not stop Lungu, however, who goes on to train as a doctor.

S'naye comes to Jezile one day and tells her that Ndondo is back in the country. Ndondo went to S'naye's hospital and told her she wants to visit Jezile. All evening Jezile and S'naye cook for Ndondo's visit. Ndondo comes late at night and they spend hours talking. When Ndondo decides she must leave, Jezile walks her to a back passage out of the village. While she is gone, a soldier comes looking for Ndondo. The soldier finds S'naye alone and he begins assaulting her, attempting to rape her. Jezile walks in and is reminded of her own rape. Jezile grabs a knife and kills the soldier. When she is sure he is dead, Jezile makes S'naye walk into Ixopo with her so that this time she can tell Siyalo in person what happened so that he will not believe anyone else's story as he must have done about her own rape.

Chapters 14-15 Analysis

Siyalo is released from prison, but instead of reuniting with his wife, he takes her children away from her. Jezile never tries to confront Siyalo, perhaps convinced Siyalo will not believe her even if she talks to him person. There is also the possibility that Jezile is jaded by Siyalo's single handed decision after so many years of trust and disappointment on both sides. For whatever reason, Jezile never tries to see Siyalo,



convinced he no longer loves her. In the end, however, Jezile knows that Siyalo always loved her despite his actions because he wears her wedding ring.

Jezile raises her children well, including her white son, Lungu. Lungu grows into a fine man, becoming a doctor despite a devastating injury that leaves him in a wheelchair. The girls too grow into fine people despite all the upheavals in their lives. S'naye becomes a nurse and Ndondo follows in her mother's footsteps by becoming a political leader. This leads to another rape, however. Jezile, who has felt powerless much longer than any person should have to, takes matters into her own hands and murders the perpetrator. In modern America this would be justified as self defense, but in the political upheaval in Jezile's country, she knows she will go to prison or might even face death herself. However, once again Jezile has done what needed doing, showing the reader again how strong and brave she truly is despite her circumstances.



Characters

Jezile

Jezile is the heroine of the book. She is a young married woman who begins the novel with a desire to become pregnant. Jezile lives in a time and a place where there are certain restrictions on her right to live her life. Jezile is separated from her husband eleven months out of the year. Siyalo, her husband, works in the city while Jezile is forced by government regulations to remain in their tiny farming village. This causes great difficulty in Jezile's desire to have a child. Jezile shows her determination, however, when she arranges to go to the city on her own without the support of her husband, something that is rarely done in Jezile's culture.

Jezile is a strong and determined young woman. Jezile becomes involved in politics, burning her pass, and attending a protest in the bigger city of Ixopo. Jezile goes to prison for six months, resulting in the near starvation of her seven month old infant. Jezile returns home to despair, forced to sit and watch her small child continue to suffer malnutrition. When Jezile's husband repairs the problem by stealing milk, he only makes things worse because he is soon arrested and sent to prison for ten years. Jezile is once again on her own, but this time with two children who depend on her for their food and other needs. Jezile has no income, no hope of income, and no food. In the end, Jezile is forced to take a job with a white family, but this ends in a rape and an unwanted child.

Jezile returns home where she cares happily for her children for seven years. However, Siyalo's return leads to Siyalo taking away his legitimate children and abandoning his marriage to Jezile. Jezile is devastated, but she fights her depression for the sake of her son, Lungu. Jezile is a very strong woman, a woman who fights back whenever she can despite the oppression of her government and her culture. Jezile becomes a symbol of oppression in this novel, showing the world how an unfair government affects even the smallest aspects of a person's life.

MaBiyela

MaBiyela is Jezile's mother-in-law. MaBiyela dislikes Jezile in the beginning of her marriage to Siyalo because it takes so long for Jezile to become pregnant that it appears she is barren. Having a barren daughter-in-law is disgraceful for a woman, causing MaBiyela to fear for her future and her place in the village. It never occurs to MaBiyela that this difficulty might not be Jezile's fault. In time, however, when Jezile finally becomes pregnant, she and MaBiyela forge a kind of relationship. They are not good friends, but they come to rely on one another. This changes when Jezile goes to jail for a political protest. MaBiyela is left with Jezile's seven-month-old infant, but with no means to feed and care for the child. When Jezile returns five months later, she finds her child half-dead, suffering from malnutrition.



MaBiyela continues to be a thorn in Jezile's side, spreading rumors that Jezile has become pregnant in prison by a prison guard. This causes tension in Jezile's marriage, but does not end it as perhaps MaBiyela has wanted. Instead, MaBiyela and Jezile once again find themselves relying on one another when Siyalo is sent to prison for stealing milk. In fact, MaBiyela becomes Jezile's confidant, encouraging her to take a job with a white family. When this job leads to Jezile's rape and the birth of her illegitimate child, MaBiyela stands by her until she is ex-communicated from the church. MaBiyela has given the ultimate sacrifice for Jezile, forcing Jezile to show some mercy to MaBiyela by leaving the village.

Siyalo

Siyalo is Jezile's husband. At the beginning of the book, Siyalo is a good man, a good provider. However, Siyalo's work forces him to live in Durban, a large city some distance from their village, eleven months out of the year. Siyalo has little choice in this matter and has worked in Durban since he was sixteen. However, Siyalo is also aware of the political climate throughout his country and he becomes active in planning protests. When the police learn this, they begin questioning Siyalo at work. Eventually Siyalo's boss becomes nervous and fires Siyalo. Siyalo tries to find work elsewhere in the city, but cannot. Eventually, Siyalo is escorted out of the city by the police and given a stamp in his pass that will not allow him to ever return to Durban.

Siyalo comes home and is immediately left a single father when Jezile is arrested at a protest and sentenced to six months. Siyalo is unable to get another job, to farm the fields due to drought, or to provide milk to his malnourished little girl. Siyalo becomes depressed and this leads to his decision to steal milk from a white farmer. In the end Siyalo is arrested and sent to prison for ten years, leaving Jezile worse off than she was before. Then, when Siyalo returns, he learns his wife has given birth to a white child. Rather than ask Jezile her side of the story, Siyalo takes their children from her and refuses to see her. In the end, the reader learns that Siyalo has always loved Jezile and that perhaps he made his decision in pain and anger, but by the time they both learn the truth, it is too late. These lovers never seem to make the connection necessary to make their marriage work, leaving them alone and frustrated in the end.

S'naye

S'naye is Jezile's oldest child. S'naye is conceived as a result of Jezile's desperate act in traveling to Durban to be with Siyalo. The first seven months of her life, S'naye is a happy, healthy baby. However, when S'naye's mother goes to jail for six months, S'naye is left without the main source of her nutrition. S'naye begins to suffer and Jezile becomes convinced she will die. However, Siyalo steals milk for several months and this saves S'naye's life. S'naye grows up to be a nurse. One night, after visiting with her fugitive sister, S'naye is nearly raped by a soldier. However, Jezile comes in and kills the soldier to save S'naye the same pain and humiliation she herself suffered.



Ndondo

Ndondo is Jezile's second child. Ndondo is conceived the night before her mother is sent to prison for six months. Jezile hides her pregnancy for a time after her return to her home village out of a sense that she has failed her family in some way. Eventually, however, Jezile tells her family and they look forward to Ndondo's birth with fear and dread because of the lack of food. When Ndondo is born, it is alone in her home because Jezile knows her husband has been arrested and she is ashamed, afraid to call for help. Ndondo is still an infant when her father goes to jail and Jezile is forced to go far away to work in the home of a white family. When Jezile returns, she has a third child. Jezile takes her daughters and her son to her mother's village and lives in peace for seven years, but then Ndondo and her sister are forced to return to their father's village. Ndondo grows to be a decisive, strong woman like her mother. Ndondo organizes protests in her school and becomes a target of the police.

Lungu

Lungu is Jezile's son. Lungu was conceived by rape. Lungu has nearly white skin and blond hair that is short and curly like an Africans. This causes Lungu to be something of an oddity in his village. Lungu is mistaken for a white child once by a white soldier and it causes him a great deal of shame. When Lungu is a teenager, he goes to a boarding school. One day Lungu is shot during a student protest. Lungu is left paralyzed. Despite this, Lungu continues his studies and becomes a doctor.

Zenzile

Zenzile is a childhood friend of Jezile's. Zenzile is married to Mthebe. Mthebe lives and works in Durban, coming home only long enough to get his wife pregnant again. Zenzile suffers through five pregnancies in six years. By the time Zenzile becomes pregnant with her last child, she is so tired and ill that she is unable to sustain the pregnancy or care for her older children. In the end, Zenzile dies of internal bleeding after giving birth to a stillborn daughter.

Nosizwe

Nosizwe is a female doctor who cares for the people in the small farming villages. Nosizwe is also a political activist who goes from village to village talking to the women about the unfair activities of the government and what the woman can do to protest. Nosizwe organizes the protest that causes Jezile and over four hundred other women to be arrested and imprisoned for six months. However, Nosizwe is also arrested and she proves to be a good, strong leader to these women despite the atrocities committed by the white government.

Potgieter

Mr. Potgieter is the white foreman with the road crew that eventually hires Jezile to work in his home. Mr. Potgieter fancies himself in love with Jezile. One night after a bitter fight with his wife, Mr. Potgieter goes to Jezile's room and forces himself on her. This results in a pregnancy that will eventually cause Jezile to lose her elder children.

Mthebe

Mthebe is Zenzile's husband. Mthebe lives in Durban, but he never sends home money, leaving his wife convinced that he is not working at an honest job. While Jezile is in Durban, she meets with Mthebe. Mthebe takes Jezile on a tour of the city, making her feel as though he is driven to prove that he is a fancy man, that he lives a good life. Jezile feels that Mthebe never truly grew up and his immaturity is causing Zenzile great harm. When Zenzile dies, Mthebe comes home and his arrival causes a delay of the funeral, infuriating Jezile and proving his lack of maturity to her.



Objects/Places

Ring

Siyalo finds Jezile's wedding ring, which she lost long before, in the soil after a hard rain. Siyalo believes finding it is a sign that their marriage is going to last. In the final paragraph of the novel, Jezile becomes aware that Siyalo is wearing this ring.

Pass

The government requires men carry passes in order to work in the city. When the government begins requiring them for women it sparks a protest that leads to imprisonment for many women.

Milk

S'naye is dying from a lack of nutritious food, so Siyalo begins stealing two pints of milk a day from the white farmer's cow.

Cows

The cows of the small villages are blamed for the loss of top soil from the fields because of overgrazing, causing the government to limit the number of cows one family can have to six. The families use these cows to work the field, to feed their children, and to provide milk. Limiting the number of cows per family limits a family's ability to survive.

Wood

Jezile works building Counselor Duma's home in order to get firewood for her family. Jezile wants clean burning wood for the household for when her infant is born rather than the cow chips they have been using.

Hostel

Hostels are rooming houses that provide a bed for men working in the city. Some hostels are overcrowded and most of them limit the privacy of their occupants.

Afrikaans

Afrikaans is the language the white people of South Africa speak, including the white family Jezile works for.



Fanakalo

Fanakalo is the language that Jezile and her friends and family speak.

BAD

BAD, Bantu Affairs Department, is the government agency Jezile must go to to get permission to visit Siyalo in Durban.

Sigageni

Sigageni is the small farming community where Jezile lives during her marriage to Siyalo.

Luve

Luve is the name of the farming village where Jezile's mother, MaSibiya, lives.

Ixopo

Ixopo is the medium sized town a dozen miles outside of Jezile's farming village.

Durban

Durban is the larger city where most of the men from the farming villages work. The men need passes to go to these cities and work. Women need permission from the government to visit their men in these cities and are rarely allowed to live with them.

Themes

Government Oppression

This novel is set in South Africa during the apartheid that left many blacks imprisoned for their protests against their government. The government made laws that kept the blacks housed in particular parts of the country, forcing workers to live in overcrowded homes in a specific part of town while their families were left in the country, forced to work specific parcels of land that were often parched and unsuitable for even the most basic of farming. These people were not allowed to travel freely, to keep their families together, to live a free and happy life.

This novel follows Jezile, a young African woman who is unable to have children because her husband works in the city and they are only able to see one another when her husband's boss allows him to go home. Not only this, but the women of Africa, who have already been moved from their family villages to reservations throughout the countryside, are forced to carry passes in order to move from place to place in their own country. Jezile begins to protest these unfair mandates with the other women in her village, refusing the passes and presenting a list of demands to the government that leads to imprisonment. However, these protests lead to difficulties in Jezile's life, causing her to begin respecting the law and living as she is told to do. However, even this leaves Jezile alone and desperate to provide for her children.

Government oppression is a story that is well known in all literature. However, this novel brings to light the oppression of a group of people who have often been overlooked, the women in South Africa. Everyone knows about Nelson Mandela and other male leaders of the apartheid. However, few know what it was really like for the women left behind in the villages. This novel shows their truth, making government oppression a major theme of the novel.

Cultural Traditions

Every culture had their own traditions. In this novel, the reader learns about the traditions of South African people. Jezile, as the young wife of Siyalo, becomes the ward of his family, specifically his mother. MaBiyela becomes Jezile's mother, her main caregiver and the one who monitors Jezile's behaviors. It is from MaBiyela that Jezile feels the most pressure to have a child early in her marriage. It is also MaBiyela that Jezile feels she has to please in everything she does. When Siyalo is gone, a work in Durban or in jail, it is to MaBiyela Jezile answers.

Not only is Jezile's life ruled by MaBiyela, but when Jezile gives birth to another man's child, the reader quickly learns that she could lose custody of her elder two children as a result. Jezile is told that the decision will be up to her husband and she has faith that Siyalo will not punish her, but will listen to her story of rape. However, Siyalo returns and



takes her children away. There is nothing Jezile can do to get her children back and she falls into a deep depression. However, her one child remains and she comes out of her depression to care for him.

Cultural traditions affect people in many ways. In this novel, it makes Jezile's life difficult before it destroys her faith all together. These events are important to the novel because they help to define Jezile and her motivations. For this reason, cultural traditions is an important theme to the novel.

Love

Hidden behind the multiple themes and story lines of this novel is the simple love story between Jezile and Siyalo. Jezile and Siyalo marry out of love, but are immediately separated by Siyalo's job in Durban. Jezile desperately wants to have Siyalo's baby, not only because it is expected, but because she is afraid she will lose her man if she cannot give him that essential element all men want, a child. Jezile loves Siyalo and does not want him turning to another woman.

When Siyalo is sent out of Durban, he and Jezile are separated by Jezile's imprisonment. Siyalo falls into a dark depression, unsure his life has meaning without Jezile. When she returns, there is tension in the marriage when Jezile does not tell Siyalo right away that she is pregnant with his child. However, the tension goes away when Siyalo finds Jezile's wedding ring after a hard rain. This good feeling continues when Siyalo finds a way to save their child. However, Siyalo is then sentenced to ten years in prison for stealing milk from a white farmer.

Siyalo and Jezile seem to always just miss finding happiness. There is so much time that has been lost in separation and anger. When Siyalo is finally released from prison, Jezile hopes he will come back to her. Instead, Siyalo disowns Jezile and takes her children away. Jezile never attempts to plead her case with Siyalo, disappointed he refused to hear her side of things first. For this reason, Siyalo and Jezile remain apart for more than another decade. In the end, however, Jezile goes to Siyalo just as she knows she is about to be arrested for murder. She learns that he has never forgotten her.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person and omniscient point of view. The narration is told mainly through the eyes of the main character, Jezile. However, there are portions of the novel that are told through the eyes of other characters, such as MaBiyela and Siyalo. The point of view in this novel is not always consistent, often switching in mid chapter or even in mid thought. The novel begins with the narration of a white man who has come to monitor the dipping tanks of the village and switches mid thought to show the celebration of the women and the thoughts of one specific woman, Jezile.

The point of view of this novel is common to most modern novels. However, this novel struggles to maintain a consistent point of view. The narration often moves from person to person in mid thought, confusing the reader as to who is speaking. There are also sections of the novel in which the author's voice comes through, especially in sections when the author is describing the political upheaval of the time. For this reason, the point of view is difficult, creating a lack of consistency but it does not detract from the overall themes of the novel.

Setting

The novel begins in the mid-fifties in a rural village in South Africa. As the novel's plot continues to develop, years pass, taking the characters from the fifties to the eighties. During this time period, South Africa is experiencing an apartheid that causes a great deal of tension and political protest. All of this is the backdrop to the main character's life, leading to many events in which the political atmosphere and her life collide.

The setting of this novel is important because the overall theme of the novel is how the apartheid in South Africa impacted the women living there. The author focuses on one such woman who takes place in the protests of the fifties and sixties and then is affected personally by the oppression of the government when her husband is forced out of the job he has held for many years, leaving him unable to provide for the family. For this reason the setting of the novel is essential to the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel tends toward a formal style, one that reminds the reader that the author was exiled to England during her formative years. The language includes some words that are particular to the Fanakalo language that Jezile and her people speak. These words are always explained in the text, usually with a definition in parenthesis after the Farakalo word. These words do not complicate the reader's ability to understand the plot.



The language of this novel is somewhat formal even as it attempts to be casual. Jezile is an essentially uneducated woman, but she speaks in perfect grammar. In fact, a great deal of the language in this novel is formal, using some grammar that most readers will recognize as coming from a British educational background. The use of African words, specifically Farakalo words, gives authenticity to the characters and plot of the novel, but they are all quickly explained in such a way that the reader sometimes feel as if they are reading an educational tome. In the end, however, the language does little to enhance or detract from the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is written in fifteen chapters. Some of the chapters are exceedingly long, encompassing many months or even years of the main character's life. The novel is written in great passages of exposition that are occasionally broken up by dialogue. When the main character goes to a prayer meeting or when an important political event has taken place, the writer tends to move into an authorial voice that covers a great deal of information in a short amount of space.

The novel contains one main plot with multiple subplots. The main plot follows the life of Jezile, a young African woman living in a time of political upheaval in South Africa. Jezile's life is defined by both the cultural traditions of her people and the laws of the white government that are designed to oppress and beat down her people. Several subplots describe the relationships Jezile has with her husband, her children, and her mother-in-law. Other subplots take Jezile on visits to old and new friends, to her mother's home village, and to distant cities. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

Quotes

"Yet, he knew that he did not understand anything about the place or its people or its problems" (Chapter 1, pg. 1.)

"He said it all depended on his employer; but what did his employer know about her, or her body or their need for a baby? How could he plan their life without them?" (Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"It galled him that anybody should think him inferior" (Chapter 3, pg. 36.)

"Things in the country moved at a snail's pace, but they did arrive in the end, and when they did they would crash in fury over people's heads" (Chapter 4, pg. 51.)

"In one convulsive moment Zenzile died" (Chapter 5, pg. 59.)

"And we do not want passes. They have enslaved our men—and we do not want to carry them" (Chapter 7, pg. 81.)

"At first, their words had little meaning; mere words that grazed her pain. But their repetition slowly convinced her—she had to live through this and survive with her children" (Chapter 10, pg. 157.)

"She shut her eyes tight in an effort to banish the thought of God standing there watching. She had lit no fire herself. God knew that. But she felt dirty; God, how to get clean, how to clean the world, how to clean Sabelweni again" (Chapter 11, pg. 174.)

"She felt dirty and steeped in evil" (Chapter 12, pg. 205.)

"It was hard for Jezile to relate to the community as before" (Chapter 13, pg. 215.)

"Jezile was determined that she would teach him the importance of justice as a virtue, for he was one of those whose own life had known no justice" (Chapter 14, pg. 228.)

"I had to kill him. They've destroyed us, Siyalo. They broke our marriage, they broke our life here at Sabelweni, and they've broken all our children's lives and killed man." (Chapter 15, pg. 245.)



Topics for Discussion

Who is Jezile? Why should the reader care about her? Why can Jezile not get pregnant? Why does this inability to get pregnant upset Jezile so much? Why does Jezile decide to go visit her husband in Durban? Why does she have to have permission from the government first? Why does the government regulate how many blacks are allowed to visit the big cities? What is their motive?

Who is Siyalo? Why does he live in Durban? Why does he not have his wife with him? Why does Siyalo want his wife to have a child? Why does Siyalo only come home once a year? What causes Siyalo to lose his job a year later? How does Jezile feel about this? What hardship does this cause for the family? What does Siyalo do about it? What does this cause?

Why does Jezile go to prison? Why do the guards call these women by Christian names? What are their true names? Why do the women have to break up rocks in prison? Why does Jezile help Nosizwe break up her rocks? Why do the guards force the women to bath in front of one another? Why is this humiliating to these women? Why do the guards call some women out of their cells on Sundays?

What happens to S'naye while Jezile is in prison? Why is she not fed formula? Why is there no milk for her? What is S'naye fed? For what reason? Why is there nothing Jezile can do for S'naye when she gets out of jail? What does S'naye need? Why does Jezile refuse to breastfeed S'naye when Siyalo suggests it? What will happen to S'naye if she does not get more nourishing food?

Why does Siyalo begin stealing milk from cows? How much does he steal? From whom? What would it hurt for Siyalo to do this? Why is Siyalo arrested? What is his defense? Why does Nosizwe say that Siyalo is a good, strong man? Is he? Was what Siyalo did political? How does his prison sentence affect Jezile?

Why does Jezile agree to work for the Potgeiter family? Where do they live? Why does Jezile remain after the wife treats her badly? What does Mr. Potgeiter do to Jezile? Why does Jezile ignore her pregnancy? Why does Jezile finally go to the hospital to have her child? What happens in the hospital? Why is Jezile sent away? By whom?

Why does Siyalo take Jezile's daughters away from her? Why does Jezile not go to protest this move? Why do Jezile and Siyalo not see each other again for more than a decade? What does Siyalo say to Jezile when she finally goes to see him? Why does Jezile go to see him? Why is it important to Jezile to explain herself Siyalo now, rather than a decade before when he took her children? What might have happened if Jezile had seen Siyalo before?