

STUDY GUIDE:

Child of Dandelions

by Shenaaz Nanji

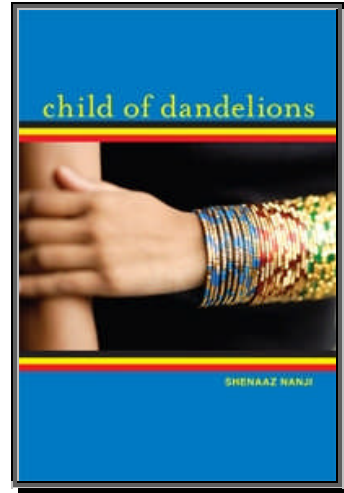


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Context

Child of Dandelions sheds light on an often forgotten dark period in world history through the experiences of its teen protagonist, Sabine, as she struggles to deal with her world falling apart.

The clash of cultures that took place in Uganda between the ethnic Africans and East Indians (known as Asians) during the reign of the military dictator, Idi Amin, is attributed to poverty, prejudice, and intolerance. The **Author's Note** at the end of the novel highlights issues of class and race that were prevalent when the British Colonials ruled Uganda. Most Indians were educated and affluent and belonged to the merchant class, while most Africans were poor and uneducated and worked as labourers. The military regime of Idi Amin exploited this factor to heighten the racial tensions between the communities. A parallel could be drawn between the Indians of Uganda and the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe, both of whom were treated as “undesirable.”

As the story progresses, Sabine realizes that, by taking a colonial attitude of superiority over the ethnic Africans, many Indians – including her family and even herself – have also been guilty of perpetuating racial and economic inequity.

The context of the novel is best described by the following reviews.

The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books:

“This is an absorbing story with historical detail and human dynamics. It's also a subject not often treated in literature for youth but one that resonates with issues closer to home, making this an important addition to young readers' understanding of twentieth-century history.” Volume 61, Number 8

Booklist

“Sabine is 15 years old in the summer of 1972, when Ugandan president Idi Amin issues his proclamation that all “foreign Indians” must leave the country within 90 days. Unlike many of the Indians in their Kampala community, Sabine was born in Uganda, and although she is of Indian ancestry, she feels as much a Ugandan as her best friend, Zena, an “ethnic African.” As the countdown continues, though, the terrifying street violence reaches into Sabine’s home, and she realizes that despite her family’s Ugandan citizenship, they aren’t immune from the president’s decree. Nanji, who grew up in East Africa, exposes a period of shocking, rarely viewed political history in this vivid story that makes the horrors feel both personal and universal. Sabine’s close, realistic friendship with Zena, who admires “Dada Amin,” mirrors societal warfare over issues of class, race, and nationhood. The story’s authentic emotions and relationships balance the detailed cultural and historical explanations and combine in a gripping story of a remarkable teen who helps her family face impossible loss.”

— *Gillian Engberg*

Herizons Magazine

Child of Dandelions is a lovely story written with an honesty one rarely sees, with sounds one hardly hears and with scents one seldom inhales - it smells like a thousand roses, all at once, and roars like a lion, reminding us that writing is meant to stretch our jaws wide enough and long enough that we can inhale the scent of its blood - the blood of the written word.” —*Rozena Maart, Spring 2009*

For other reviews see the author’s website at <http://www.snanji.com>

About the Author

Shenaaz Nanji was born on the ancient island of Mombasa, one of the oldest settlements on the East African coast, and grew up amid a fusion of cultures: Bantu-Swahili, Arabic, colonial British, and East Indian. Every year, she visited her grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins in Uganda until Idi Amin turned them into refugees. She moved to the United States and lived in upstate New York before moving to Canada, where she now lives with her family. She holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College and has written several books for children.

Child of Dandelions was a finalist for a **Governor General’s Literary Award** in 2008 and was selected as one of 2009’s **Notable Books for a Global Society** by the International Reading Association.

“This is a gripping drama about a fascinating fragment of time in history – the expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972. Fifteen-year-old Sabine poignantly straddles two worlds – those of the landed Indian gentry and of the native Ugandans amid wrenching turmoil. Quietly and crisply written, all of Nanji’s characters are beautifully realized, morally nuanced and compellingly crafted.”

Canada Council for the Arts

“Several committee members praised Child of Dandelions for teaching us about an often-forgotten aspect of the world’s history and expanding readers’ perspectives on the world. The protagonist is complex, and our committee was quite impressed with how her innocence and trust are challenged by the events around her. Many of us considered this title to be a page turner, and we found it hard to put the book down.”

Barbara A. Ward, N.B.G.S. Chair

For other awards see the author’s website at <http://www.snanji.com>

Key Facts

TITLE · Child of Dandelions

GENRE & TYPE · Young Adult; Coming-of-age; Bildungsroman; Historical Fiction

SETTING TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · Uganda, 1970s

DATE OF PUBLICATION · 2008

In CANADA By Second Story Press & In the USA By Boyds Mills Press

NARRATOR · Third-person narrative mode

PROTAGONIST · Sabine

CLIMAX · Sabine's ride to Entebbe Airport in "Searched to the Skin"

ANTAGONIST · Idi Amin and his soldiers including One Eleven and Baobab

FALLING ACTION · Sabine and Munchkin leave Uganda in "Going, Going, Going"

TENSE · Past tense

tone · The story encompasses emotions such as fear, sadness, confusion, anger, betrayal and loss, and ends with hope and optimism.

KEY THEMES · Issues of Race, Class, and Gender; Identity; Friendship and Loyalty; Fate and Fortune; Law and Order

SYMBOLS · Dandelions; Tree of Life Makonde sculpture

Plot Overview

Child of Dandelions unfolds from the perspective of Sabine, a teenager caught amid the political turmoil of 1970s Uganda. Her journey of self-discovery, and growth from innocence to experience, is reminiscent of characters such as Anne Frank in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Frances Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

The story begins when the military dictator of Uganda, Idi Amin, has a dream in which God wants all “foreign Indians” to be weeded out and expelled from the country, and then extends through the ensuing countdown period of 90 days (during which time the Indians must leave).

Initially, this new expulsion law seems fair and just to Sabine. She and her family are exempt from it – they are Indians who have lived in Uganda for three generations and are Ugandan citizens. The law is targeted at British Indians – such as Lalita – who hold British passports yet continue to do business in Uganda. However, as the countdown progresses, the soldiers harass anyone with brown skin, regardless of their citizenship.

The country’s conflict is mirrored in Sabine’s friendship with Zena. Sabine is East Indian while Zena is ethnic African. Sabine’s life of privilege is starkly juxtaposed with Zena’s lower-class status. Soon, Sabine’s favourite uncle disappears, and her best friend, Zena, abandons her. Then, when soldiers raid Sabine’s house, her parents are forced to flee, leaving Sabine and her brother, Munchkin, behind with their grandfather, Bapa, and their neighbour, Lalita. Though Sabine initially agrees with her father, that they are Uganda citizens and thus immune from the expulsion order, she begins to realize that her mother is right, that their brown skin makes them undesirable and unwanted.

Sabine helps reunite her family, and they are forced to leave the country just before the countdown of 90 days expires. Idi Amin’s dream uproots Sabine from her home, but she resolves to begin a new life in Canada.

Character List

Sabine: She is the fifteen-year-old protagonist, and the expulsion of East Indians from Uganda is viewed through her eyes. She lives a protected and privileged life in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, but spends her school holidays at her Bapa's farm. Here, she meets her African friends, Zena and her brother, Ssekore, both of whom work on the farm. Sabine is bright, stubborn, and caring, but she is also naïve. She recognizes that she is often fearful like her mother, but she tries to emulate her brave father and grandfather. She loves to dance, in this way expressing her feelings of fear, wonder, sadness, and hope. She is very close to her Uncle Lollipop and is devastated when he suddenly disappears. As she matures, she realizes that her family and community are as prejudiced as the soldiers. Initially, she tries to appease both her father and her mother, who have opposing views. Later, she realizes that she can draw upon the best characteristics of both parents to forge her own individual identity. When Sabine leaves Uganda, at the end of the 90-day countdown, we see her as sad but hopeful about her future and as resilient as a dandelion.

Munchkin: He is Sabine's younger brother, who has Down syndrome. His given name is Minaz, but Sabine affectionately calls him Munchkin. His favourite toy is his stuffed monkey, Milo. Due to his disability, Papa makes Sabine his "brave boy" and decides that she will inherit their family wealth.

Papa: Sabine's father is a rich, proud, industrious businessman, who works long hours. Sabine observes that he comes home late and is often weary. As the story progresses, readers learn that he runs a loan-shark business that charges high interest rates to its clients, who are poor African farmers who cannot get bank loans.

Mama: Sabine's mother is portrayed as fearful and anxious. She was about Sabine's age when her father and brothers were brutally killed by Hindus for being Muslims during the partition of Pakistan and India. The only other survivor in Mama's family was her

younger brother, Zulfiqar (also known as Zully or Uncle Lollipop), whom she raised and to whom she is very close. Like Sabine, Mama is heartbroken when Uncle disappears.

Uncle Lollipop: He is Sabine's favourite uncle as well as Mama's younger brother, Zully. He is a Safari race-car driver, who loves cars and drives a flashy red sports car that attracts trouble. When he goes missing, Sabine makes it her mission to find him. He can be viewed as a foil to Captain Asafa.

Bapa: Sabine's grandfather is also known as Simba or Lion. Being a farmer, Bapa uses farming metaphors to inspire hope in Sabine. He emigrated from India as a young boy to help build the Kenya-Uganda railway for the British colonials and now considers Uganda his home. As the terror by the soldiers mounts, many Indians begin to flee the country, but Bapa refuses to leave. He loves the land, and, unlike other Indians, he has completely assimilated with the African community. He is secretly married to Captain Asafa's sister, Halima, an African.

Lalita: Sabine's neighbour is owner of a teahouse in Little India. Sabine calls her "Queen Lalita." Lalita is always well dressed and very shrewd, often overcharging her customers. She is prejudiced and regards Africans as lazy and inferior. She frightens Mama by making thoughtless comments and boasts that she is glad she is British – she is safe and can go to Britain anytime. However, the British government enforces a quota to restrict the number of Indians entering Britain – even those who have British passports. At first, Sabine is annoyed by Lalita, but she later appreciates Lalita's help and support.

Zena: Zena is short for Zenabu. She is an ethnic African and Sabine's best friend. Both girls enjoy dancing and biking in Kampala, and they also meet every school holiday at Bapa's farm. The racial and class tensions in Uganda are mirrored in their friendship which falls apart when Zena accuses Sabine's father of being a loan shark. In the final scene, the girls reunite and share apologies and tears.

Ssekore: Sabine has a secret crush on Zena's older brother. He works on Bapa's farm during school holidays.

Captain Asafa: He is Zena and Ssekore's uncle, who cared for them after their mother died and their father abandoned them. Initially, Sabine is suspicious of the Captain, but she later discovers – to her surprise – that he has used his influence to protect her family. He can be viewed as a foil to Uncle Lollipop.

Aunty Halima: She is Captain Asafa's sister and the aunt of Zena and Ssekore. She works as a manager on Bapa's farm, is secretly married to Bapa, and lives discreetly with him.

Katana: The one-eyed African servant of Sabine's family, he has worked for them for many years – since Sabine was a baby. He is of the Langi tribe and is a target of the military regime for supporting the ex-president, Obote, who is also a Langi. Katana is very fond of Sabine and has named his own daughter after her. In fact, he is more of a companion to Sabine than a servant. He gives her a magic chicken feather to protect her from the soldiers. His belief in magic makes him a comedic and loveable character. He accompanies Sabine to meet the Bodyfinders and is beaten up by the soldiers during the raid at Sabine's house, but his loyalty for Sabine and her family never falters.

Bodyfinders: This pair of detectives has hastily set up a business to find the rising number of missing people in Uganda. The Bodyfinders are aware that most of the missing people have been killed by soldiers. Sabine hires them to search for her uncle.

Mzee: He is Sabine's family's old and loyal driver, who is forced to give up Papa's Mercedes to the soldiers. Concerned about Sabine, he comes to look for her when she is with the detectives at the meat warehouse.

The Soldiers: The brutality of the soldiers is epitomized by Butabika (or One-Eleven) – identified by the emblem of the gazelle on his sleeve and by three vertical scars on his face, which together resemble the number one hundred and eleven. One-Eleven kills the goat in the first scene and refuses to let Sabine leave the country in the last scene. Another soldier, whom Sabine calls Baobab, is responsible for the raid at Sabine's house and for ripping Munchkin's *kipande* because he is angry that Sabine will not respond to his sexual advances.

Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis

Day One: The Dream

Summary: The story opens with two best friends, Sabine and Zenabu (Zena), on Allidina Visram Street in Kampala, Uganda. The friends are caught amid a parade of cheering Africans chanting “Indian, go home.” Readers learn that Sabine is East Indian while her friend Zena is African. Zena tries to comfort Sabine and convince her that she is not affected since she is a Ugandan citizen, but a demonstrator spits on Sabine and yells at her to go back to India. Later, at home, Sabine and her family learn that President Idi Amin, head of the military regime, has had a dream in which God directs him to expel all foreign Indians from Uganda within 90 days.

Analysis: In the opening chapter, readers witness the racial tensions in Ugandan society. The spitting incident, followed by rioting – during which people throw stones, break into Indian shops, and steal what they can while the police stand idly by – foreshadows the racial trouble that will soon unfold. When Sabine returns home, we are introduced to her family: Papa, Mama, and Sabine’s brother, Munchkin. The contrast between Papa and Mama is apparent; Papa laughs at the new expulsion law passed by President Idi Amin, while Mama’s brown eyes grow wide with fear. The differences in their characters and attitudes are illustrated throughout the story.

As Sabine and her family listen to the radio, two themes are introduced. One theme is the social class hierarchy in Uganda in the 1970s. Papa demonstrates the superior attitude of Indians when he asserts, “We may be a handful of golden raisins among eleven million, but we control Uganda’s economy. You can’t bite the hand that feeds you.” This statement, which can be viewed as hubristic, introduces the controversial possibility that the Indians may be complicit in their own tragic downfall.

The second theme that permeates the novel is the comparison of Indians to weeds or dandelions. The radio declares that ethnic Indians will be “weeded” out of Uganda. This garden and weed imagery is similar to that of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. In Act I scene iv, Marcellus delivers one of the play’s famous lines: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The metaphor of a rotten garden or state symbolizes the corruption and greed that led Macbeth to inherit the position of King of Denmark. In drawing upon this imagery, Nanji seems to imply that Uganda, like Denmark, is falling prey to the evil and avarice of its rulers.

Day 8: The Goat; Zenabu; Home

Summary: Sabine continues with her routine while the countdown is announced frequently on the radio. Every Sunday, she meets with Zena. Uncle Lollipop drives her to Zena’s place in his flashy red sports car. However, their drive comes to a stop when a stray goat holds up traffic in the middle of the road. A soldier, Butabika, with scars on his cheek in the shape of the number one hundred and eleven, kills the goat. When an impatient African taxi driver behind Uncle’s car honks loudly, the soldier turns furious. He assumes that it is Uncle, in the flashy red sports car, who has dared to honk at him, and roughs him up. Sabine gathers up courage and informs the soldier that Uncle is innocent, and he is let off. As Uncle and Sabine speed off in the car, they hear a gunshot.

Uncle Lollipop drops Sabine off at Zena’s flat, where she and her brother, Ssekore, live with their Uncle Asafa. Sabine describes her encounter with Butabika to Zena, who comforts her. The girls trade dresses. Zena wears the Indian *lengha* and Sabine wears the traditional African *gomesi*. Then they dance, but Sabine’s steps express the fear she feels from her experience with the soldier. Zena is upset that Sabine has strayed from their choreographed dance moves, but Ssekore, who has been watching, praises Sabine’s moves. As Sabine leaves Zena’s flat, she bumps into Captain Asafa and is chilled to see that his military shirt has the same insignia as One-Eleven, the soldier that shot the goat and roughed up Uncle.

Sabine and Uncle Lollipop make a pact not to tell worrisome Mama about the soldier and the goat incident. Mama chastises Sabine for not playing with her neighbourhood Indian friends. Sabine says that “mixing her African and Indian friends was like mixing oil with water.” At night, the bloody goat invades Sabine’s dreams.

Analysis: The juxtaposition of Sabine’s life of privilege with the impoverished lives of Africans brings the contrast between the two cultures into focus. As Uncle Lollipop drives from Sabine’s house towards Zena’s flat, the streetscape changes dramatically. The “red-roofed villas” and lush frangipani trees fade away and are replaced by the tin shanties of the slums. Indian families, including Sabine’s, have taken over the homes of the *mzungus*, the whites. Sabine’s ostentatious home with its vast open foyer, marble floor, and “Paradise” garden is in sharp contrast with Zena’s simple flat. It should also be noted that when Sabine visits Zena, she strips off her white socks and replaces her new black shiny shoes with African sandals.

The subsequent scene with the goat introduces the readers to the violence of the soldiers. Sabine stands up to the soldier in an attempt to be her father’s “brave boy.” She struggles with a culture that defines males as strong and resilient and females as soft and yielding. At first glance, Sabine’s mother and father fit these stereotypical gender roles; however, readers learn that when Sabine’s mother was growing up she witnessed the brutal murders of her father and brothers. This helps readers sympathize with Mama’s anxieties and suggests that she may be stronger than Sabine realizes.

When Sabine and Uncle drive away, it is unclear if the soldiers shot in the air or if they shot the taxi driver.

Is this a deliberate omission by Nanji?

What effect does this omission have?

The friendship between Sabine and Zena symbolizes a bridge between the two races, and the exchange of dresses symbolizes harmony between the two cultures. However, Sabine's improvised dance of fear, arising from the goat incident, breaks this harmony. Nanji foreshadows tension between the friends. When Sabine expresses her hatred for soldiers, Zena is quick to disagree and defends her Uncle, Captain Asafa, as a good soldier and calls Idi Amin her hero. Suspicion is also cast on Captain Asafa, who is linked to One-Eleven by the insignia on their clothing.

Day 9: The Feather and Day 12: Lalita

Summary: In the next few chapters, readers meet two more characters who have a big impact on Sabine throughout the story: the family servant, Katana, and her neighbour, Lalita. When Katana wakes Sabine up in the morning with his rooster sounds, his face is covered in white paste to ward off evil. He warns Sabine that the "countdown monster" will eat her and gives her a magic chicken feather that will turn bullets into water. We also learn that Sabine's family helps Katana by paying his school fees.

In the next chapter we meet Queen Lalita, owner of a teahouse in Kampala. Lalita, aware of her good fortune in possessing a British passport, is insensitive to Mama's growing fear at her own family's increasingly precarious situation. Initially, Sabine dislikes Lalita, who also irritates Munchkin by hiding his toy, which causes him to have a tantrum.

Analysis: The use of Katana's feather in the story introduces elements of magic realism. Magic realism is an artistic style in which magic and the supernatural appear in otherwise realistic settings. It is often associated with Latin American authors, including Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Isabel Allende, and with postcolonial literature. The use of magic realism may suggest a critique of society or a desire to escape from difficult circumstances.

Day 12: The Fight; Day 13: Where is Uncle?

Summary: Uncle does not show up for dinner. Mama is worried and fears something is amiss, but Papa dismisses her fears and says they are “body, soul, and by law – one hundred percent Ugandan.” After dinner, Papa takes Sabine into his office and shows her an African artifact: a Makonde sculpture of the “Tree of Life.”

Sabine’s world begins to change. Her teachers and classmates leave Uganda. The remaining teachers, such as Mr. Corky, are harassed and humiliated because they are foreigners. Sabine builds a model car for Uncle and plans to give it to him on his birthday.

Analysis: Nanji gives more insight into Sabine’s family. The Tree of Life Makonde sculpture depicts past and present generations holding and supporting one another. It symbolizes how Sabine’s ancestors struggled and worked hard to settle in Uganda. Readers learn that Bapa was recruited from India by the British Colonials to build the Kenya-Ugandan railway. By having Papa show the Makonde sculpture to Sabine, the author seems to imply that Papa, despite his sense of superiority, has assimilated into the African culture.

Papa’s comments about the Makonde sculpture also raise crucial questions:

Was it wrong for the Indians in Uganda to exhibit the wealth – large mansions, servants, flashy cars, and jewellery – they had accumulated as a result of their hard work and sacrifices?

Should the Indians have remained inconspicuous?

Did this factor bring about the expulsion of Indians from Uganda?

Days 15 – 21: Little India; Day 22: Lalita's Teahouse

Summary: Sabine and Zena visit Little India. In contrast to Sabine's experience of racial discrimination in the opening scene, Zena is now a victim of racial insults. Mr. Singh, a shopkeeper, treats Zena as if she is Sabine's servant. Hurt and angry, Zena defiantly proclaims her joy that Dada Amin will "weed out" foreign Indians like Mr. Singh. At home, Mama and Papa notify the police that Uncle is missing, and the wait for his return continues.

The next time Zena and Sabine meet at Lalita's teahouse, the best friends have their first disagreement. Zena calls Uncle's passport activity *magendo*, corruption. Sabine is hurt and defends Uncle as helping those who are treated unfairly by the government. Their disagreement is interrupted when soldiers break into Lalita's teahouse and falsely accuse Lalita of tearing down the President's photograph since it is not displayed in her teahouse. Sabine saves the day by lying that Lalita gave her the photo to be framed.

Analysis: In this chapter, the rift between Sabine and Zena deepens. In Little India, a beggar's expectations show the pervasiveness of the class hierarchy in Ugandan society: she expects the whites to give her the most money, followed by the Indians; she expects the least from Africans.

At Lalita's teahouse, it is apparent from Zena's side comments that she does not like Lalita. Zena has seen Lalita mistreat the African workers, calling them useless and using derogatory terms to describe them. Later, Sabine protects Lalita from the soldiers when they wrongly accuse her of tearing down the photograph of President Idi Amin. Zena feels betrayed and walks away without saying goodbye to Sabine. The incident gives rise to a question: **Who is wrong? The soldiers? Zena? Lalita? Sabine?**

Days 23 – 28: The Midnight Train; Day 29: In the Park; Day 30: Papa’s Office

Summary: In the next few chapters, Sabine’s world turns upside down. An Africanization policy forces her school to replace all foreign language classes with Swahili and appoint a new African headmaster. Uncle’s car is found abandoned at the airport. Sabine tells Papa about her secret encounter with the soldier, Butabika (One-Eleven), with the hope that it may help the police find Uncle.

Despite the increasing tension with Zena, Captain Asafa drops Zena off at Sabine’s house for their usual Sunday outing. Sabine makes an extra special effort to offer Zena lemonade and her favourite biscuits. The girls bike to a nearby park, where they have yet another altercation. Zena calls Sabine’s father a loan shark and says he takes advantages of Africans just like Uncle Lollipop does. In a highly symbolic moment, Sabine gets angry at Zena for ripping out the dandelions on the field.

At home, Sabine sneaks into her father’s office, goes through his drawers, and finds a biscuit tin filled with money. She confronts her father, who explains that the money is just a decoy for thieves and that he helps poor farm workers who are refused loans from the bank, charging interest only to cover bad debt.

Analysis: As Zena braids Sabine’s hair in the park, we learn more about the Indian culture. Cross-marriage between Indians and Africans is taboo and thus rare.

An extract from a review provides insight into this scene: “...*the girls braid one another's hair - knotting the known and the unknown - and, in the process, learn of the pains of belonging and dispossession. They each love the other until distance - the defence mechanism invented for colonial encounters - is created so that the girl who stays can tell herself that her Indian friend is better off leaving, that she does not belong...*” Rozena Maart, Herizons Magazine, Spring 2009

At the park, the girls have an altercation about Sabine’s father, which is similar to the earlier disagreement about Uncle Lollipop’s passport business. Two interpretations of

Papa's business are provided. Zena refers to him as a loan shark, stealing money from the poor. However, when Sabine confronts Papa, he describes his business as helping others.

Which interpretation do you believe?

This raises a question about the deeper disagreements between ethnic Africans and East Indians in Uganda in the 1970s – to what extent does the clash between the two communities originate from misperception?

Zena's act of uprooting the dandelions is rich in symbolism. This is the second reference to dandelions in the story, and, given the title of the book, it is clear that they have significance. The dandelion represents the resilience and strength of the Indians. But, as a weed, it is also undesirable, just as the Indians were.

Day 36: At Zena's; Day 36: Mengo; Days 37 – 42: The Breakdown

Summary: The next Sunday arrives. Sabine learns that Indians are not the only group being targeted. The Langi tribe, of which Katana is a member, is also being targeted, because it is the tribe of the ex-President, Obote. Sabine goes on her weekly trip to see Zena but is told to leave. Zena's uncle, Captain Asafa, has been promoted in the army so Zena says that they can no longer associate with Indians.

Hurt and angry, Sabine reflects on their past. She had always helped Zena finish her chores on the farm so they could get more time to play. She recalls the friendship tree they had planted and their pact to remain friends forever. She decides to find Ssekore and visits Mengo Hill, a slum area in Kampala, for the first time in her life. She is shocked to witness the poverty and degradation in which the Africans live and leaves without meeting Ssekore.

In the next few days, Sabine waits for Zena to apologize, but she never calls. Terror reigns in the Indian community when Mr. Madhvani, a prominent Indian businessman, is arrested because his daughter-in-law refused to have sexual relations with Idi Amin.

Mama talks about Uncle in the past tense but Sabine refuses to give up and resolves to find him.

Analysis: Readers see a growing awareness in Sabine's character. She feels like an "alien" in the slums of Mengo. The Africans live in shanties, and the barefoot *totos* have protruding bellies due to malnutrition. The stench from the sewage contrasts with Sabine's comfortable life. She begins to understand why Zena and other Africans support Idi Amin, why they anxiously wait for the day the rich Indians will leave, why they want to take over their homes, shops, and farms. She decides she will not look for Ssekore and gives up her crush on him.

Sabine also realizes that she has never interacted with her driver, Mzee. She knows nothing about him or his family and doesn't even know his name. When Mzee tells her that he is working to save money to have water piped to their village home, Sabine is both grateful and ashamed. When she wants to access water, all she needs to do is to turn on the tap.

Sabine recalls a debate about fate and fortune, which had once taken place on Bapa's farm. Zena had been bitter, saying that fate depended on destiny and on who their forefathers were: a "chief's son will be a chief" and a "king's son a king." Ssekore had disagreed and said they could change their destiny.

Are individuals victims of fate and circumstance or are they agents of change?

Which chapters in the novel show Sabine taking charge of her own destiny?

Who is right, and what implications does this have?

Days 43-59: War Days; Day 63: The Detectives; Days 67-72: The Raid

Summary: Radio Uganda spreads propaganda that Tanzania is at war with Uganda and that the Tanzanian government is using Chinese experts against the Ugandan soldiers. Later, the radio announcer states that the British have invaded Uganda. Then Katana comes home from grocery shopping on foot, and trembling with fear, because the soldiers

have stolen Papa's Mercedes at gunpoint. Katana confides in Sabine and tells her that a lot of dead men are being dumped in the lake, but Sabine is in disbelief. She finds an advertisement in the newspaper that guarantees finding missing loved ones and hires a pair of detectives, the Bodyfinders, to find Uncle Lollipop. The Bodyfinders inform her that her uncle has offended President Idi Amin's special police, the State Research Bureau (SRB), and this may be the reason why he has disappeared.

Soldiers break into Sabine's home chanting that they want to kill Papa. Sabine sends her father into hiding. He realizes that he is putting his family in danger and leaves for Nairobi, in neighbouring Kenya.

Analysis: In the next few chapters, Sabine's quick thinking saves her family. When the soldiers break into their house, she devises a plan for her father to escape and covers up evidence that the dinner table was set for four people. Sabine's actions suggest the beginning of her transition from adolescence to adulthood.

At first, readers may wonder why Radio Uganda started rumours. It later becomes clear that the military regime broadcast false reports to divert attention from internal conflicts within the army. Subsequently, we learn from Katana that the soldiers are involved in ethnic cleansing of the Langi tribe, who supported the ex-President Obote.

Sabine overhears that the soldiers have orders from the Captain not to harm them and wonders if they are referring to Captain Asafa. It should be observed that, unlike other servants who turned on their Indian employers, Katana remains dutiful and faithful to Sabine's family.

The detectives hired by Sabine to find her missing uncle are foils for one another: one is short and round, and the other is tall and slim. One is shrewd and wants to make money at all costs, while the other is kind. It is ironic that they are making money and doing well in times of crises. These characters relieve the tension and introduce some comic relief in the story. **Why is this necessary?**

Day 73: Mama; Day 74: Bapa

Summary: After the raid, Sabine's father is stranded at the Ugandan-Kenyan border and cannot enter Kenya. He sends a message through his African friends to tell Mama that he needs *chai*, a codeword for bribe or cash. To Sabine's surprise, Mama fearlessly volunteers to go. While Mama is away, Bapa arrives to take care of Sabine and Munchkin. He tries to inspire hope by using farming metaphors: just as the coffee seeds face drought, floods, and pests, they must face hardships in life, too.

The next day, Mama calls to inform Sabine that she and Papa are safe. Sabine expresses her excitement by dancing. Her dance reflects her inner emotions and acts as a form of catharsis or relief.

Analysis: More progression in Sabine's character is shown. She begins to treat Katana as an equal rather than a servant. She invites him to sit at their dinner table and drink from the same cups they use. A new and equal relationship is forged.

When Mama leaves to help Papa at the border, Sabine realizes that while "Papa was the head of their family...Mama was the heart." She redefines stereotypical male notions of courage and questions what "colour" of courage she holds.

Bapa tries to inspire Sabine with his farming laws, but Sabine believes it is unfair that some crops receive good weather while others experience drought and disease. Once again, this raises questions of fate, fortune, and destiny.

Day 74: The Warehouse; New Rule

Summary: Sabine calls regularly to receive updates from the Bodyfinders. When she receives new information that some prisoners are being held at the meat warehouse, she

insists on going immediately to see if her uncle is there. But the detectives are reluctant to take her; they claim the warehouse is an unfit place for a young woman.

Sabine asks Mzee, the family's driver, to follow the Bodyfinders' car to the warehouse. In the freezer room at the warehouse, they stumble upon tortured bodies sealed in plastic bags. Sabine is horrified and thinks the detectives have misunderstood her. She reiterates to them that her uncle is alive and needs to be found.

At home, Sabine tells Bapa about the Bodyfinders and the dead bodies in the warehouse. Then they hear about a new rule on television: Indians who claim to be Ugandan citizens and want to stay in Uganda will need to carry *kipande*, identification cards, with them at all times. To get the cards, they must line up with their documents and prove to the officials that they are Ugandans. Since Sabine's parents are held up in neighbouring Kenya, Sabine declares that she is "Simba's child" and will get the identity cards for her family by herself.

Analysis: Before Sabine enters the warehouse, the author foreshadows evil and death in two ways: first, the Bodyfinders insist on driving away *chen* (evil) spirits; then, a marabou stork appears, which is akin to a vulture, a harbinger of death. Uganda is described as a cavernous abdomen that feeds on its own people and as possessing a disease that "multiplies, spreads, and invades." The metaphor highlights how the self-destructive nature of Idi Amin's rule will destroy Uganda from within.

Sabine identifies herself as "Simba's child" (Lion's child). This identification can be interpreted a number of ways. A lion is a wild animal that symbolizes bravery and strength. However, it also represents pride, a major sin. The display of wealth by Indians was interpreted by the Africans as pride and arrogance.

Day 83: Kipande Line

Summary: Lalita accompanies Sabine and Munchkin to get their *kipandes*. Sabine laments that her family's situation is a product of the hand that "fate had dealt." As they stand in the scorching sun, Lalita suffers heat stroke. Sabine forces Lalita to go home, which leaves her and Munchkin alone. Readers witness the soldiers' cruelty when they mistreat an old man for no apparent reason.

Analysis: In the *kipande* lineup, we see the different Indian communities affected by Idi Amin's laws: "Punjabi, Hindu, Bohra, Ithnasri, Sikh, Ismaili, and Goan. They had only one thing in common – their skin colour. Brown." Nanji cautions readers from generalizing about individuals based on the colour of their skin, and shows that each of the communities is separate and distinct, with different religions, languages, food, manner of dress, and other cultural practices.

Sabine's comments on fate and fortune are thought-provoking. Throughout the story, she takes situations into her own hands – in the car with Uncle Lollipop, at Lalita's tea shop, and during the raid of her house. The question raised is - **Do Sabine's actions disprove this notion of fate?**

The *Rota Fortunae*, also known as the Wheel of Fortune, is a medieval philosophical concept that illustrates the capricious and random nature of Fate. The wheel belongs to the Roman Goddess Fortuna, who spins it at random, so that some court luck, others suffer great misfortunes. The dilemma of fate and fortune has been explored extensively in literary analysis of some of Shakespeare's works, including *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Day 83: Verification of Documents: The Run

Summary: When Sabine enters the room where *kipandes* are issued, she recognizes Baobab behind the desk. He is the soldier who raided their home. She tries to placate Baobab by telling him that her father can build a house for him. Baobab tries to take

advantage of Sabine, but she pushes him away. In retaliation, he rips up Munchkin's passport. Sabine spits on the soldier and runs away with Munchkin.

Sabine and Munchkin run to a nearby bus depot and take a bus home. Sabine finds a tag similar to the ones taped to the body bags of dead men at the Meat Warehouse. The nametag reads "Zulfiqar Manji," the name of Sabine's uncle. Bapa confirms the news and says that Uncle's body was found. Upon hearing Sabine's story, Bapa decides that it is no longer safe to stay at home and that they must leave immediately.

Analysis: These chapters highlight the importance of memories, the power of remembrance, and the meaning of home. As Sabine packs to leave, she realizes that someone else will become the new owner of her home and all her possessions. She cannot take everything, but she will carry the "stories of her life" with her. Similarly, Uncle is gone, but she will keep him alive through memories. She thus redefines the meaning of home: "It's just a house, she thought. It became a home only when it was filled with the love, trust, and hopes of her family. Turtles carry their homes with them so they are always at home. *I will carry my home with me.*"

Day 83 – 84: The Sky Be Very Angry

Summary: Kampala is deserted, turned into a "ghost city." Sabine, Munchkin, Bapa, and Lalita stay at the Apollo Hotel, which is filled with Indians ready to leave Uganda. Sabine calls her parents in Nairobi and informs them that she and Munchkin will meet them. Katana visits Sabine to give her Mama's jewels. In an emotionally moving scene, he begs Sabine to take him with her.

Analysis: Katana's loyalty to Sabine contrasts with the betrayal of servants of other Indian families and Zena's betrayal of Sabine's friendship. At the Apollo Hotel, Lalita receives an update of the events occurring on the streets. The Africans have taken over

the shops owned by Indians in Little India. Lalita mocks the new African owners because of their ignorance – for instance, they determine the price of a shirt based on its size label. Sabine sympathizes with the Africans and understands that their inexperience stems from the fact that the Indians prevented the Africans from learning entrepreneurial and business skills.

Day 85: High Tea; Day 87 – 88: A New Sabine;
Day 89: Searched to the Skin; Going, Going, Going

Summary: The chapter opens with the stone sculpture of a crested crane, Uganda’s national bird, which ironically symbolizes advancement and progression. Sabine aptly notes the hypocrisy. The “countdown monster” in the radio states that all Indians (not just foreign Indians), have five days remaining to leave the country. Sabine tries to convince Bapa to leave the country as well, but he refuses, stating that his blood, sweat, and tears are entrenched in Uganda’s soil. He confesses that he and Halima, Zena’s aunt, have been secretly married and living together. When Sabine calls her father, she pre-emptively calls him before he calls her his “brave boy” and says she is his “brave girl.”

Sabine, Munchkin, and Bapa go to the temporary United Nations office in downtown Kampala to pick up their refugee papers. To her delight, Sabine learns that Canada will accept her family as refugees. She rips up her *kipande*, celebrating an end to tyranny.

The final two chapters describe Sabine’s last days in Uganda. She asks Lalita to cut her hair and wears pants and Munchkin’s shirt to appear as a boy so that Baobab and other soldiers will not recognize her. When they leave for the airport, Sabine hides their suitcases behind the coffee sacks at the back of Bapa’s lorry so the soldiers will assume they are heading for the farm and not bother them.

Sabine and Lalita shed tears as they catch the final glimpses of their homeland. On the way to the airport, Bapa is forced to make several stops at roadblocks to bribe the soldiers with cigarettes and money. However, at one roadblock there are several cars, and the

soldiers order the Indians to line up. Ahead of Sabine in the line is Mr. Singh, the shopkeeper who insulted Zena earlier in the story. He is with his aged mother. The soldiers harass them and try to steal and remove the wedding bangle from the old woman's arm that she has worn for fifty-five years. When the stubborn bangle holds, the soldier threatens to cut off her hand. Quick-thinking Sabine asks a soldier to bring some soap, which she rubs on the old woman's wrist, causing the bangle to slip off.

At another roadblock, Sabine meets Butabika, or One-Eleven, the soldier who killed the goat and roughed up her uncle at the beginning of the story. He claims that Sabine's refugee papers are forged because they show the picture of a girl while she is a boy. Bapa volunteers to stay to sort out the trouble and urges Sabine to leave. She leaves reluctantly with Lalita and Munchkin and drives Bapa's lorry the rest of the way to Entebbe airport.

At the airport, Sabine is shocked to see Zena. She is completely transformed – she wears a short red leather skirt with matching boots and heavy makeup. In contrast, Sabine is sweaty and grimy from her long journey, and her “scruffy white shirt” is stuck to her skin. The girls hug and attempt to renew their friendship. Sabine thanks Zena for her uncle's help in saving her family. Their tears mingle together, symbolizing unity.

Why did Nanji include this scene?

Does it add/detract from the novel?

The story ends with hope. Sabine comes to the following realization: “The best way to avenge the injustice, she decided, would be to live well and be happy. The tenacious gene of the dandelion in her would help her rise out of the African ashes and sow the seeds of a new Tree of Life.”

Analysis: In these last chapters the story reaches its conclusion and climax. Sabine finally corrects her father and notes that she is not his “brave boy,” but rather his “brave girl.” This represents a coming-of-age moment for Sabine, who is now able to assert her own identity.

In the chapter “Searched to Skin,” the brutality of the soldiers is once more revealed. The soldiers put roadblocks all along the road to Entebbe airport and stop the cars filled with Indians. Sabine notes the paradox. The soldiers do want the Indians to leave, yet they delay their departure because they wish to harass the Indians and steal their possessions first. Bapa justifies the soldiers’ actions, saying that the Africans have repressed years of anger under the colonial government and this is their last chance to punish the Indians. However, the explanation rings hollow. Then, in a violent scene, the soldiers give “bottle treatment” to Mr. Singh and chop off his hair. They also harass Mr. Singh’s elderly mother, threatening to cut her arm off because they cannot remove her wedding bangle.

In what way do the soldiers’ actions violate the Singh’s dignity?

(Hint: Examine the symbolism of long hair and that of the wedding bangle in the Sikh culture).

As the plane takes off, Sabine remembers – and finally understands – a saying of her mother’s, which likened life to “a golden *ladhoo*”: “If you eat the sweet you will regret it. If you don’t eat it, you will regret it.” The story ends with the image of a butterfly, which suggests resurrection and rebirth. The butterfly is a symbol of change and transformation; it hides in a cocoon, then emerges as beautiful and powerful. The reward for leaving the safe cocoon is maturity and growth. At the end of the novel, Sabine has emerged as a butterfly.

Central Themes and Symbols

Themes

Friendship:

Sabine and Zena's friendship is central to the novel. Although the girls differ in terms of class, race, and culture, they have a special bond. However, that bond is not perfect, and the escalating tensions within Uganda put a strain on it. When Zena accuses Sabine of being a "weed" and a "child of dandelions," their friendship is weakened.

Fate and Fortune:

Sabine often wonders whether her situation is a result of fate. The narrative structure of the 90-day countdown gives the impression of inevitability. However, Sabine increasingly exerts control and shows resilience, using her ingenuity to get out of difficult situations. This implies that she is not completely a victim of circumstance or fate. In the last chapter, Sabine's resolve to build a new home suggests she has won her battle against fate.

Loyalty:

Devotion and faithfulness play important roles in the story and are felt not only in relation to one's family and friends but also towards one's country. Wartime brings out the best and worst traits in people: loyalty and betrayal. Katana's loyalty contrasts with the betrayal of other servants of Indian families. At the end of the novel, Sabine learns that her assumption that Captain Asafa had betrayed her family is false and that, in fact, he protected her family from the wrath of the soldiers and helped them escape.

Sabine is also steadfastly loyal to her country and proud to be Ugandan. Like her father, she believes that since they are Ugandan citizens the expulsion laws do not apply to them. The Indians' pride in Uganda stems from the fact that their ancestors emigrated from India and built their new homes from nothing. While Sabine's loyalty to Uganda never fades, the country's circumstances force her to leave and build a new home in Canada.

Race, Class, and Gender:

Sabine's family and the other Indians experience discrimination because of their skin colour and their socio-economic status. The beggar lady, Amina Goli, aptly describes the class hierarchy in Uganda, where the Indians have inherited the wealth and class stature of the British imperialists. Although the British implemented the class system, the Indians perpetuated the inequities. This led to envy and jealousy among Africans, who resented the rich, arrogant Indians. However, Nanji implies that greed made the Indians complicit in their own tragedy. In addition, their ostentatious homes, clothes, and flashy cars made them open targets. The economic class distinction between Indians and Africans strained Sabine's friendship with Zena and was the catalyst for their falling out. Idi Amin exploited this inequity to fuel hatred against the Indians. Naturally, the Africans viewed him as a hero who would end poverty and make them wealthy.

Nanji examines the implications of systemic racism at three different levels: how it affects one's personal relationships, how it affects the family structure, and how it impacts the community as a whole.

Issues of gender are important in the story. Traditionally, in Indian communities, the eldest son inherits the family wealth. However, in this story Sabine is the heir because her younger brother, Minaz, has Down syndrome. Sabine's father calls her his "brave boy." Initially, Sabine tries to live up to these expectations. She identifies courage and strength as male characteristics, and sees her mother as weak and frail. However, Mama proves her wrong and redefines the stereotypical view of courage. In a moment of self-discovery, Sabine corrects her father and tells him that she is his "brave girl."

Identity:

Child of Dandelions is a coming-of-age story. Sabine undergoes inner turmoil in her journey from adolescence to adulthood, as she comes to grips with the reality of the military regime; the cruelty and violence of the soldiers; the death of so many people

including her favourite uncle; and injustice, racism, and hatred among her friends, family and, community. The novel ends with Sabine's positive assessment of herself. She recognizes the tenacious dandelion gene within herself and that it will help her rise out of the African ashes and sow the seeds of a new Tree of Life in Canada.

Sabine is plagued by questions of identity. She constantly searches to define who she is and who she wants to be. The story unfolds during her early adolescence, when she struggles with how to relate to her parents, how to deal with her burgeoning sexuality, and how to assert her independence. She tries to fulfill her father's expectations and be the "brave boy" he has always wanted.

Sabine's quest for her identity and her coming-of-age are significant themes that make the novel a "bildungsroman" like other great coming-of-age novels, including *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird*.

Law and Order:

Laws are established to enforce order and justice in a society. However, Idi Amin's expulsion laws lead to disorder, chaos and injustice. Nanji demystifies the notion of law as concrete and stable, and exposes it as a man-made social construct. Law is malleable and can be manipulated and used as a tool for good as well as evil.

Symbols

Dandelion:

The title, *Child of Dandelions*, carries great symbolic weight in this novel. The image of a dandelion mirrors the Indians' abilities to thrive under adverse conditions. Dandelions, which are persistent and defiant, are known to grow between the cracks of city sidewalks. They have strong roots and are difficult to remove.

The word "dandelion" is said to originate from the French words *dent de lion* (lion's tooth), an expression that suggests tenacity and strength. Similarly, the Indians in Uganda were hardworking and had sacrificed a great deal to build their new homes and lives. The Indians controlled all the major sectors of Uganda's economy. When the Indian population left, Uganda's economy fell into a shambles.

On the other hand, dandelions have a negative connotation; weeds horde water and steal nutrients from other plants. This double-edged symbol perfectly embodies the manner in which Indians were perceived in Uganda.

Tree of Life:

This African Makonde sculpture shows different generations supporting one another. It symbolizes how the immigrant ancestors struggled to ensure a better life for future generations. Sabine's Bapa came from India to build the railway so that his children and grandchildren could enjoy the fruits of his labour. Similarly, as Sabine struggles to leave Uganda, she too will face problems settling in a new country, but she moves forward with the hope that her children and grandchildren will have a better future. The image of a tree signifies growth and progress.

Important Quotes

"She and her family had been treating the Africans like the untouchables in India. Katana could not share their utensils, could not use their washroom. As if he'd pollute them. Every day he waited until they finished their meal; then he cleared the table, washed the dishes, and sat on the kitchen floor to eat the leftovers or cook the bubbling white ugali, a corn mush. Sabine's face felt hot with shame. It was not only Mr. Singh or Lalita who were prejudiced, but she and her family as well." (p.135)

"Sons were the pride of Indian families; a son inherited the family wealth and preserved the family name, unlike a daughter, who married and took on her husband's family name. But after Munchkin was born with Down syndrome, Papa had vested all his hopes in her as the sole keeper of their family legacy." (p.51)

"The Africans didn't understand the Indians and the Indians didn't understand Africans. Their communities had plunged her and Zena apart and destroyed their friendship." (p.92)

"A wave of helplessness washed over her as she realized that the law of the gun would prevail. Fate had tied their hands and muffled their voices." (p.155)

Discussion Questions/Topics:

Describe the characters of Lalita, Katana, and the Bodyfinders. How do these characters bring comic relief to the novel's otherwise tragic events? Compare the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy in this novel with Shakespeare's plays. (Hint: think about the Porter in *Macbeth*, the Grave-Diggers in *Hamlet*, and the Fool in *King Lear*).

Who is the strongest character in the novel?

How does Mama redefine typical definitions of "strength" and "courage?"

Describe Zena and Sabine.

What techniques does the author use to compare and contrast their race and social status throughout the novel?

Analyze the title *Child of Dandelions*.

How does the image of the dandelion function throughout the book?

How does it relate to Sabine's journey and the rest of the novel?

To what extent does the author suggest that the British colonials are responsible for the racial tension between the Indians and Africans? What textual evidence is there to support this?

“ ‘Some people are born lucky,’ Zena said wistfully, eyeing Sabine's bikes. ‘I will have to make my luck.’ ” Is this statement fair? How does the author show that Sabine's family's wealth is not merely luck or fate but the fruits of hard work and persistence?

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