

Nervous Conditions Study Guide

Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga

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Plot Summary

Set in white-dominated Rhodesia of the 1960's, Tambu begins her story by talking about her brother's trip to and from mission school each day. She says that he complains about the trip - especially the two-mile walk from the bus station to their home - and that she could talk endlessly about all there was to do during that walk and how much she loved it. Children, including Tambu, were seldom restricted and were allowed to swim in the pools.

Tambu is the oldest daughter and the second oldest child of Ma'Shingayi and Babamukuru. Her uncle, known to Tambu as Babamukuru, is the patriarch of the family and is an important benefactor, providing money, food and education for Tambu's immediate family. The family is obliged to show earnest gratitude for the gifts, and Tambu believes her uncle to be as near an angel as an earthly person can be.

As a young child, Tambu works hard for her family, taking on chores before she's told in an effort to lighten her mother's load. Her brother, Nhamo, attends school, first a walking distance away and later at a mission school where Babamukuru is headmaster. Tambu's own education at one point is put on hold because there is no money to pay school fees. When this happens, she clears a field, plants maize and sells the ears to finance her education. Upon Nhamo's death, Tambu is sent to school. The purpose of education is not for education's sake but so that the educated member of the family will help support the rest of the family. As Tambu is considering her role in adulthood, she imagines being able to buy pretty clothes for her younger sisters and provide adequate food so her mother will grow strong and healthy. Tambu studies hard and wins a place at Sacred Heart, a school run by nuns for further education.

Along the way, Tambu all but severs her relationship with her mother admitting there is nothing at the homestead for her any longer, but Tambu grows a bond with her cousin, Nyasha. It's through Nyasha's constant movement that Tambu learns to question things in her life and to test the boundaries set up for her by others. She learns that her aunt, Maiguru, has as much education as her Babamukuru and that she doesn't keep any of her earnings for herself, nor is Maiguru's education ever touted as is Babamukuru's. Tambu doesn't seem to question the reason but later admits that everything she saw as a child has been a seed, planted and waiting for the right time to grow.

Tambu's story is one of how to grow and learn, though her most significant step in the coming of age process happens at the conclusion of the book. She comes to realize many things about her family, her world and herself.



Chapters One and Two

Chapters One and Two Summary

Tambu's brother complains about the trip to and from missionary school, but she loves the walk. Children were seldom restricted and were allowed to swim in the pools. Men have a specific place for bathing and women bathe in a place ideal for washing clothes. Tambu doesn't want to become a woman who'll have to do laundry rather than play in the "interesting" pools. When the area around the swimming holes gets an increase in traffic, the bathing spots are forced further upriver, but Tambu sometimes does swim in the deeper holes.

Tambu's brother, Nhamo, excels at school. By 1968, everyone except Tambu's father begins to worry about Nhamo, who has refused to return home during the brief breaks, staying to study. On the November day Nhamo was expected home, Tambu arrives from her work in the fields to discover that Nhamo has not yet come. Tambu was to have prepared a rooster for the family's meal in honor of her brother's arrival. She has much less work to do because he isn't at home. She decides to prepare the family meal so that when her mother comes home from working hard in the garden, she can rest. Netsai, her sister, has carried water from the river earlier. Netsai is a "good worker," and Tambu is touched by her sister's concern for the family.

Babamukuru urges Tambu's father to send the children to school at the relatively young age of seven, and says they are "malleable". The year Tambu is to have started school, there was a poor harvest and no money left over for school fees. Nhamo has excelled at school up to this point and he cries when he's told that he can't attend. Tambu's mother boils eggs and takes them to the bus terminal to sell to travelers. She extends her garden and sells the extra produce as well, scraping up enough money to put Nhamo back in school but not enough for Tambu to return. She is a good student and is sad, but her father tells her she's better off staying at home and learning things a wife should know - how to cook, clean and tend a garden. She points out that Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, is educated and is a good wife as well. Tambu's mother says that Maiguru also knows how to cook, clean and garden. She tells Tambu that the skill most needed for a woman is the ability to carry her burdens. Tambu wants to be like Maiguru - well educated, living in a fine mansion and has a driver - and knows that an education is the way to achieve that goal. If her parents will give her the seeds, she will clear a field of her own and grow maize to earn the fees. Her father is angry, but her mother says to give the girl the seeds so that she can see some things just can't be done.

Babamukuru himself is well educated, having gone to England to study for his bachelor's degree. Tambu was only five when he left and later learns that he had been given a scholarship but hadn't really wanted to go. He felt a responsibility to his mother and had a family of his own, including his wife, Maiguru.



In December, Tambu begins her field of maize, thankful to her grandmother who taught Tambu how to garden. Tambu's grandmother taught her work ethic by praising her efforts; she also taught Tambu the history of her family. As the crop nears harvest time, Tambu is pleased with the results, but cautions herself not to become optimistic. Then, just before harvesting, the ears - called "mealies" - begin to disappear. That Sunday, Tambu decides to go to church, having missed the fun and laughter. There she learns that Nhamo has been handing out mealies for roasting as an after-school treat - he's been stealing her crop. She attacks him, but is stopped by a teacher, Mr. Matimba, who chastises Nhamo, saying that it's a brother's duty to look out for his sister. She tells Mr. Matimba of her plans to return to school by earning the necessary fees. He offers to take her into town the next time he goes to do errands, saying that she could sell the mealies for more to the white people. Tambu's father is angry, accusing Mr. Matimba of interfering and trying to take over parental duties. Ma'Shingayi says that Tambu has the right to try and says that if he refuses that, Tambu will hate him. As Tambu leaves with Mr. Matimba, she notes that she's scored a major victory even if she doesn't sell any maize.

The trip is exciting because Tambu has never been in a vehicle before. She sells several ears to a woman named Doris, who admires Tambu's drive and calls her a "plucky pickanin." The ten-pound note the woman gave Tambu for the corn is used to pay her school fees for the coming years. The first year back, Tambu has to repeat a level but she excels, finishing at the top of her class and holding that position the following year. Nhamo is fourth in his class, and he constantly points out to Tambu that she's only at the top of the class because she repeated a level.

When Babamukuru and his family are due to return from Europe, Tambu's father throws a party. Tambu suspects that he begged for the money. Nhamo is going with Tambu's father to pick up Babamukuru and the family. The journey took careful planning because the buses were erratic and often full. Tambu's mother argues that the two should leave early on the morning of Babamukuru's expected arrival rather than spending a night with an aunt. She hopes that by arguing in favor of staying at home, the two would go. They decide they will leave the night before but that Tambu is to meet them the following morning with food for the remainder of the journey. Tambu says that her mother got the peace and quiet of a night without the two, but that she's faced with the task of finding food for them.

Chapters One and Two Analysis

The family farms and Tambu says that much of the work is difficult manual labor. They have a plow that can be pulled by an oxen, but it takes a strong man for that task. If there's no one available, it's up to the women and children to dig and plant by hand. Once the maize has begun to grow, there's a constant battle against the weeds which are either pulled by hand or chopped by a hoe. At harvest time, the maize leaves the harvesters so itchy that everyone rushes to the river to "wash the itch away" at the end of the day. Tambu says that she doesn't wonder why Nhamo doesn't want to return home to help with the chores. Tambu's aunt sometimes sends a small gift of tea or



sugar to Tambu's mother, but Nhamo usually keeps it for himself. Often, their mother finds Nhamo sipping sweet tea and reading, prompting her to scold him into some chore, but she later laughs saying that Nhamo will be a good teacher some day.

On the days Mukoma arrives in shorts, he takes up a hoe and helps with the work. On the days he is not wearing shorts, he and Tambu's father return to the house. Tambu says that when the men leave, her mother becomes ferocious and that she and her younger sister work diligently so as not to provoke their mother's wrath. Tambu says that her father and uncle would talk of the crop, of how far behind they were, of the neighbor's livestock escaping into their fields, of the fact that Mukoma would purchase barbed wire for fencing. It seems that Mukoma helps the family in many ways, though it's never really explained why he does so.

Tambu doesn't like Nhamo's ways. She says that her home felt "healthier" when he was away and that she was relieved to have him gone so much of the time. As she is thinking about this, Netsai asks if there's something wrong. Tambu feels guilty over her thoughts and says that she was just thinking how good it would be to have Nhamo home. Once, Tambu had objected to Nhamo's demand that Netsai go fetch his luggage. Nhamo had beaten Netsai for not going. Tambu says that she is almost as big as Nhamo; therefore, he didn't threaten her with bodily harm, but that he was a bully. As she prepares dinner on the November evening when Nhamo failed to return home, she thinks that Nhamo will likely arrive the following day and she will be forced to catch, kill, pluck and cook a chicken for the family meal. She says that she hates lunging for the birds and the smell of blood after the slaughter. She decides that she will have Nhamo catch and kill the chicken, and she will pluck and cook it - that the division of labor seems fair. She also notes that Nhamo has no interest in fairness and that he won't help. It's interesting that Nhamo refuses to carry his own suitcase from the bus stop but plans to take on the duty of educating his sisters and caring for them in adulthood. Tambu notes that this is what Babamukuru has done and that Nhamo seems to be prepared to take on that duty as well. However, Nhamo has made these pledges as a young boy not yet in the position of responsibility to have to carry through on those promises. Considering his attitudes, it seems unlikely that he would have done this duty.

Tambu is behind in her studies because she doesn't often attend school, spending much time in the fields helping her family instead. She says that the needs of the women in her family had never been a priority. Her attitude about Nhamo reflects that she blames him for at least some of her situation, though she admits that blame doesn't come in a neat package and that it might be unfair to blame Nhamo when he isn't around to defend himself. She has actually come to the point at which the injustice has caused her to "hate everybody."

Babamukuru was reluctant to leave Africa to study but had no choice. Had he refused, the missionaries would have taken some other young African under their wing to teach, pushing Babamukuru out completely. Tambu's grandmother wants Babamukuru's children - Chido and Nyasha - to remain on the homestead, but Babmukuru remembers the hard work required so takes his children with him so he can oversee their education during the five years of his own study.



The stories told by her grandmother teach Tambu many things, including the details of her ancestry. More importantly, Tambu learns from her grandmother that if a person works hard, is diligent and willing to endure and obey, that person will succeed. Tambu says that the success sought should be within reason. The bond she describes between herself and her grandmother is common of families of that era and earlier and seems to be an important factor in the kind of person Tambu grows up to be. Tambu works on her own garden plot of maize with the intention of selling the harvest to pay for her school fees, but her parents believe she will fail. She says that she grew sturdier than was useful for any eight-year-old and that she craved support. She eventually begins to ignore her mother's predictions. She hopes to find an ally in Nhamo, but he is malicious and tells her that she should know he is the one who must go to school. He then says outright that she shouldn't be concerned with learning because she is a girl. Before that statement, Tambu was concerned about Nhamo. He has many chores and often misses school to help in the fields. She wonders how he has time to study and is on the verge of intervening on her brother's behalf by taking on the milking as her own chore. She says that self-preservation overcomes her concern for her brother and once he makes the comment about her gender, her concern "dies an unobtrusive death."

When Mr. Matimba asks Tambu what she plans to do with the ten pounds given to her by the woman named Doris, Tambu says that she'll keep it to pay her school fees for the coming years. Mr. Matimba, probably realizing that Tambu's father would never allow her to keep that much money, suggests that she give it to the headmaster who will deduct her school fees each year until the money is gone. Tambu agrees, but when she gets home, Nhamo doesn't believe her story.

Tambu admits that she wanted to be part of the planning and to make the trip to meet her uncle, though it's not so that she can be with her father. It's simply that the trip is an exciting adventure. She says that her father tells her to curb her natural impulses because she will remain at home to help prepare the homecoming. Tambu says that she has come to believe that there is no way to please her father, and so it becomes natural to simply please herself. She says that her father threatens to pull her out of school, but she knows that he really can't. She does admit that her father is torn. He sees her education as an investment because she will someday be ready for a good job because of the education. However, if she grows up to be a wife, some man's family will pay for her in cattle.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

When Babamukuru arrives in a cavalcade of motorcars, Tambu's father tells of the return of the "prince" with his educational degrees. Maiguru enters behind her husband and Tambu notes that Maiguru's wearing a dress that looks very much like one Babamukuru gave Ma'Shingayi for Christmas just before leaving for his studies. Tambu prepares the meal, and she is praised by the women, making her feel a little better and greatly boosting her confidence.

Tambu is assigned the task of taking the bowl of water to each of the relatives for washing their hands. The job is tricky because the most important male relative there is to be first with the line behind it in order of importance. Tambu says that there are other relatives more important than Babamukuru, but since he is the guest of honor, she takes the water to him first. The majority of the meat has been dished out for the elders dining together, meaning Tambu and some of the other children have none, but she says that they are not accustomed to meat at all, so having none is no hardship. The young men are unhappy that there is no alcohol. Babamukuru does not drink at all and alcohol is not served in deference to him. Tambu says that those who complain don't realize the extent of Babamukuru's importance. After the meal, many of the guests lament their lack of money, pointing out all the things they would have done for Babamukuru's homecoming had they had money.

The young people gather for dancing. Tambu invites Nyasha to join, but the girl has trouble understanding the language. Having spoken nothing but English for the past years Nyasha has all but forgotten the Shona language, which offends Tambu. Tambu hears Nyasha, Chido and their mother hold a conversation in rapid English. She can only pick up a few words, including "dirty." It's evident that Maiguru is not encouraging the two to join in, saying that she is concerned that they are overly tired. Tambu walks away, trying not to let the incident spoil the rest of her evening.

Later, Tambu's father, Jeremiah, joins Babamukuru and his other siblings as they discuss the future for the family. Babamukuru says that the key to a prosperous family is that one child from every branch must be educated. Jeremiah says that Nhamo suffers greatly, working hard at home and at school, but that the boy never complains, only works harder. Babamukuru says that Nhamo must move to the mission school for the next school term. Tambu's aunt jumps up, shouting for the good deed done by her brother. Jeremiah falls to his knees and thanks God for giving him a saint as a brother.

The following day, Jeremiah tells Nhamo of the plan, who immediately goes to the garden where Tambu is working to be certain that she knows of his good fortune - that he was chosen because he is smart, and that she would never rise to that level. Tambu erupts into an angry tirade, telling Nhamo that he will always be part of this family, whether he wants to be or not. She might have been able to be happy for Nhamo's



opportunity except that he had made it clear that he believed she was being passed over because she is a girl.

As Nhamo's time at the mission school nears, Tambu finds that she is unable to talk to him. She softens somewhat by the time Nhamo leaves, but speaking to him at that point would have meant losing face. Babamukuru is a frequent guest, and Tambu tries to pull Nyasha into conversation. However, she's quiet and never talks, even to try to get past the language barrier. Tambu says that she feels humiliated for trying so hard to grow a friendship with her cousin. When Nhamo returns home at the end of the school term, he has "forgotten" how to speak Shona - the family's native language. Jeremiah is the only one who is impressed and pleased, saying it's the first step toward the emancipation of the family.

Tambu has related these stories to fully describe the situation in her family on that day in November of 1968, when they are waiting for Nhamo to return home from school. It's already dark and they have decided he will likely return the following day when Babamukuru arrives with Maiguru. Ma'Shingayi takes one look at the couple and begins keening, telling them to go back because she doesn't want them to tell her what she already knows. Ma'Shingayi is furious, saying that their education killed her son and spitting at both of them. Nhamo had complained of pain in his neck and had been taken to a clinic where he was tentatively diagnosed with mumps and died two days later.

Babamukuru tells Jeremiah that "the girl" must now take Nhamo's place, getting and education so she can help her family until the time comes for marriage. Ma'Shingayi objects, but Tambu's father insists that she be educated. Tambu wins and notes that Babamukuru's decision to oversee her education has vindicated her.

Chapter Three Analysis

Tambu's cousin, Nyasha, is wearing a "skimpy" dress during the homecoming. Tambu notes that it is barely sufficient to cover the girl, and that she seems uncomfortable, constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks as if to hold the dress down. Tambu says that the dress is inappropriate and that she won't condone Nyasha's wearing it. She says she also disapproved of Nyasha's brother, Chido, though she can't really put her finger on a reason other than the fact that he's Nyasha's brother. It's interesting that Tambu is facing censure for her hopes and dreams because it's not what society is accustomed to, but seems to have little tolerance when her cousin steps outside the bounds of what's considered socially acceptable.

Tambu says that her uncle's homecoming should have been a joyful occasion for her as it was for the other family members, but she doesn't enjoy it because she was denied the opportunity to go to the airport. She says that she is unable to reconnect with her cousins now, though she doesn't explain why it would have been easy at the airport and impossible at home. She says that she realizes these are the of which burdens her mother speaks. She then analyzes her feelings. She says that she liked her cousins before they went to England and ponders the idea that she doesn't like anyone. She no



longer fights with Nhamo, but that's because they simply have too little in common for fighting. She decides that she doesn't really want to understand what she's feeling and busies herself with housework.

Babamukuru and his siblings talk for a long time that night. He says that his branch of the family is stable because of his education boosting his job and earnings. He says that each branch of the family must have someone do the same. Tambu's father, Jeremiah, immediately inserts the idea that all children should graduate. It's interesting because he has often threatened to pull Tambu out of school. Babamukuru says that the main problem is Jeremiah's family. He says that the others have someone to support them, but that there is no one in Jeremiah's family. He says that he received a letter from Jeremiah in 1962, saying that the children would not be able to return to school. Babamukuru says that he was surprised to hear that Jeremiah's crops had failed because others said it had been a good year. It seems that he questions whether the crops failed, or if Jeremiah simply hadn't worked the fields like he should have. Babamukuru moves on without dwelling on that, saying that he was pleased to know that the money he had sent was used to keep Tambu and Nhamo in school. It's interesting that Jeremiah doesn't even spare a glance for Tambu, who worked to harvest her own little crop for school fees. It's also interesting that Jeremiah interrupts Babamukuru's speech to say that all the children should go to school, though he himself has opposed Tambu's attendance and has often held Nhamo out.



Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Tambu is taken to her uncle, Baramukuru's house. When she sees the house and realizes the extent of her uncle's wealth, she falls into a pit of self-pity, believing that she herself has nothing to do with the fact that she's being offered this opportunity. Anna, the housekeeper, warmly meets her at the door. Tambu feels that she and Nyasha will reconnect here at the mission, but Nyasha's reaction strikes Tambu as rude.

Tambu knows she must develop some strategy to avoid being distracted from her life by her grand surroundings and decides that she'll simply have to ignore her surroundings and begins immediately by being as unimpressed as possible. Nhamo had been so enamored with the life that he had never wanted to return to the homestead. Tambu likens her uncle to God and the home to Heaven. The lack of dirt is proof of this theory; she is in danger of becoming an angel or a saint. The occasional presence of red dust is a way to remind herself that this is not Heaven after all.

Tambu has tea with Maiguru. Maiguru strains the tea, and Tambu thinks to compare it to the tea on the homestead to see which is better. Nyasha enters the room and displays a lack of manners. Tambu is embarrassed at her cousin's lack of manners and her apparent lack of respect for her mother. Maiguru says that Nyasha picked up "Anglicized" habits in England and that it's difficult teaching her proper manners now that they have returned home.

Maiguru will be sharing a room with Nyasha. Tambu knows that there's something "intangible" about her cousin but she can't decide if it's "intangibly bad" or "intangibly good." Either way, she knows that Nyasha will be a distraction when all Tambu wants to do is to settle down with her studies. Maiguru shows Tambu her new clothes and Tambu is filled with gratitude, but admits that her emotions are so confused that she has to fight back tears.

Chapter Four Analysis

Babamukuru's house is, in Tambu's mind, a mansion. She says that Nhamo had told her about the wonder of it but that she hadn't been able to fully understand, having only the homestead with which to compare. She says that if she had written down her impressions that day, she would have used words such as castle, palace and mansion. Looking back on her first look at the house, she says that she can still remember her impressions, but that the passage of time gives her the ability to see the house for what it truly is, a house. She will similarly talk of how she felt the kitchen was extraordinary then but later realizes that the linoleum was cracked and worn and that the walls, painted pink and green, didn't match the flooring. As she waited in the living room for her aunt, Tambu looks at the furnishings carefully, saying that she will someday own a



home like this and that she must know how to decorate properly. Though she doesn't yet explain how it came to be, Tambu obviously becomes friends with Nyasha because Tambu says that it's Nyasha who tells the stories of the early missionaries and their idea that only a white house could be comfortably cool in the summer. Tambu says that Babamukuru is the only African living in a white house in the mission and that they are all proud of that fact except Nyasha, who Tambu describes as egalitarian. She intimates that Nyasha believes it to be some sort of discrimination, though it could be that Nyasha feels other Africans are being discriminated against.

Tambu discovers that there is a long shed that could easily have been a house but was a building to shelter two cars. With the understanding of her uncle's wealth—a fact that she had not previously grasped—she says that she is forever separated from him. It's interesting that Tambu herself is here for an education in an effort that she will pull herself out of poverty. While she may understand that, she notes that Babamukuru got himself educated without the help of a wealthy relative. She seems to believe that makes him superior to her and that she will never achieve what he has, simply because she has a benefactor helping her. Understanding the lengths Tambu went to in order to attend school at all, it seems reasonable for the reader to believe that she might also have found a way to progress her education, but she clearly believes that whatever she achieve will be because someone helped her.

Maiguru asks Tambu about her mother and Tambu answers with an answer that is short as possible without being rude. She says that she wants to keep her thoughts on her mother's condition to herself. This is the first mention that something might be wrong with Tambu's mother and she doesn't elaborate. It's interesting that Maiguru seems to be greatly lacking in self-confidence. She worries when Tambu takes only a small biscuit from the tea tray and offers her something else, when, in fact, Tambu has had to restrain herself from grabbing up many of the treats for fear of being thought greedy. She says that she can only remember having had cake occasionally at Christmas or Easter when Babamakuru brought it, and then the pieces were doled out over several days with the children eating slowly and carefully so as to savor every bite.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

Tambu sits on the bed. It's only a few minutes later that she and Nyasha glance at each other at the same time, prompting Nyasha to laugh and say that they're going to have to talk sooner or later and that it's not Tambu with whom she's angry. The girls then begin to communicate. Nyasha says that her parents are angry that she and Chido have adopted Anglicized ways, and it might have been much better if the two children had been sent home to live rather than living those years in England. She says that returning home was a shock for them and they'd truly forgotten that England wasn't their home.

Tambu awkwardly learns how to use the bathroom before dinner. She's concerned that they are eating so early, thinking she'll be hungry again before bedtime. Babamukuru arrives for dinner, obviously with much on his mind. Maiguru begins serving him but he says he wants gravy and Nyasha goes to make it. Maiguru puts everything back in the warming dishes while they wait. When Nyasha returns, Maiguru insists on serving her husband with a fresh plate. Nyasha begins to serve herself, ignoring custom, and Maiguru serves both herself and Tambu.

Tambu says that the meal is embarrassing and that it looks like a "small angry child" ate at her place. She has trouble with the knife and fork and drops much of her food. Maiguru sees her distress and calls for Anna to bring some sadza, a traditional dish that is a staple for Tambu's family. Maiguru says that getting accustomed to the food in England was horrible, and she wants Tambu to eat whatever will fill her stomach and makes her happy.

Nyasha makes a scene when she realizes that her father has taken away her book. Tambu finishes as quickly as possible so that she can leave the table and the uncomfortable atmosphere. Nyasha asks Tambu to join her outside for a cigarette. Tambu declines and decides that her uncle was right; Nyasha is beyond redemption.

Tambu remains in the bedroom reading until Anna says that she's wanted in the living room. Tambu recognizes this as the moment she'll be formally welcomed to her uncle's home and separated from her own. Babamukuru begins a long speech, but Tambu barely listens to most of it. As the eldest son, father, husband and headmaster, Babamukuru has authority. On those occasions when he wasn't in power - when he was a student in the mission school, for example - the reward for the time of submission was an increase in power. He tells her to be grateful for the opportunity, to study diligently, and reminds her that the reason for her education was so that she could provide for her family as he had done for so many years.

Tambu returns to her room, pledging to be as straight and diligent as her uncle. Tambu feels too superior to admit to Nyasha that she doesn't know how to switch off the light.



Nyasha, realizing the problem, points out the switch and turns the light off herself. She then says that Tambu doesn't have on her bedclothes and will have to dress in the dark. Tambu doesn't admit she also doesn't know what bedclothes are and sinks deeper into her self-pity.

Tambu's warm bath the following morning is wonderful, and she stays in until Maiguru knocks on the door to ask if she's alright. She drains the water, pleased that she knows how because Nhamo had told her of the stopper, then - feeling warm and generous - runs water for Nyasha, which puts an end to the girls' quarrel. Tambu makes her bed and dresses and is amazed looking in the mirror to find that she's quite pretty. Her aunt gives her a shilling for buns at mid-morning, and Tambu, knowing it's enough money to buy bread for her family for a week, promises that she won't need it but will return it.

Tambu soon learns that Nyasha is not well liked. Girls call her proud or loose and say she tries to be white. They say that she gets away with anything because she's the headmaster's daughter. Tambu is accepted, and calls this period her "reincarnation." She reads avidly, picks up English quickly, and notes that she is becoming educated. Tambu knows about menstrual cycles and during one of her vacation trips home, her mother gives her rags to use along with instructions. Tambu says she accepts the first cycle but grows morose at the prospect of washing the rags and keeping herself clean in Maiguru's pretty bathroom. Nyasha teaches her about tampons, and Tambu's affection for her cousin grows with the caring action.

Tambu doesn't understand Nyasha, who explains herself by saying that a person must be constantly moving and learning new things or runs the risk of ending up like her mother - trapped. Tambu doesn't look at Maiguru's life like that, but one Sunday she learns that Maiguru has a Master's degree, just like Babamukuru. She achieved it despite the opposition from others, including Tambu's "family". Maiguru receives no salary for what she does. Tambu now has a better understanding of her aunt, though her uncle continues to be a stranger, working long hours and seldom talking to Tambu at all.

Chapter Five Analysis

Tambu sees Maiguru as a wonderful person, who is thoughtful and kind. Those traits show as she sends Anna for a spoon because Tambu has so much trouble with the knife and fork. Maiguru even does this discretely, saying that she believes Anna must have forgotten to put a spoon at Tambu's place. While this was done only with Tambu's feelings in mind, Maiguru also seems to have a tendency to go overboard. For example, when dinner resumes after Nyasha has made gravy, Maiguru insists that her husband have a fresh plate and fresh portions of the food. She then asks if he wants more meat, which he declines, but she says that it's obvious he doesn't have enough and piles more on his plate.

While Nyasha is preparing the gravy, her mother tells Babamukuru that Nyasha is reading a novel called "Lady Chatterley's Lover." He is angry and then sad and takes



the novel from the room, though it's not evident what he does with it until later. Maiguru asks if he believes it unsuitable and he says that he does. Despite the fact that she had earlier voiced the same opinion, she now says that she'd considered it, but that it is only a book.

On the way to the mission, Tambu decides that she will eventually find a "new self." That she will become a person like her aunt and uncle, someone who has clean clothes that don't tear and without dirt clinging to her. Now, Anna comes into her room to summon her to the living room. Anna kneels, which is required of a servant, but which is something she has not done with Tambu before now. She is also very quiet, unlike the young girl who chattered all the time when she helped Tambu's family during the time of Nhamo's death. Tambu says that she's not quite sure she's ready to be a person to whom Anna would kneel. She later resolves that she should just talk to Anna and that decision helps her become more comfortable in this new situation.

Babamukuru impresses upon Tambu that he left his office that afternoon to bring her to the school, which required that he miss some time at work. He says that he is now at home, though he spends most evenings at work. He seems to want to be certain that she knows that what he's done for her is a sacrifice on his part and that she must be grateful. He then says that he didn't call her to tell her these things and then talks of her duties. He says that she must listen to her aunt and uncle as they are now her parents, that she must be a diligent student and that she must strive to be a good woman. He then tells the story that she's heard from her grandmother of his own life's plan, which he established at age nine.

After more than a full term with her aunt and uncle, Tambu begins to understand more about Nyasha. When Babamukuru instructs Nyasha to greet another adult, Nyasha barely has a word to say. Babamukuru takes it as insolence, but it seems Nyasha has never understood what it is that her father wants from her on these occasions. She mutters something and escapes as quickly as possible. As the time passes, Tambu spends more time with her cousin and the bond between the two deepens.



Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary

One of Nyasha's few friends is the daughter of a missionary, Nyardzo. She attends the mission school as did her two older brothers, Brian and Andrew. The boys had been sent to secondary school, a school open to whites and with high fees. Baker, Nyardzo's father, arranged for Chido to take the entrance exam for this boarding school, though Nyasha says that he did so in an effort to ease his conscience about having his sons educated away from the missionary school.

Nyasha is facing exams that will determine whether she is allowed to advance in school, or if she will be "screened out" of the school system. Her father could use his influence as headmaster to find a place for her even if she failed the test, but this would go against his claims of morality and honor. She emerges with the highest aggregate score in the school. Maiguru worries, but Babamukuru is pleased that she is willing to apply herself. Nyasha says it's the first time she's done something that matters.

Chido arrives home for vacation and the three dress for a school-sponsored Christmas dance. Babamukuru doesn't recognize Nyasha and insists that she change, but Maiguru says that she purchased the dress as a reward for the good grades. Chido and Tambu tease Nyasha, saying that it's because she looked so pretty that Babamukuru objected. Tambu says she doesn't like parties but finds that she has a good time. Nyasha hangs behind, learning a dance step from Andy. When Babamukuru realizes that Nyasha is alone with a boy, he goes out to find her. He yells at Nyasha for hanging around outside with a boy at this hour and the argument escalates, with Nyasha not backing down and her father attacking her, calling her a whore, and threatening to kill her. He orders her out of the house as Chido and Maiguru restrain him.

Chido tells Nyasha to come inside, and says that she can't upset her mother anymore, that she can't take it, but doesn't elaborate. Nyasha and Babamukuru are stony to each other in the coming days. Nyasha withdraws and Tambu begins to worry. Babamukuru administers her punishment, fourteen lashes and an hour-long sermon. Nyasha tells Tambu that she understands that she is to be obedient to her father, but that she feels she'll lose something of herself if she caves in. Tambu talks about the reason she is two years behind in school, of the raising of the maize and her own father's reactions. Nyasha says that she understands this sort of treatment is common, but that she still can't just give in. One night, Tambu crawls into bed with her cousin and they cuddle together as they go to sleep. That seems to be the beginning of the healing for Nyasha, but Tambu worries about her uncle, who hasn't the luxury of tears to wash away some of his pain.



Chapter Six Analysis

Before attending the mission school, Tambu's one interaction with a white person was Doris - the woman who had given her the money for her mealies. Tambu, with only that impression, was surprised to find that the missionaries were beautiful with tanned skin, though some had strange ways. She says that some wanted only to speak Shona, while she lapsed naturally into English when speaking to a white person. The missionaries had left their comfortable homes to do the work and the children were grateful for the sacrifice. Tambu says that the missionaries were treated like "minor deities" and they accepted it as their due.

The fight between Babamukuru and Nyasha is an important experience for Tambu. She says that it's suddenly clear to her that women will be treated in certain ways and held to certain standards, regardless of rank or wealth or family. She has held Babamukuru in high esteem to this point and it's suddenly clear to her that he is capable of the same biases as everyone else. She admits that she's having ideas and feelings that make her into a person she isn't supposed to be. Though she doesn't explain these, it seems evident that she's considering that the prejudice against women isn't fair and that it's not merely a burden for women to carry, as her mother says. Tambu, having been raised to believe that she shouldn't think such things, says she is frightened by the turn of her thoughts; she counteracts them by remembering that she's the poor relative, grateful for the opportunity she's been given. As the event begins to blow over, Tambu remembers her uncle's words as he was threatening to strangle Nyasha—that he would kill her then hang himself. She then remembers that Nyasha had fought back when Babamukuru first slapped her, punching him in the eye. Tambu knows that if she had punched her father, she would have felt she had no choice but to hang herself.



Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary

Tambu, Nyasha and her parents go "home" on December 23. On the way, Tambu has time to think. As they arrive at the homestead, she realizes that there's no reason anyone would want to go there other than to visit family. Upon arrival, they find that Tambu's mother is lying down and that her father has gone to town with a man named Takesure. Takesure is a relative of Babamukuru, who came to stay with Jeremiah, ostensibly to help out. He has been having sex with Ma'Shingayi's sister, Lucia. Lucia came to stay with her sister during a difficult pregnancy and has remained, though Babamukuru has told her to leave. Upon his arrival, he confronts Lucia for not following his order. She asks where she is supposed to go, adding that her family is too poor to feed her and that there is no work.

Tambu finds that the latrine is filthy. Nyasha helps clean the latrine, though Tambu says she would have been too embarrassed to have asked for help. They never manage to make it as clean as it should have been, and the two girls revert to using the bathroom in the bushes. Tambu's mother, pregnant and claiming illness, greets everyone first from her place on a reed mat in the bedroom. Nyasha first earns Tambu's silent censure for taking a seat on a chair instead of on the floor, but then Nyasha participates in a formal greeting, which surprises Babamukuru into a quick smile of praise.

Tambu's aunt arrives with her family and an uncle with his family soon after, making a total of twenty-four people at the house. Nyasha, Tambu, three hired girls, and Maiguru do the majority of the work. They must prepare all the meals, fetch water, wash clothes, clean the latrine, sweep the yard, and wash dishes. Maiguru has the responsibility of overseeing all the food preparation as wife of the head of the family and provider of the food, but the main reason she can't delegate any part of this to someone else is that the sheer number of people means she must carefully ration the food. Some of the unrefrigerated meat goes bad and Maiguru insists on it being cooked anyway. After being chastised by Tete Gladys, she cooks fresh meat for those higher on the family line.

One night, the family takes up the issue of what to do about Takesure and Lucia. Babamukuru, Thomas, Tete Gladys, Jeremiah and the accused, Takesure, convene in the living room. The women, including Lucia, Tambu and Nyasha are in the kitchen as the meeting begins. Ma'Shingayi declares that it's unfair that Takesure is to be present but that Lucia is not. Lucia picks up that sentiment and soon is angry to the point of raving. Lucia calls on Maiguru for an opinion, but Maiguru declines, saying that she is not of the family but was taken into the family by marriage, and excuses herself to bed. Lucia condones the attitude but it angers Ma'Shingayi, who says that Maiguru believes herself better than everyone else because of her wealth and education. Ma'Shingayi then says that Maiguru was responsible for the death of Nhamo and that she's now stolen Tambu. Ma'Shingayi turns on her daughter, spitting out the accusation that



Tambu follows Maiguru around and jumps to obey her orders, while having the temerity to chastise Ma'Shingayi - her own mother - for not having properly cleaned the latrine. Tambu first looks around for Nyasha but is grateful to find that she's slipped out.

When Maiguru arrives at the house, Babamukuru tells her to sit in on the discussion. She asks to be excused for bed but he insists until Thomas says that she works too hard and should be allowed to go to bed. The compliment on how hard she works excuses his interference and Babamukuru excuses her. The women listen to the meeting. Takesure says that he tried to follow Babamukuru's order to leave, but Lucia refused to go. He says that she's a witch, threatened him and that he was afraid, an admission that makes Babamukuru angry. Lucia marches into the house and grabs Takesure by the ear, saying that she'll leave but she'll take her sister, Ma'Shingayi, with her. When Lucia leaves the living room, Tambu begs her not to go because if Ma'Shingayi leaves the homestead, Tambu will have to leave school and return home to care for the younger children. Lucia simply smiles, tells Tambu not to worry, and promises that it will blow over.

The men continue with their meeting, and note the amount of problems in their family, from lack of manners, to unwed pregnant daughters, abusive sons, and lack of money. Jeremiah says all these things point to an evil presence and suggests that they bring in a "good medium," have beer and a sacrificial ox, and call the clan together for a cleansing ritual. Babamukuru is appalled. He does agree that there is evil among them but believes it's punishment for some wrongdoing. His mother had suggested to him before her death that Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi, having never had a formal wedding, were therefore living in sin. Babamukuru says he's gathered enough money for a small wedding to rectify the situation. The following morning, Tete Gladys and Maiguru have a laugh together over Lucia's antics.

Chapter Seven Analysis

The relationship between Lucia and Takesure is complicated by the fact that Lucia, upon becoming pregnant, claims that Jeremiah is the father because she knows Takesure hasn't the means to support the two wives he has, let alone a third, and believes Jeremiah would make a better father. Based on the fact that Jeremiah had the self-control not to have sex with her until she was already pregnant, she also believes he will also have more stamina than Takesure. Jeremiah actually avoided Lucia to avoid Babamukuru's wrath but is now considering taking her for a second wife. Tambu says that Lucia is very strong and attributes it at least partly to her dalliances with old men who don't require much but who are wealthy. Jeremiah uses that, along with the fact that she is the sister of his wife and the two women would get along, as reasons he should take her, but Babamukuru adamantly opposes the plan. He says that he won't have a bigamist in the family because it's a sin and will bring the wrath of God onto the entire family.

While Tambu's mother is making her accusations about Maiguru's role in Nhamo's death, Tambu glances at her cousin and admits that it was a mistake because they each



saw the raw emotions on the faces of the other. When Ma'Shingayi goes on to say that Maiguru is now stealing Tambu away because she could have only two children of her own, Tambu avoids looking at Nyasha so Tambu doesn't have to discredit her mother in order to retain her cousin. It's obvious that Tambu feels torn and that her respect for her mother is absolute, but her love for her cousin is also very strong. Tambu admits that she has more respect for her aunt and uncle than for her parents. She wonders if there would come a time when she would also lose her respect for Maiguru and Babamukuru.

When the women are arguing over whether Lucia should be involved with the hearing, there comes a point where it seems they realize that the bias against women has been going on for generations and that it is no different now. Tambu notes that it would have been the perfect moment for all of them to expand their thinking a little and consider the larger picture, but to have done so would have been to admit that the bias exists and that they are victims so they all withdraw back to their single points.



Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary

The relatives leave, with Babamukuru, Maiguru and Nyasha being the last to go. Tambu stays to help as her mother is ill. She feels anxious at being away from Nyasha for three weeks, until the beginning of the school term, but is strangely relieved when only her immediate family, Takesure, and Lucia remain at the homestead. Lucia says that she will leave or stay, depending on what Ma'Shingayi wants. Ma'Shingayi finally says that she's crossed the country and lived in poverty for nineteen years, and that she can do it for another nineteen and even for nineteen after that, if need be. Tambu works hard during her stay. When Babamukuru returns to pick up Tambu, he notes the repairs Tambu did and compliments Jeremiah on a job well done. Jeremiah accepts the praise, elaborating on how difficult the work was.

Ma'Shingayi delivers a healthy baby boy and Lucia arrives that same day. Lucia asks Babamukuru to help her find a job. He soon finds her a job as a cook at the girl's hotel on the mission grounds. Maiguru, Ma'Shingayi and Lucia fall to their knees, expressing their gratitude. Tambu would also have knelt, but Nyasha kicks her under the table and says, "Don't you dare," though Tambu still tells her uncle of her gratitude. Ma'Shingayi goes home a few days later. Lucia begins her job and starts taking classes as well. She is immediately proud of her accomplishments. Tambu feels that Babamukuru's actions prove he is an honorable person, but to Nyasha, people in her father's position have a responsibility to do whatever they can for the less fortunate. Nyasha says there's nothing wrong with being thankful but that there's no need to turn Babamukuru into a hero.

The wedding preparations begin. Babamukuru passes the chore of buying material for the dresses on to Maiguru. Maiguru is to go shopping for material but days pass without the material being bought, and finally Nyasha takes over the project. Tambu allows herself to be fitted for a peach bridesmaid dress and admits that she looks beautiful in the dress, hose, and matching sandals but continues to feel that the wedding is a sham and makes a mockery of her parents. In some ways it makes her feel as if her very existence is threatened. The morning of the wedding, Tambu can't bring herself to get out of bed. When Babamukuru orders her up she refuses, even with the understanding that disobeying Babamukuru means she'll no longer be able to live at his house. Even though she doesn't attend, her mother was happy, her father dashing, and her uncle generously giving Jeremiah the homestead house as a wedding present and announcing plans to build another house that his family will use when they visit.

Babamukuru doesn't send Tambu away but does punish her. He gives her fifteen lashes because she is fifteen years old, then gives Anna two weeks off with Tambu taking over her chores. Still attending school, there is simply more to do than she can keep up with and after only a couple of days the man hired to do outside work, Sylvester, pitches in. At the end of the first week, Nyasha ignores Tambu's objections and helps with the



laundry, which has accumulated for the entire week. While they are working, Lucia arrives, learns of the punishment, and then speaks to Babamukuru. She asks if he took time to find out why Tambu didn't want to attend the wedding, if Ma'Shingayi wanted Tambu there, or if she even wanted the wedding. After she leaves Maiguru says that Lucia is right, the punishment is too severe. Maiguru says that she's earned the right to speak out by supporting Babamukuru's family, helping pay for a wedding, and providing a home that is a hotel for his relatives. Maiguru tells Babamukuru that she is no longer happy in this house and that it's time for her to leave. The next morning, she packs a suitcase and boards the bus. Several days pass before Chido calls, saying that Maiguru has been to visit him, that she's going on to stay with her brother for awhile, and she'll be back when she is ready. Nyasha passes the message on to her father, who barely acknowledges it but leaves in the car that night, returning the next morning with Maiguru, who seems much happier with her situation.

Chapter Eight Analysis

Tambu says that the idea of a wedding twists her up inside, though she can't be certain why. She seems to be angry at her uncle for putting her parents through a ridiculous farce but knows that it's a sin to be angry at her benefactor and so tries simply not to think about it. She has also come to realize that she is dependent on Nyasha. She says that she has been taught that her job is to become educated, then to settle into a good job to help her family become emancipated from poverty until she marries. But watching Nyasha flit from one thought to another, constantly moving, has opened Tambu's eyes and she seems to be on the verge of questioning the path her life is to take.

As Tambu faces the wedding crisis, Nyasha offers to take her place as bridesmaid, seeming to think that might help. Tambu has not confided in her cousin, an unusual occurrence, which suggests that she was having trouble voicing her concern because it's evident that Nyasha would have stood behind Tambu's decision. Tambu admits that she's gone with what was expected of her ever since she arrived at the mission, but that she'd always thought that it was simply because there hadn't been any major issues. She had thought that when the time came, she would be able to stand up for what she believed to be right. Though she has stood up to Babamukuru to some degree, she still feels that she is spineless.

When Maiguru is threatening to leave, Nyasha says that she doesn't believe her mother will follow through with the threat, though she admits that their arguments have never been so serious before. Nyasha has a theory about why her father allowed Maiguru to go. She says that he believed that she wouldn't, and that having tried to leave and fail would give him something to hold over her head forever. However, but the time Maiguru's bus has departed, it's too late for him to do anything about it. While it seems natural that Nyasha would have felt at least somewhat abandoned, she looks at her mother's departure as a sign that she, too, can eventually break free of Babamukuru.



Chapters Nine and Ten

Chapters Nine and Ten Summary

Just before the Grade Seven examinations, a group of nuns visit the mission school. The students are subjected to a "general knowledge" test and each student is interviewed individually. The nuns are recruiting; that two girls will be offered a chance to study at a school called Sacred Heart. Tambu is selected for one of only two scholarships offered. Nyasha says that the nuns will change her and urges Tambu not to go. Babamukuru tells her that he won't allow it, fearing the negative effect of too much time with whites and the cost of her terms there. He then asks Maiguru if she has anything to add and to his surprise she speaks out. She says that Tambu has a scholarship so there's no real expense and that Tambu has been raised well, that she will be a good woman no matter to what she is exposed.

Jeremiah and Babamukuru discuss the matter, and Jeremiah agrees. Tambu's mother becomes disconsolate over the continual separation from her children. She refuses to rise most days, sits in the sunshine and only rouses herself to feed the youngest son, Dambudzo. Lucia comes and puts Dambudzo on a rock in the middle of the river and tells Ma'Shingayi that the child will drown if she doesn't rouse herself to go to him. Ma'Shingayi comes back to herself, taking on her duties again, and freeing Tambu to leave for Sacred Heart.

Tambu goes to the mission on her own by taking the bus. When she arrives at the mission for her overnight stay, she is anxious to talk with Nyasha, and finds her at the school in a classroom, studying. Her cousin barely acknowledges Tambu's presence, simply saying, "I shall miss you". Babamukuru is angry that Nyasha is late to dinner, and she backtalks him. At her father's command, she shovels down all her food then leaves the table. Tambu follows and discovers that her cousin is throwing up in the bathroom; Nyasha admits that she used her toothbrush to prompt the vomiting. The girls talk long into the night.

Nyasha accompanies Tambu, Maiguru and Babamukuru on the trip to Sacred Heart. Maiguru remembers at the last moment that Tambu needs "tuck," and stops to purchase tinned jams, tomato sauce, juice and other items for this purpose. Only Babamukuru has been to the campus before, to arrange Tambu's arrival. She is to receive a second-hand uniform, the only cost to Babamukuru. Babamukuru says a very solemn farewell; Maiguru is cheerful and Nyasha's gaiety is forced.

Tambu has little time for homesickness, and is overwhelmed with all she has to take in. She has to learn about the people, the nuns and the lay teachers, the white students who were like her and those who weren't, and the languages which were so unlike English and in some ways like her own. She receives letters from Nyasha filled with news. Then comes a letter filled with longing for Tambu. Her father won't allow her to come see Tambu, thinking it would "spoil" Tambu. Things are deteriorating for Nyasha.



Tambu has little time to dwell on her guilt, the next letter is again bubbly, and Nyasha says that she has a new diet that will make her into a svelte young woman.

At break, Tambu notes that Nyasha is much slimmer. Nyasha throws up her dinners, hiding it from her parents. Tambu wants to talk to her uncle but doesn't know how. She finally asks to remain for awhile. Over the next few days, Nyasha grows weaker, is almost unable to walk, and collapses over dinner one evening. She wakes the family in the middle of the night, ranting incoherently. The episode jars Maiguru and Babamukuru into action. They take Nyasha to a psychiatrist, who says she's seeking attention and tells her parents to be firm with her. While Babamukuru wants to take that advice, Maiguru's brother makes an appointment with another doctor. This doctor puts Nyasha in a clinic. Despite the fact that Tambu feels she should stay with Nyasha, Babamukuru takes Tambu to the homestead the next day. Her mother says that Nyasha's illness is the result of her time among the English and warns Tambu not to allow the same thing to happen to her.

Tambu prepares to return to Sacred Heart but takes her mother's warning to heart. She says that she was at first able to assure herself that she was stronger than Nyasha but that "seeds grow," and that she was never again able to fully accept Sacred Heart. The journey brought her to the place where she is now, the place where she can begin to tell her story of the four women she loved and the men who were part of their lives, and that the story itself will stretch over another volume.

Chapters Nine and Ten Analysis

There is no immediate decision on whether Tambu will be allowed to attend Sacred Heart, and she waits anxiously to find out if Babamukuru will allow her to go. It's interesting that she knows Babamukuru will make the decision and that her parents will allow that. When she learns that her father and Babamukuru have discussed the issue and that she is to be allowed to attend, she is so excited that she needs to tell someone and she goes to her mother. Ma'Shingayi is angry and says that Babamukuru is trying to kill Ma'Shingayi by continually separating her from her children. It's then that she says that everyone does whatever Babamukuru tells them, regardless of what it requires and refers back to the ridiculous show of a wedding in which Ma'Shingayi herself donned a veil because Babamukuru said she should.

The parting will be especially difficult for Nyasha. She confides in Tambu more often than either girl had believed would be possible; Nyasha depended on their talk sessions as a way to work through her personal problems and conflicts. Nyasha says that she and Tambu together were able to laugh at the conflicts between Nyasha and her father but that without Tambu, there is nothing funny about them and nothing to laugh at. Nyasha will slip into a deep depression without her cousin with long-term, life-threatening effects.



When Nyasha gets into the car for the trip to Sacred Heart, Babamukuru doesn't object, though Tambu can't be certain of the reason. She knows that Nyasha is missing classes and though her teachers have given her permission, Babamukuru isn't likely to approve.

Tambu is to share a room with six other African girls, though Babamukuru says that there were only supposed to be four in her room. The nun says that they had two additional African girls than were expected and that there was no where else to put them. Babamukuru points out that there are only four wardrobes and the nun says that it will be inconvenient, but that the four girls in the lower grades will have to share. The nun keeps getting Tambu and Nyasha confused as to which is attending, and Tambu says she wishes she had a uniform to wear so that the nun could tell them apart.



Characters

Tambudzai

Known as Tambu, is thirteen in 1968, when her brother dies. She is a serious young girl and feels a great deal of responsibility towards her parents, especially her mother.

Tambu says that she worries about her mother when she is working alone in the garden or the fields. On the November 1968, day Nhamo was expected home from school, Tambu says that she has much less work to do because her brother doesn't arrive. She no longer has to kill a rooster for the meal but will prepare simpler fare. She says that leaves her with several options, including returning to the garden to help her mother. In this case, she prepares the meal instead, so that her mother will be able to rest when she does come home.

That is Tambu's background and is likely at least part of the reason she is successful in school. Though she knows that her role in the family isn't fair, she accepts that it's up to her to change it. A weaker person would likely have given in when urged not to take advantage of another step toward her education as Tambu's family did when she was offered a place at Sacred Heart. Nyasha, Babamukuru, Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi all give reasons Tambu should not go. She admits to feeling relieved when her mother overcomes her depression at Tambu's leaving and to feeling guilty when her cousin writes of her deep longing to be near Tambu again, but neither are enough to keep her from following her dream of attaining an education.

Tambu is African but is willing to question the traditional roles to some degree. For example, she believes that she should have the chance for an education and that she shouldn't be left at home simply because she's female. However, she is deeply traditional in many ways. She carefully chooses a chair some distance from her uncle because it would have been unseemly for her to have taken a seat near him, and she would have preferred to have taken a seat on the floor to show her subservience. Though she does eventually make some admissions about the fact that Babamukuru is, after all, only human, she never fully takes him from that exalted position.

Babamukuru

Tambu's uncle, brother of Tambu's father and patriarch of the family, called other names by other family members but referred to as Babamukuru by Tambu. Babamukuru is the chief benefactor of the family. He provides food for the Christmas holidays and other family events, to the extent that he sends money ahead of his arrival from England so that Tambu's family can purchase a goat for the homecoming party. In exchange, Babamukuru gets the full thanks, praise and adoration of his family. That goes to the extent that Tambu has been raised to believe that Babamukuru is not human but is some higher being; on some level she believes this to be so. Once, when she needs to



talk to him about something, she realizes that it simply cannot be done because she can't bring herself to address him.

When Babamukuru issues instruction, it's typically carried out without question. There are exceptions. For example, he refuses to have alcohol be part of their gatherings and that prompts many of the young men to simply sneak around with it. When Jeremiah is ordered to send Takesure and Lucia home, Babamukuru demands to know why it wasn't carried out.

Babamukuru does many good deeds. For example, he highly disapproves of Tambu's maternal aunt, Lucia, but helps her get a job. It's not clear whether he sees the potential in the young woman or if he merely wants her praise, but he does help. There are also evidences of a more human side to his nature. Later, when Lucia tells him that he's being too hard on Tambu and that he had acted in a high-handed manner with regard to the wedding for Tambu's parents, she adds that she's telling him these things because she doesn't want to be tempted later to say them behind his back. Babamukuru is amused, says that she has acted rather like a man, and it seems that he might have actually listened to her words.

When Nyasha is ill, Babamukuru first grabs onto the diagnosis that indicates she is seeking attention and needs only to have a firm hand. He wants to control this situation as he does all others. In the end, there is little doubt of his concern for his daughter, just as he evidently loves his wife and is working to adapt to her.

Nyasha

Tambu's cousin and the daughter of Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru. Nyasha spends five years in England during her formative years and the return to Africa is a culture shock from which the girl never entirely recovers. She and Tambu are great friends as children but have grown far apart by the time of her return to Africa. When Tambu goes to live with Nyasha, there is not an instant connection, but it's not in Nyasha's nature to ignore another young girl in the household; though it takes some time, they become friends again. The two girls balance each other. Nyasha is constantly moving and this opens Tambu's eyes to a world outside that which has been prescribed for her. Tambu's calm but passionate approach to life with her dedication to her heritage has a stabilizing effect on Nyasha. The bond is so strong that Nyasha's tenuous hold on reality and balance slips when Tambu makes plans to attend Sacred Heart. She finds herself battling bulimia in a battle for her life.

Jeremiah

Tambu's father. While he apparently works hard at his farm, he also relies heavily on his brother for support. When the brother goes away to school in England, Tambu's father is worried because that support will no longer be available for the five years of study. He "consoles himself" with the notion that Babamukuru will be more affluent upon his return, therefore able to lend more support. Jeremiah tells Tambu that her plan to grow



maize to pay for school fees will fail and offers no support but does provide the seeds at her mother's urging. When Tambu is offered the opportunity to study at Sacred Heart, Jeremiah wavers, obviously waiting to see what decision Babamukuru has made, then agrees and thanks him profusely for his kindness and generosity. While Jeremiah give all the appearances of an obedient subservient younger brother when Babamukuru is around, he does what he pleases behind his brother's back. For example, he wants to take his wife to a witchdoctor when she falls into a deep depression and says that it won't matter that Babamukuru doesn't approve if no one tells. When Tambu threatens to tell, Jeremiah is willing to find some alternative.

Ma'Shingayi

Tambu's mother. She is weak in some ways but strong in others. She tells Tambu that a woman's place is to carry her burdens, and those burdens include the fact that she is a woman, therefore subservient to men. She does stand up for Tambu when the girl wants to raise maize to pay for her school fees. Though her mother says that she believes Tambu's enterprise will fail, she says that the girl should have the opportunity. Ma'Shingayi lays her son's death at Babamukuru's feet and says that he has now separated Ma'Shingayi from her daughter, Tambu. She seems to be a good mother to Tambu because the girl is thoughtful, dedicated and hardworking.

Nhamo

Tambu's brother. Nhamo attends school at a mission some twenty miles from his home. The plan was for Nhamo to attend school, distinguish himself academically and enter a good profession. With the money he will earn, the family will be lifted from the squalor in which they live. He dies in 1968, when Tambu is thirteen years old.

Netsai

Tambu's younger sister. On those occasions when the men leave the fields headed for home while the women continue to work, Netsai works as fast as she can to avoid her mother's wrath. Tambu says that Netsai would easily have outworked Tambu, except for Tambu's determination that her younger sister not do so. Tambu notes that Nhamo sends Netsai to fetch his luggage on his rare visits home, and that Netsai doesn't mind running the errand and only asks Tambu for help if there is too much to carry. Sometimes, she even straps their youngest sister, Rambanai, to her back to run the errand.

Maiguru

Tambu's aunt and wife of Babamukuru. Maiguru is a quiet, unassuming woman, who takes on the duties of her husband's families without voicing complaints and apparently without question until one day when she simply has enough. Maiguru has a Master's



Degree, the equivalent of her husband's education. She works everyday but once tells Tambu that she doesn't earn any money, seeming to indicate that Babamukuru gets all her earnings. One day, she tells her husband that he seems to assume that she's happy when she says nothing, so she wants him to know that she's not happy helping to support his family and paying for things she doesn't believe necessary, such as an elaborate wedding for Tambu's parents. After Tambu leaves for Sacred Heart, Nyasha's letters are filled with details of how Babamukuru is learning to cope with this new, assertive aspect of his wife.

Anna

The woman hired by Babamukuru's family, who does the domestic chores for the household. When Nhamo dies, Anna stays several days with Tambu's family, and it's there that Anna and Tambu come to know each other. Tambu says that Anna chatters incessantly and when Tambu is not yet certain of the living arrangements at her uncle's house, Tambu believes she would be happy sharing a room with Anna, though the woman's chatter could disrupt her studies. Anna greets Tambu enthusiastically but as soon as Tambu's place in the household is sealed, including that she's to share a bedroom with Nyasha, Anna withdraws. Tambu says that she isn't certain she's ready to be someone Anna would kneel to but is cast into that role.

Nyari

Tambu's best friend from day school. It's Nyari who tells Tambu that Nhamo has been bringing mealies for the girls to roast after school, alerting Tambu to the fact that it's Nhamo who is stealing the mealies she'd grown and that were to pay her own school fees.

Mr. Matimba

The Sunday school teacher who interrupts the fight between Tambu and Nhamo after Tambu discovers that Nhamo has been stealing the mealies from her field.



Objects/Places

Sigaukes

The family name of Tambu's family.

The Nyamarira River

The river that runs near Tambu's childhood home, where she and the other children play, where everyone bathed and where the women did the laundry.

Truckshop

The term used to denote any store, including those that sold bread, tea, sugar, jam, salt, cooking oil, matches, candles, paraffin and soap as well as Fanta, Coca-Cola and a vanilla perfume.

Nhodo

A game in which a child throws a stone into the air, picks up other stones on the ground and catches the first stone before it reaches the ground.

Chipinge

Where Tambu's ancestors lived. Tambu hears the stories of the family and their lives in Chipinge from her grandmother, who also taught her about gardening and that a strong work ethic is a desirable trait.

Umtali

Rhodesia's third largest city and where Tambu goes to sell her mealies trying to earn enough money to pay for school.

Mahewu

A type of drink made of mash that is almost at the point of fermenting. The beverage is served at Babamukuru's homecoming because he abstains from all alcohol consumption.



Shona

The language of Tambu's people.

The Mission School

Where Babamukuru is headmaster and where first Nhamo and then Tambu attend.

Sacred Heart

The school run by the Catholics where Tambu is invited to attend.



Themes

Coming of Age

Tambu is a young child at the beginning of the story, but she is very mature because of the requirements of her situation. From a very young age, she takes on responsibilities for her sisters, does an extensive amount of labor and worries about her family, especially her mother. The fact that she is responsible isn't unique to Tambu because her younger sister takes responsibility for caring for a younger sister while Tambu and their parents are in the fields working. While that's true, Tambu seems to go beyond that level, doing chores that would save time for her mother in an effort to lessen her mother's burden. Tambu is still just a child when she realizes that she's going to have to find a way to get back in school on her own because her father isn't going to help her make it happen. When she comes to that realization, she clears a field, plants maize and plans to sell it in order to earn enough money to pay her school fees. It's a statement of her level of maturity that she makes this long-term investment of time and energy to achieve that goal rather than simply begging someone to make it happen for her.

The most significant coming of age point comes when Tambu is ready to return to Sacred Heart after Nyasha's breakdown. Tambu's mother says that Nyasha's problem is a direct result of her contact with the English and that Tambu must find a way to protect herself from the same fate. Tambu believes herself stronger than Nyasha and that she "banished the suspicions." She says that she loved things about Sacred Heart such as the debates and the books and the games. She says that there eventually comes a change when "something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and to refuse to be brainwashed." The full coming of age portion of the story happens actually after the final chapter. As Tambu says, when she is finally past the journey and is ready to tell her story.

Determination

There's no doubt that Tambu is a determined girl. The most obvious example is her determination to go to school. She likes school and excels but also seems to understand that school is important to a successful life rather than settling for a life of poverty, as is the norm for her people. Of course, it could have been merely that her brother was being sent to school while Tambu was obliged to remain at home. For whatever reason, Tambu becomes determined to find a way to return to her education. She does not beg or demand that her parents find a way to send her; instead, she asks for seed to plant her own maize field, planning to use the proceeds to pay her school fees. Tambu's level of determination is such that she rises before dawn every day, carries water for her family's use, then works in her little field for the first hours before joining her mother or father at their tasks. To fully understand her determination, remember that Tambu first had to clear a field. Though she used an old family garden



plot of about a half acre, the plot was overgrown and required significant work before it could be cultivated. Tambu did all that work on her own, though her father - and even her mother - predicted that she would fail at her endeavors.

As the crop was nearing harvest time, the ears - called mealies - began to disappear. Tambu doesn't express opinions of what is happening to them but it's obvious that it's not an animal raiding her field. She finds out by accident that it's her brother taking the ears, which leads to her conversation with Mr. Matimba and her trip to the city to sell the green ears. Tambu has never been to the city and might have been completely overwhelmed. She is thankful for Mr. Matimba's presence, but she is also determined to sell her ears. She hawks her wares to the best of her ability, though her English is limited and she isn't overly confident. Again, it's determination that carries her through.

That determination continues to be a factor. When she faces the emotional roller-coaster upon arriving at the mission, she continually falls back on her determination to fully succeed at her studies.

Adherence to Custom

Tambu has a strong need to adhere to the customs and traditions of her family and her people, especially when it comes to manners. There are many examples of her efforts to do so and of her low opinions of those who fail on this point. For example, when her family holds a welcome home event for Babamukuru, Tambu is asked to take the water bowl around to the guests. This is an important, but daunting task, because her job is to decide who is the most important guest present, allow him to wash, then take the bowl to the second-most important man and so on. She is immediately torn between the eldest member of the family and Babamukuru, who has just arrived from England with a Master's Degree and is the guest of honor. She admits that she allows her admiration for her uncle to sway her judgment and she chooses him. As she goes on down the line, she is sometimes teased about her lack of family tree knowledge as she gets several wrong. She says that in a more relaxed situation, she would not have made those mistakes. It's obvious that she places great weight on the duty and on the tradition of rank among the men.

She is often upset with her cousin Nyasha's lack of manners on this point. Tambu, Nyasha, Maiguru and Babamukuru visit Tambu's mother at Christmas. The woman is in the bedroom on a reed mat, claiming illness as the birth of a child approaches. Babamukuru sits on the side of the bed and Maiguru takes a seat on the floor. Tambu's mother insists that Tambu bring a chair for Maiguru, but Maiguru says that she doesn't need it, though Tambu obeys her mother and provides the chair. Tambu says there's an embarrassed silence as everyone seems to look at the empty chair and then Nyasha sits in it. Nyasha, a teenager, has openly dishonored her elders by being seated on the chair, and Tambu is appalled at her cousin's action. Then her mother's sister, Lucia, inserts herself into the conversation by beginning formal greetings to each of the family members. The greetings were correct, but Tambu says the timing was improper because Lucia should have at least waited until the conversation had turned to queries



about each other's health before interrupting. At another time, Tambu is told to sit on a chair in her uncle's living room and she can't decide which would be most proper but finally eliminates all those near her uncle because she would not have the temerity to dishonor him by sitting next to him.

While these may all seem relatively insignificant, the customs are important to Tambu. She sees the adherence to the traditions of her people as more than merely good manners and is willing to do whatever is necessary to be at peace with herself, having not broken with tradition.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in first person, largely limited to Tambu's point of view. The limited view is not really a hindrance in this case because the story is actually about Tambu's life, observations and thoughts. There seem to be some minor exceptions. For example, she talks of Lucia's relationship with her father, saying that her father had not had sex with Lucia until after Lucia was pregnant and that Lucia had declared that her unborn child had been fathered by Jeremiah because she knew her lover, Takesure, couldn't afford to support the two wives he already had, let alone another. There's really no way that Tambu could have known these things, but she presents them as fact, not speculation on her part.

The fact that she decides what to write about gives the story a somewhat disjointed feel in some sections. For example, she talks of Nhamo's reluctance to return to the homestead after he had gone away to school. She says that he seldom returned, even for school holidays and that he was lazy and did few chores when he did come home. However, she doesn't say anything about her usual practice in this regard. It's noted that she does go back at least sometimes because she mentions that her mother gave her rags for her menstrual cycle along with instructions about that event. There is also a description of Christmas spent at the homestead, but not of any visits by Tambu on her own. There's no indication how often she goes home, whether she takes the bus (which Nhamo had hated) or what her relationship and duties were once she arrived.

Setting

The story is set in African in a region known as Umtali in the 1960s and 1970s. The region exists and the extensive descriptions seem believable, adding credence to the story overall. Readers who do not have extensive knowledge of African culture will likely find some aspects of the descriptions interesting, such as living conditions and relationships. The customs are complex and may be confusing to some readers. For example, Tambu is expected to provide a bowl of water for hand washing before a particular meal. She is to give the honor first to the man who holds the rank at the top of their clan but is torn between her uncle - who she considers guest of honor - and the eldest member there. She admits that she makes several mistakes of relationship during her task and is flustered by those. Tambu is adamant about following most customs - such as the fact that she shouldn't sit too near her uncle. All aspects of the life combine to create a life that could very well have existed in Africa during the time described. The places, people and events seem real enough that it's easy for a reader to forget that this story is a novel rather than a biography.



Language and Meaning

The book is written in an easy-to-read format. In general, the story flows in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions. For example, in chapter one, Tambu talks at length about the November day Nhamo is scheduled to arrive home from school. The chapter ends with Nhamo still not at home and with Tambu admitting that she doesn't like her brother. The next chapter begins with her family's attitudes about education and flashes back to their early school days. The time line may become somewhat confusing at this point and readers must pay attention in order to keep track of the chronology of events.

The book is written almost as if it were a diary in a conversational tone. There is one point at which the writer seems almost to be talking to someone in particular. At the beginning of chapter two, Tambu says that she has asked many people what happened when her uncle left the country because she was only five and doesn't fully remember. She says that she asked "Maigru and Babamukuru, my father, my mother, Nyasha and Chido," but she doesn't identify those people and only a few have been identified up to this point. Over the course of the coming chapters, the names again arise, but it's left to the reader to determine relationships and identifications. Tambu's younger sister calls her "Tambur." Additionally, Tambu doesn't always use names and sometimes deviates from a person's name. For example, she continually refers to her parents as simply "my mother" and "my father." Another example is the references to Tambu's paternal uncle. When her father is speaking of him, he is called Mukoma, but when Tamur is talking about him, she calls him Babamukuru. These two names seem to refer to the same person and the change is not explained. For the sake of continuity, Tambu's uncle is referred to as Babamukuru throughout the guide and other characters are referred to by a single name rather than by the variations used by other characters.

The book was not originally written in English and has been translated. While the translation is easy to read, there are some spelling differences between American English and the British English used in the translation. For example, the American word for "labor" as used in this book is "labour." The differences are not significant and most readers will not be distracted by the discrepancies.

Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters of fairly even length. Chapters are merely numbered and are generally divided at points of change within a particular event. For example, Chapter Five begins in the middle of an interaction between Tambu and Nyasha soon after Tambu's arrival at the mission school. The situation is strained, and Maiguru is talking to the girls as Chapter Four ends. She is gone and the girls are alone as Chapter Five begins. Chapter Nine ends and Chapter Ten begins with Tambu expressing her thoughts about attending Scared Heart. At the end of Chapter Nine, the cousins talk about the coming event until they fall asleep, and at the beginning of the following chapter Tambu offers up her thoughts upon waking the following morning. The

method seems designed to keep the reader involved and willing to read on into the following chapter, and it is effective on this point.

The book obviously has an European influence with the spelling of many words reflecting that, such as aeroplane and labour. They are not so overwhelming as to be a problem to most readers, though some may find the differences notable.



Quotes

"He did not like traveling by bus because, he said, it was too slow. Moreover, the women smelt of unhealthy reproductive odours, the children were inclined to relieve their upset bowels on the floor, and the men gave off strong aromas of productive labour. He did not like sharing the vehicle with various kinds of produce in suspicious stages of freshness, with frightened hens, with the occasional rich-smelling goat." - Tambu on her brother's opinion of the public bus, Chapter One, Page 1.

"In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it, which I could not help but do often since the children were always talking about their age. Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother but my father, my mother - in fact everybody." Chapter One, Page 12

"Nhamo was one of the youngest pupils in his class. Perhaps other parents, believing that we really were a retarded lot, thought it best to let their children's abilities mature a little before exposing them to the rigours of formal education." Chapter Two, Page 13

"'It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl.' It was out. 'That's what Baba said, remember?' I was no longer listening. My concern for my brother died an unobtrusive death." Chapter Two, Page 21

"He would threaten to beat me but, preferring to be lazy, never bothered to catch me when I ran. I was fortunate that my father was so obviously impossible, otherwise I would have been confused. Under the circumstances the situation was clear: there was no way of pleasing my father, nor was there any reason to. Relieved, I set about pleasing myself." Chapter Two, Page 34

"You never thought about Babamukuru as being handsome or ugly, but he was completely dignified. He didn't need to be bold any more because he had made himself plenty of power. Plenty of power. Plenty of money. A lot of education. Plenty of everything." Chapter Three, Page 50

"Now, having seen it for myself because of my Babamukuru's kindness, I too could think of planting things for merrier reasons than the chore of keeping breath in the body." - Tambu upon seeing her first canna lily, Chapter Four, Page 64

"The food looked interesting, which made me suspicious of it since I knew that food was



not meant to be interesting by filling. Besides the rice, there was something that might have been potato: I could not be sure since it was smothered in a thick, white, tasteless gravy. Although I gallantly placed small portions of in it my mouth, it refused to go down in large quantities." Chapter Five, Page 83

"It was a sacrifice that made us grateful to them, a sacrifice that made them superior not only to us but to those other Whites as well who were here for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds. They missionaries' self-denial and brotherly love did not go unrewarded. 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." Chapter Six, Page 105

"There were packets of powdered milk, bottles of cooking oil and orange juice and peanut butter, tins of jam, cans of paraffin, soap and detergent. In fact, there was everything we needed for the two weeks' stay and more besides, because Babamukuru always provided not only the Christmas meal but Christmas itself for as many of the clan that gathered for as long as they gathered. We did not have Father Christmas but we had Babamukuru. Chapter Seven, Page 124

"To me the question of that wedding was a serious one, so serious that even my body reacted in a very alarming way. Whenever I thought about it, whenever images of my mother immaculate in virginal white satin or (horror of horrors) myself as the sweet, simpering maid fluttered through my mind, I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin, my chest contracted to a breathless tension and even my bowels threatened to let me know their opinion." Chapter Eight, Page 151

"They made us write a test, which we though was unfair because we had not been warned and had not prepared. Mr. Sanyati said we should not worry because it was general knowledge and general ability, but this only confused us more. General knowledge was all right, but general ability was a subject we had not taken." Chapter Nine, Page 180

"I was and would remain Tambudzai, the daughter. Babamukuru was still and would always be the closest thing a human could get to God. So although I knew I had to talk to him, I had no idea how that could be done." Chapter Ten, Page 203

"We felt better - help was at hand. But the psychiatrist said that Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described. She was making a scene. We should take her home and be firm with her." Chapter Ten, Page 206

Topics for Discussion

Describe Tambu's relationship with her mother, her father, her brother, her sisters, her uncle and her cousin Nyasha. Describe the role of Tambu's grandmother in shaping Tambu's life. Who played the bigger roles? How?

How is it that Tambu is being held out of school while Nhamo is still attending? What does Tambu do to rectify the situation? What do her parents do? How is it that Tambu is eventually taken to the mission school? Do you believe her brother would have fulfilled his duty toward the family as an adult? Why or why not?

How does Tambu find out what's happening to her maize crop? What happens as a result of the discovery?

What is Tambu's attitude toward her uncle, Babamukuru? Why does she believe her own educational endeavors are less than his? Was she correct?

What is the source of the problems between Nyasha and her father? How does Tambu come to be part of that situation? What role does she play? What is the result?

What role does Babamukuru play in Tambu's family? What is the ultimate goal of Tambu's education. What does Babamukuru receive from the family for each of his generous acts? What does he seem to expect? What is Tambu's father's attitude about Babamukuru?

What is Tambu's mother's attitude about having her children go away to school? What happens to her mother when Tambu is accepted at Sacred Heart? Who else objects to her plan to go to Sacred Heart? Why does she finally go anyway?