



# The River Between – *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o* Studymate MA II

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# The River Between

-Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

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Waiyaki, the only son of Chege, a well-known and respected elder in Kamen, grows up in a time of tension between the tribes of the two ridges Kamen and Makuyu. Many areas of Kenya are experiencing the influx of the white man, and particularly the white man's religion of Christianity. The major British figure in the area is Livingstone, who opened a notable mission school at Siriana. His most fervid convert is Joshua.

Joshua is a religious hardliner who even disowns his daughter Muthoni when she follows her own conscience and is circumcised, a practice condemned by the Christians for being "pagan" but which is central to the identity and culture of the tribe. Her sister, Nyambura, is a Christian and disapproves of Muthoni's choice, but still loves her; Joshua, on the other hand, disowns his daughter.

After the procedure, Muthoni's health declines; soon, she is in a critical condition. Even though Waiyaki manages to get her to the hospital, she dies soon after.

Waiyaki is seen as a natural leader with a fire in his eyes that makes people obey. One day, Chege leads him to the top of a holy hill where he reveals a prophecy: Being the last of a long line of seers, Waiyaki must lead and save his people. Chege sends Waiyaki to Siriana so that he gains vital knowledge of the white man, but he warns him not to adopt their ideology.

Waiyaki obeys his father, and in the years after his father's death, he builds a number of schools in Kamen. Many people are filled with a zealous desire for education and begin to admire Waiyaki as the savior who will enable the tribe to become independent and empowered. As for Waiyaki himself, he often feels that he is caught somewhere in the middle: while he is loyal to the tribe, he mostly desires unity and does not think everything the white man brings is evil.

However, Waiyaki soon faces the opposition of the elders of his tribe—particularly Kabonyi, who was once a follower of Joshua but later defected. Kabonyi considers himself to be the rightful leader of the people as he is older, and he also hates Waiyaki because he knows of the prophecy and fears that Waiyaki may be the chosen one.

As tensions rise between the ridges, Waiyaki and Nyambura encounter each near the river a few times and begin to fall in love even though they know no one would approve of them. Waiyaki asks her to marry him, but she refuses even though she loves him. One time when they are together, Kabonyi's son, Kamau, glimpses the two; he is jealous of Waiyaki and vows to destroy him.

In an attempt to reconcile the two opposing groups, Waiyaki meets with Joshua, which alienates the elders of his own tribe, as they fear that he would sell them to the white men. However, the outcome is the opposite of what he expected, as both parties are fighting more fiercely than ever for their ideologies. Kabonyi takes advantage of Waiyaki and Nyambura's relationship and calls a meeting to humiliate and disenfranchise Waiyaki, which he hopes will end his leadership.

Waiyaki and Nyambura pronounce their love for each other, and Joshua tells Nyambura she is no longer his daughter.

Waiyaki sees what is happening to his leadership after the Kiama kicks him out as a teacher. He visits the sacred grove to find clarity and realizes he should press for action. He now knows that education is not all that the tribe needs: they must have unity to push for political power.

Waiyaki leaves the grove and comes before the people. He makes his case but Kabonyi deems him a traitor and when he brings Nyambura forth, Waiyaki cannot deny her. This is proof to the people of Waiyaki's oath-breaking.

In the end, the people of Waiyaki's tribe are more loyal to the elders than to him. The council of the elders punishes Waiyaki and Nyambura, but the nature of their punishment is not revealed.

## **Character List**

### **Waiyaki**

Waiyaki is an ambitious young man who tries to save his people from the white man by building schools and providing education. His eyes are his most striking feature; they seem to have "a light that appeared to pierce your body, seeing something beyond you, into your heart." Because his gaze is described as demanding, leaving others no choice but to obey him, he becomes the

natural leader of his tribe. In fact, he is told by his father Chege that he is the last of a long line of people going back to the gods, which means that he is chosen to become a savior. Following his father's wish, he attends Joshua's Christian school, where he is one of the best students. After leaving the school, he uses the knowledge gained from the occupying powers to build his own schools and to provide education to his people. At first, he is praised for his hard work and dedication—indeed, he is considered a savior. However, he soon learns that education is not enough to achieve his ultimate goal of uniting the people of the two rival ridges. He realizes too late that the council of the elders, led by Kabonyi, with its traditional structures and ideas, is more powerful and respected than his ideas of change. Moreover, his falling in love with Nyambura, the other daughter of Joshua, is considered an act of treason. Eventually, instead of uniting the rivaling people, his actions lead to a hostility that is stronger than ever.

### **Chege**

Chege is Waiyaki's father. He is a well-respected elder of his tribe, presiding over a range of ceremonies. He also knows all the prophecies, including the invasion of the white people with their clothes like butterflies, and a savior rising to face this threat. However, his people did not listen to his warnings, which made him weary. He now hopes that Waiyaki, as the obvious savior, will be more successful in dealing with the encroaching Europeans.

### **Joshua**

Joshua represents the influence of the white man and is one of Waiyaki's antagonists. He is "a middle-aged man who always preached in sharp ringing tones that spoke of power and knowledge." He was one of the first people to be converted to Christianity, seeking refuge in Siriana because he feared the revenge and anger of his people, who felt betrayed. At Siriana he learns how to read and write, and he becomes increasingly religious until he is almost a fanatic, renouncing his tribe's rituals and traditions. Considering his people to live in darkness, he is dedicated to converting as many people as possible to save them from hell. Seeing some of his converted Christians return to the old traditions of magic and circumcision made him even more aggressive, following the words of the Bible to the letter. As a consequence, he punishes every sin, even if that means beating his wife, because he feels he is executing God's will and justice. Moreover, he disowns his daughter Muthoni when she follows through with her own circumcision.

## **Muthoni**

Muthoni is one of Joshua's daughters. However, instead of following the Christian way of life, she follows the traditional path and chooses to get circumcised to become a woman. She questions the criticism of her father, who is also circumcised but was allowed to convert to Christianity anyway. Thus, she exposes the hypocrisy of the Christian leaders who consider circumcision a sin. When Joshua disowns her after learning about her plan, she stays with her aunt, who supports her. However, the circumcision leads to medical complications, and even though Waiyaki managed to get her to a hospital, she dies after claiming that she sees Jesus.

## **Nyambura**

Nyambura is Muthoni's younger sister, but not as revolutionary because she is not as independent. While Muthoni openly rebels against her father, Nyambura follows him because she fears his anger. Losing her sister deeply troubles her, as she lost the only companion she had. Because Waiyaki was close to Muthoni, she feels like discussing Muthoni's mutiny with him but she never gets the opportunity. Eventually, however, Waiyaki is attracted to her and falls in love with her. This secret affair seals his downfall: the people condemn Waiyaki's relationship with their Christian enemy.

## **Kabonyi**

Kabonyi represents the council of the elders and, therefore, the conservative forces within the community. He detests Waiyaki for many reasons. First, he resents his rise to power and influence because he considers him to be "a mere boy" with silly ideas. Second, he feels that Waiyaki takes the people's attention away from him, even though he should be respected more due to his age and experience. Moreover, he would have wanted his son Kamau to lead the people. Finally, knowing the prophecy, he fears Waiyaki may be the one sent to save the people. Eventually, however, Kabonyi is able to punish Waiyaki during a council meeting, effectively ending the struggle for reconciliation.

## **Kinuthia**

A close and loyal friend of Waiyaki's and a teacher at Mariosioni. Kinuthia loves Waiyaki and thinks he is a great leader, but he often warns his friend of imminent trouble. At Waiyaki's final stand, he is nearly crippled with fear and foreboding; he can say nothing to dissuade the Kiama from punishment.

## **Kamau**

Kabonyi's son and peer of Waiyaki; he is a teacher at Marioshoni. Kamau is extremely jealous of Waiyaki, especially when he realizes Nyambura loves Waiyaki. He works with his father to topple Waiyaki from his perch of power.

## **Livingstone**

The British missionary who founds Siriana and carries on a more than twenty-five-year outreach in the ridges. He is now corpulent and old, but he is still devoted to getting rid of circumcision, which, despite his claim to be enlightened, he considers to be a barbaric practice.

## **Miriamu**

Joshua's wife and mother to Muthoni and Nyambura. She is a devout Christian, but she still has a Gikuyu spirit inside. She loves her daughters and weeps for their sorrows, but she believes that they must obey their father.

## **Themes**

### **Colonialism/Imperialism**

*The River Between* is an allegory of the colonization of Kenya when the British introduced Christianity and exploited the country. Joshua represents the converted African who does everything in his power to support the colonialists, represented by a man called Livingston (possibly referring to David Livingston, the pioneer missionary). The British secure their power by building government posts and collecting taxes, which at first does not concern the people because they do not know what taxes are. Only later do they realize that they are exploited. Therefore, Waiyaki tries to lead his people to independence through (Western) education, after his father tells him, "Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices." However, in the end, he realizes that education alone is not enough to improve the lives of

the people. Instead, it is necessary that the community gains self-respect through political action uniting the different tribes.

### **Individual vs. Community**

The two characters that try to follow their own agenda without first consulting with the elders and their community meet with an unfavorable end. Waiyaki keeps building more schools in an attempt to provide education to the people, but even though he has good intentions, he underestimates the power of the council of the elders, who consider adhering to ancient traditions more important than taking over parts of the white man's culture. In the end, he is punished by the council and the people, which indicates that all his efforts were in vain. Similarly, Muthoni goes against the will of her father and Christian community when she decides to follow the traditions and get circumcised to become part of the tribe. Muthoni dies because of this procedure, which also indicates that reconciliation is impossible.

### **Self-Knowledge (or lack thereof)**

Waiyaki's main flaw seems to be that he is not entirely self-aware. He knows he is a vital member of the community and most of the time sees himself as the savior from Chege's prophecy, but he is incapable of acknowledging that his vision for the tribe may not be what the tribe actually needs. He also cannot really see how crucial his failure to talk about unity was, and how he is being selfish by putting it off. He ignores aspects of what his elevated role in the society might mean for himself and others.

### **Tradition**

Tradition is exceedingly significant to a society, especially in terms of their founding history, rites, rituals, etc. The Kikuyu have long held their own beliefs on these subjects, and the white man's influence is seen as deleterious to those beliefs. Ngugi suggests that not all new ideas are bad—Waiyaki and Muthoni and Nyambura articulate the need for a fusion between Christianity and tribal tradition—and that traditions can be problematic. He is aware, though, that traditions are excessively difficult to change or eradicate, and that the white man and his African supporters cannot expect to order the Kikuyu to get rid of something overnight. Rather, patience and understanding are necessary.

## **Unity and Division**

Ngugi evinces complicated views on human nature, suggesting that both unity and division can be sustaining and dangerous in various circumstances. The two ridges are unified by the river but at the same time divided by it; there is neutral ground but it is nearly impossible to occupy. Division is present in the novel through the white man and his religion/education/influence; as we watch, various Kikuyu come down on either side of these encroachments. Division is natural because a population cannot be perfectly homogeneous; however, these divisions can become dangerous when they are accompanied by violence, ignorance, and intolerance. There is a need for unity on the basis of something deeper to preclude the complete fraying of a society. Thus, by the end of the novel unity is needed to patch the two ridges together in order to maintain autonomy over a way of life—but Ngugi indicates that this is a difficult thing to achieve.

## **The Land**

The land is of paramount importance in the text. Ngugi begins the novel with an image of its ancient presence, its sustaining nature, and its centrality to rite and ritual (as seen, for example, in the way that the circumcision and initiation ceremonies are tied to the river). The land is tied to culture, and when the Kikuyu feel like their land is under siege by the white man, it is so much more than that. That the white man builds on their land, taxes their land, and eventually will take their land is what so horrifies the Kiama; even though Waiyaki is the central protagonist, the reader feels sympathetic to the Kiama's goal of routing the outsiders.

## **Courage**

The characters in *The River Between* exhibit courage in a variety of ways. Sometimes this courage is standing up to family or to the community, and sometimes it is being honest with oneself. Muthoni has convictions that necessitate her standing up to her family, and Nyambura stands up to her family and her community for love. Similarly, Waiyaki demonstrates courage as he pursues his goal of education, as he seeks unity between the ridges, and as he defends his love for Nyambura. Having courage doesn't guarantee a positive outcome, but it can foster a sense of wholeness and peace in a person.

## **Summary and Analysis of Chapters 1-8**



## Summary

### Chapter 1

A river flows between the two ridges of Kamenno and Makuyu in Kenya. The valley is called the valley of life and the river is called Honia, or “cure.” It never dries and is the soul of the two ridges. All men, beasts, and trees are united by it. However, if you stand in the valley the ridges look like antagonists because of the way they face each other; there is a sense in which this is a struggle of life and death.

Long ago, a man rose in Makuyu. He claimed that Gikuyu and Mumbi sojourned there, so it meant leadership belongs in Makuyu. Not everyone believed this, thinking they had stopped in Kamenno. In Kamenno they said Murungu gave them the land and that a sacred spring sprang where they stood. People still paid homage to it. The great Gikuyu seer, Mugo, was also born there, grew up there, and warned everyone that someday the people with clothes like butterflies would come. And come they did—they were the white men.

The ridges were isolated and people lived their lives undisturbed by what went on elsewhere. The hills and ridges were “the heart and soul of the land. They kept the tribes’ magic and rituals, pure and intact” (3).

Most people never left the ridges but some went out. Leaders of the land arose there, having the courage to look beyond. They became strangers to the hills.

### Chapter 2

Two boys, Kamau and Kinuthia, emerge in the plain. They are wrestling, but it soon becomes violent. Another boy emerges and orders them to stop. It is Waiyaki, and he asks why they are fighting. Kamau says the other boy called his father a convert to the white man, and Kinuthia says Kamau made fun of him for his father dying poor. They begin struggling again.

Waiyaki says Kamau’s name; humiliated, Kamau stops and slinks away. Kinuthia is grateful.

Waiyaki is the son of Chege. He has not yet been circumcised but is tall and well-built. He has a small scar from a wild goat near his left eye. Chege is an elder of Kamenno who knows “the meaning of every ritual and every sign” (7) and all the ways of everything in the tribe. There are

plenty of stories about him. Some say he is related to Mugo; some say he is a seer. He often warns his people of the white men. People respond that the white man does not speak the language of the hills or know the ways of the land, but the white men still come. Now, Joshua and Kabonyi have been converted and abandoned the ways of the tribe.

The boys come home in the darkness and Waiyaki goes to Chege. Chege warns his son that it is dangerous in the darkness, but Waiyaki boasts that he knows the way of all the ridges. He realizes his father was worried about him, and his heart warms. Chege tells his son that he must remember tomorrow is the day of his second birth. Waiyaki trembles with excitement.

### **Chapter 3**

The Demi na Mathathi were the giants of the tribe who long ago cut down trees, cleared the forests, and held communion with ancestral spirits. Sometimes the boys played as them, and even though one boy told Waiyaki he could not be one because he was not circumcised, everyone knew there was something about Waiyaki's eyes, gaze, and the burning words within him.

The day for the second birth is here and Waiyaki wonders why he does not feel happier to learn the ways of the tribe and be like his father. He wants his initiation and manly spirit.

The elders are beginning to arrive near the river, and people are feeling festive. Waiyaki sits between his mother's legs, a ceremonial umbilical cord is cut, and he follows his mother into the river. He is filled with strange fear, though, and this disturbs some.

Waiyaki goes to bed early after this strange experience. Even though he feels a little hollow, he is ready for the future.

### **Chapter 4**

Waiyaki gets back into the rhythm of the village. Some say his eyes have a glitter in them; some say it is evil.

One evening Chege calls him into his hut and asks if he has been to the hills deep south of Kamen. Waiyaki says no. Chege then asks if he has heard of the sacred grove, and Waiyaki says he has. Chege tells his son they will go there tomorrow. Waiyaki feels a thrill course through him and wonders what manly secret they will see.

The next day, Waiyaki follows Chege through the labyrinthine plants and thorns. It is quiet, but Chege often stops to comment on something he knows about a bush or plant. Waiyaki feels close to his father and thinks that the hidden things of the hills are being revealed to him.

They leave the valley and climb up the slopes. Once, an antelope runs away from them, and Chege explains that they only run away from men, not women, because women used to rule this land and the men—until they became too harsh and the men overthrew them.

At the top of the path, there is a small hill; this is the sacred place. A big Mugumo tree looms on the edge of the tree, huge and strange. It looks holy, and Waiyaki knows it is the tree of Murungu. He can see across the whole land; he can that the ridges are not antagonistic, but rather have merged into one.

## **Chapter 5**

Chege is moved by what he sees and tells his son this land is beautiful to the eye, that it is all their land, and that the Father and Mother of the tribe were made by Murungu. Murungu showed them the land and brought them here.

Chege seems like he is in a vision and Waiyaki, while a little frightened, senses something great in his father. Chege continues to speak of this blessed and sacred place. Kameno is where the father and mother started and were supported; their children spread throughout all the land.

After a moment, Chege looks at his son and tells him he descends from those who came to the hills. He then tells his son of Mugo the seer and how he warned the people of the men with clothes like butterflies. The people thought he was crazy and scorned him, so he became bitter and hid himself away. He went beyond the hills but finally came back, disguised, to live. Chege adds that he and Waiyaki are descended from Mugo.

Waiyaki is dumbstruck. Chege tells him not to fear and that he is the last in their line. Waiyaki feels a weight on his soul and a presentiment stirring within him. His father tells him to sit and, staring off into space and trembling a bit, explains that this is the ancient prophecy of Mugo: the only way to stop the butterfly men was to learn their ways, trap them, and fight them back; salvation will come from the hills and a son shall rise.

Chege stops. He says only he and maybe Kabonyi know the prophecy. He looks at Waiyaki and tells him he must heed this, go to the Mission, and learn the wisdom and secrets of the white man; he must be true to his people and his ancient rites.

Waiyaki is weak with shock but Chege presses on, telling him there must be a man to rise and save the people. They will cry for a savior.

Late in the day father and son return home, exhausted. Waiyaki thinks their trip was like a dream and wonders if his father is sane. However, deep within he feels a heaviness. His soul feels like a man's, though his body is a boy's.

Waiyaki, Kinuthia, and Kamau go to Siriana to live and learn together under the Reverend Livingstone of the Siriana Mission. Many boys from the hills go there. They work hard and Waiyaki impresses everyone. Some think he will be a great Christian leader.

## Chapter 6

Nyambura sits by the Honia river, feeling it call to her. This is the place where boys and girls come for their circumcision ritual, but she knows that it is sinful and a pagan rite that she and her sister are saved from. Her father, Joshua, is a man of God and helped them realize this.

Muthoni, Nyambura's younger sister, seems moody and restless. The two are inseparable and even look similar. Nyambura is normally quiet, though, whereas Muthoni is vivacious. Muthoni tells her sister that she must say something, but that it is a secret. Nyambura promises to keep it secret and tries to calm her sister.

Finally, Muthoni admits that she wants to be circumcised. Nyambura is stupefied and sits in silence. She reminds Muthoni that their father will never allow this and that they are now wise in the ways of the white people. Father teaches them what he knows, and missionaries do not like this rite.

Muthoni will not yield. Nyambura knows their father will never allow this, and she begs her sister to explain why. She grows passionate and Muthoni is upset and rushes to her. She says she wants to be a woman: a real girl who knows the ways of the hills and the ridges. She reminds Nyambura that their parents are circumcised and this did not prevent them from being Christians.

Muthoni tells her sister that she does not simply want the white man's Christianity and needs something more. Nyambura is stunned silent. She has never thought deeply about this, usually listening to her father.

Muthoni states that she will go to their aunt in Kamenno for this. Both girls start to weep. Nyambura knows she cannot change her sister's mind. The river flows on.

The sisters begin their walk home. On the way, Muthoni accidentally drops her watermelon and Nyambura thinks privately that this is a bad omen.

## **Chapter 7**

The people of Makuyu are performing their chores and duties that morning as the girls walk home. The houses here are uniform, but Joshua's is distinct because of its tin roof. It makes it clear that the isolation of Makuyu is perhaps ending. Siriana is the nearest missionary center, though, and Nairobi is far. Disciples come to these hills, but they did not live here yet. The people are loyal to the ways of the land. Livingstone rarely comes here, but Joshua does his work.

Joshua was converted when he was a young man. He found a sanctuary and power in Siriana, and now the faith possesses him wholly. He renounced his tribe's magic, power, and rituals for the one God. He thinks his people ignorant and living in darkness. He is happy he has escaped Hell, been washed anew, and been freed from fear. He does not fear Chege, nor the hills and its people; he preaches with fury and vehemence and converts many. However, some fall back into their old ways, and Joshua sometimes feels wrathful and condemnatory. Thankfully, his own home is a model of rigidity and religious uniformity.

When Joshua sees his daughters walking home, he is proud of his upstanding family and their strong faith.

It is an unusual year with rich seasons. The elders of Kamenno offer sacrifices to Murungu. All are preparing for rites and rituals—Kamenno for the initiations and Joshua for Christmas. Joshua is adamantly against circumcision and even feels chagrin that his own wife, Miriamu, is circumcised. Miriamu does not agree but says nothing; Joshua is so devoted to the Old Testament that he'd even beat his wife.

That year is not a good one for Joshua. Some in Kamenno are restless and blame him for the white men. They hear of a Government Post being built at Makuyu and that they will be taxed by

a government in Nairobi. Joshua does not mind these changes and sees the white men as his brothers in Christ. They are not responsible for the ills of the land; the people, in their blindness, are. He often feels great anger and tries to be patient even though he wishes he could punish them. Preparation for the birth of the Christian savior, as well as the initiation rituals, proceeds.

## **Chapter 8**

Sundays are usually busy for Joshua. Sometimes he has Kabonyi preach, but Kabonyi is not as compelling. Joshua is exhausted one Sunday and goes home with his wife. Nyambura is home but Muthoni is not. Nyambura starts to worry, especially for the moment when Joshua, who does not allow his children to stay out late, will ask for Muthoni.

Miriamu asks where she is. She is a peace-loving woman who wants her children to obey their father, but “one could still tell by her eyes that [Christianity] was a religion learnt and accepted; inside the true Gikuyu woman was sleeping” (34).

Nyambura is quiet. Her father calls out for Muthoni. Nyambura steps outside but returns. Joshua glares at his wife to find their daughter. Night is coming.

Miriamu knows that her duty as a mother is to bear on her shoulders her children’s sins and misdeeds, and so she goes to look for Muthoni.

Inside, Nyambura and Joshua are silent. Joshua rages at his wife and Nyambura is torn. Finally, she timidly ventures that maybe Muthoni has gone to visit their aunt. Joshua turns on her and asks why she would do that. Nyambura says she wants to be circumcised.

Joshua grabs her, so infuriated he has spittle coming out of his mouth. Nyambura is terrified that he will hit her. He releases her, though, and she feels a sense of pity at his defeated and pained form.

Joshua sits, looking like a defeated beast of prey. He tells Nyambura she has permission to go to Kamenno and to tell Muthoni that if she comes back then everything will be forgiven—but if she does not, then she is no longer his daughter.

Silence falls. Miriamu cries.

Nyambura goes and returns the next day, saying Muthoni refuses to return. Joshua is ashamed and thinks of the suffering of Job. From this day inward she is dead to him; she is a disgrace to him and his house.

## Analysis

Ngugi begins on a macro scale and then moves to the micro. He starts with an image of the ancient ridges of Kamenio and Makuyu in the remote central highlands of Kenya and takes their history back to the gods and founding Kikuyu. The structure of the hills, river, and valley is already suggestive of conflict, as the river divides more than it unifies. The ambiguity surrounding the founders of the ridge communities (where did they go, where did they stay, etc.) is indicative of that conflict, as are the troubles that follow in subsequent generations. This image of the ridges standing apart from each other thus foreshadows the tremendous divisions to come: the tribe and the white man, Waiyaki and the elders, Muthoni and Nyambura, Joshua and Waiyaki, and more.

The first division of the tribes versus the white men still operates on a macro scale, as the influx of Europeans into Africa had been growing exponentially since the late 19th century. White Christian missionaries were traditionally the forerunners of companies and governments, and even though they may not have directly advocated for colonialism, they were often indirect implements of it. Tellingly, the tribe in *The River Between* is not dealing with just the missionaries and educators but also with the government and its imminent taxation.

By beginning with this “brief, symbolic evocation of the mythic landscape in which the plot unfolds,” Ngugi asserts that “land serves as the unifying ground for leadership and tradition,” as critic Michael Loudon writes. The tribe’s most important ritual, circumcision, is deeply tied to the land in its execution, and the most important gatherings take place in sacred places. Chege relates the prophecy to Waiyaki at the sacred grove with the great tree of Murungu, Nyambura and Waiyaki plight their troth at the river, Muthoni is immersed in the river when she speaks of and undergoes circumcision, and more. The further Waiyaki removes himself from the land, and the further he becomes a stranger to it, signifies “his failure to achieve the leadership of his people. As the prophecy’s mythic power originates from the land, so must its fulfillment speak to the land’s sanctity.”

On the micro scale, Ngugi explores the events surrounding the figure of Waiyaki. From the first introduction, the reader is made aware that Waiyaki is a young man to be reckoned with and someone who will do great things for the tribe. Waiyaki’s physical appearance is matched by his pedigree: he is the elder/putative prophet, Chege’s son, and maybe even related to the great prophet Mugo. Waiyaki’s interpersonal issues with Kabonyi, Kamau, Joshua, the elders, Muthoni, and

Nyambura, make up much of the drama of the text, but Waiyaki is also a deeply introverted young man in the sense that he lives in his head. He is constantly ruminating, worrying, planning, and second-guessing; Ngugi makes the reader privy to Waiyaki's internal processing in such an immediate and consuming way in order to reinforce just how far out of touch with the rest of the tribe he is. When things crash and burn for him, it makes sense because, as Kinuthia worries, Waiyaki cannot see everything that is really happening.

In these first few chapters, Ngugi develops his main characters and sets in motion the conflicts between them. First, there is Joshua, the main Christian convert among the tribe. Joshua represents Christianity in a negative light, for he is harsh, cruel, unyielding, and incapable of forgiveness. He eventually renounces both of his daughters, is the worst sort of Old Testament patriarch with his wife, and grows irrationally angry when he observes what he thinks is sinful behavior on the part of the tribe. He cannot accept any of the tribal customs or allow them to be eased out; rather, he preaches vociferously against them and offers no compromise. Joshua's tribal counterpart is Chege, who just as powerfully "preaches" against the white man's encroachment. Chege matches Joshua in age, experience, and respect of his community, but unfortunately, he dies not long after Waiyaki's circumcision.

Both Muthoni and Waiyaki are potential unifying figures—potential "rivers between"—that do indeed see a path of compromise. They meet in the neutral ground between the ridges in the river Honia, the divider but also potential unifier. Yet, as critic Charles E. Nnolim writes, "the irony in Ngugi's works is that those who try to bridge the gap between opposing forces are doomed to failure" and that what makes this novel a pessimistic one is "that there is no acceptable alternative, no viable counterweight to either fanaticism or the law of sweet reason."

## **Summary and Analysis of Chapters 9-14**

### **Summary**

#### **Chapter 9**

The harvests are good that year, and the elders offer burnt sacrifices to Murungu.



Chege can remember harvests and famines, and how he'd always warned of the Christians. Things seem okay right now, as his daughters are circumcised and Waiyaki has been in Siriana for a few years, but he still does wonder if Waiyaki will fail the tribe or the prophecy. Chege knows he is growing old and cannot help pinning all his hopes on his son.

He knows it seems like a contradiction that he, the embodiment of the tribe, sent his son to Siriana. However, he knows this is the way to beat the white man. He watches and waits, then, and knows that this season Waiyaki will be initiated into manhood. He will better be able to absorb the white man's wisdom and help the tribe.

The time has come. People undergoing the rituals are preparing. Waiyaki is a candidate. He is grown tall and strong. He has been in Siriana for awhile, though, and has trouble always remembering the dream from years ago. He is somewhat out of touch with the things that matter most to the tribe and is not very interested in the dances and celebrations attached to the ritual; however, it means a lot to his father. He looks forward to testing his courage at the ceremony. It is the eve of initiation day and the hills ring with the sounds of drums and jingles. Waiyaki's mind is unsettled and he is unsure why. He thinks of Muthoni and how someone had pointed her out to him that day. He wonders if she ran away and how she could be here. Kinuthia confirms what she did and Waiyaki is stunned; he knows he could never disobey Chege like that.

Everyone begins to get into the frenzy of the celebratory dance—old and young, men and women. They feel free, lost in the motion. They sing of sexual things, though no one participates in the act itself. Waiyaki is uneasy and wonders what Livingstone would say. He is slightly embarrassed by the words.

Muthoni appears, dances, sings, and speaks of forbidden things in the most startling way. Something stirs in Waiyaki and he thinks her beautiful. Someone pulls him into the dance and, finally, he feels free and madly intoxicated. He blows a horn. It seems like Muthoni holds him with something inside her.

Moments later, though, Muthoni is gone and Waiyaki finds himself alone. He is annoyed he let himself go like that. He finds Muthoni and confronts her. He asks why she ran away; she explains that she is a Christian but still wants to be initiated into the ways of the tribe. She wants to be a woman and cannot be outside the tribe. She adds that she wants to be made beautiful in the tribe, to have a husband and children. She moves away dreamily.

Waiyaki remains where he is, feeling dumbstruck and troubled. He goes back to the tribe but still feels apart. He cannot sleep that night.

## Chapter 10

It is misty and cold in the morning, but Waiyaki is glad for the coldness of the Honia so he can numb his body.

He thinks of how he'd waited for this day all his life, but now he is afraid. He does not show it, though, even when the surgeon cuts him. Now a religious bond links him to the earth, as if his blood were an offering.

Pain shakes Waiyaki to his core and his mind races with thoughts. He is confused by the pain, but he keeps still and people laud his courage. The new generation thus proves itself.

In the hospital, the initiates recover. Waiyaki's wound swells after two days, and he wonders if he will ever feel normal. The attendants tell all the men secrets and stories, and the initiates delight in them.

Chege receives many compliments for how his son handled the rite and "how the white man's education had not softened him" (47). An elder tells him, though, that Muthoni is not healing as she should. Her wound is getting larger and worse. They talk of how stubborn Joshua is and how this might be a curse.

Alone later, Chege looks out to the opposite ridge. He can see Joshua's hut and shudders; he fears for his country.

Waiyaki talks to Muthoni. He can see how she is suffering. She wishes for Nyambura. Waiyaki wonders if she is paying for her disobedience, but he decides he must go see her sister. The next day he travels to Makuyu. He finds Nyambura by the river, greets her, and tells her of her sister's condition. She is shocked and weeps, but she immediately goes to her sister's side. She continues to visit and often asks her sister amid her tears why she did it; Muthoni tells her she must make her own choice someday.

Muthoni gets worse and worse. Waiyaki also visits her often and realizes the herbs are not helping her; she ought to go to the Siriana Mission Hospital. Muthoni's aunt resists but Nyambura urges her. Waiyaki volunteers to take her.

Nyambura tells her mother what is happening, and Miriamu breaks down in tears.

## Chapter 11

Muthoni dies. Waiyaki walks around as in a stupor after the death. He tells Nyambura and her mother, and they leave Kamenno. Waiyaki cannot go straight home. Muthoni's face is in his mind always. He remembers her bright eyes and rambling words. As she died, she told him she saw Jesus and was a woman made beautiful in the tribe.

Joshua hears of the death and shows no emotion. To him, she was an outcast and a curse.

Chege is silent with all this; he had foreseen this drama. This is a punishment to Joshua and to the hills. It is a warning. He thinks Muthoni's death does not augur well for the future. He admires his son but wonders if he will be corrupted by Siriana.

In Siriana, Muthoni's death only confirms how barbaric the Gikuyu customs are. Livingstone, an old, heavy man now, had been full of vigor when he first came here but soon realized he was not making much progress. He'd been fired up by heroism and the vision of new souls for Christ, but these Kenyans only seemed interested in education and slipped back to their blind customs. He thought circumcision was particularly barbaric, though he considered himself an enlightened man who did not want to get rid of all the tribal customs. He had even gone to some of the dances but was disgusted; he realized how immoral these people were. He had kept his preaching against this quiet for a time, but then he took it up with new zeal. He was worried that Muthoni's death would cause a backlash for him, but he feels Christ filling him with youth and power.

One of the Siriana women knocks on his door. She tells him triumphantly (she is a critic of his policies) that Muthoni was the daughter of Joshua. Livingstone groans; it seems the war is on.

## Chapter 12

Muthoni's name became a legend. The elders of Makuyu looked at each other, knowing that the new faith had contaminated the hills and Murungu was angry. They do not know what to do, as Chege is aging and now confined to his home. Joshua's followers are gathering.

Waiyaki does not return to Siriana because his father is ailing. He worries about what is happening to him, what their dream portends, and what the ridges will do. Will they fight? He sees greater splits coming, and cannot help but think of Muthoni.

Kabonyi breaks from Joshua and is followed by others. Joshua remains loyal, though, and gathers more followers. Waiyaki feels like a stranger.

One day Waiyaki is walking home, thinking about how Siriana said no child of a pagan can attend the school anymore and how he must renounce circumcision. Waiyaki knows this is his end there, but he is sad because he loves learning.

At home he sees his mother standing outside, crying. He rushes inside the hut, hoping to see his father one more time before he dies.

### **Chapter 13**

The rain drips and then pours. Waiyaki is in his school—the office plus the buildings. He worries about the furious rain destroying the places where children come to learn. Kamau and Kinuthia, his fellow teachers, are sitting near him and arguing.

In the last few years, the conquest of the hills has accelerated. The white man is here, taxes are being paid, and the country is no longer isolated. Many people feel that this is the time to do something. The break with Siriana has made things worse, and they feel a sense of injustice. People remember Chege's warnings and have come to see Waiyaki as a leader.

Waiyaki hears Kinuthia complaining about the white man and his heart warms to him. He does not feel the same way about Kamau, however, who is the son of Kabonyi. Kamau has a strange look in his eyes. Kamau does not like Waiyaki either, and is always jealous of him.

Waiyaki tries to mediate the argument. Kinuthia maintains that he will push back against intolerable conditions and that it is his right to rebel against the white men who have made conditions intolerable and anything that is unjust. Waiyaki wonders if he is correct, but then he thinks about his new drive for education and thinks *that* is what will give the people hope.

The other men ask Waiyaki about the new Kiama, which will be a way to preserve the purity of the tribe. Waiyaki had already heard of it, knowing it came from Kabonyi. He is worried about it and wants to concentrate on education; perhaps Livingstone's words that "education was

of value and his boys should not concern themselves with what the government was doing or politics, had found a lace in Waiyaki's heart" (65).

Maybe the sleeping lions are stirring; the people know the earth is important to the tribe and the white man threatens that. People fear what is happening.

Waiyaki grows angry with the rain and wishes he could fight it. He then realizes this is silly, knowing rain can be a blessing and a curse. The rain stops, and it is time to fix its damage.

## **Chapter 14**

Waiyaki's school is Marioshoni, the first to be built since the break with Siriana. It bore fruit so quickly that even Waiyaki was surprised. His father's death had numbed him and he had realized he was now a grown man. This vision took hold and he traveled from ridge to ridge, finding willing people. Schools popped up like mushrooms and were symbols of the people's thirst for knowledge—for the white man's knowledge. Few wanted to live like the white man, but they did want his magic.

The tribe still adhered to circumcision, though, as the core of the social structure, as something that gave meaning to man. It could not be ended or the tribe would not cohere.

Children crammed into the schools and parents were proud when they came home full of learning.

Waiyaki is the headmaster at Marioshoni. He loves the walk there and back, using it as a time for thinking. There are splits in the land, and the ancient rivalry continues. He is sometimes confusing to the people because he has the white man's education, which is part of the other faith, yet he is also of the tribe. He feels isolated, but still proud of his efforts. There is more he wants to do, though, and his eyes blaze with yearning. He is young and passionate, and people wonder about his quiet courage. He is becoming the pride of the hills.

## **Analysis**

There are many things of consequence that occur in these chapters. The first is that of Chege and the prophecy: Chege still believes the prophecy refers to his son, but nevertheless, he admits to himself that he doesn't know if he made the right choice by sending Waiyaki to Siriana.

He is occasionally filled with a sense of defeat and despair, and, dangerously, “it was as if his life, his heart, was being carried by Waiyaki and he feared his son might stumble” (38).

We now turn to Muthoni, a crucial character in the text—even though she is gone long before it comes to a close. Muthoni tells Nyambura and Waiyaki that she wants to be pure: to be made a girl and a woman in the tribe. Being circumcised, according to Muthoni, means she can be married and have children, and also be initiated into the secrets of knowledge of the tribe. She does not see this rite as negating her Christian faith; rather, she seeks reconciliation between the two. She knows she is of the hills and that there are aspects of Christianity that are wanting, but she fully sees herself as representative of both. Unfortunately, Muthoni is not able to be the symbolic river between the two warring ridges of the tribe and Christianity, and she perishes from her wound. The significance of this in the novel is observed even by the characters within it, who see her passing as a bad omen.

There has been a multitude of critical writing on Muthoni’s role in the text. Critic Apollo O. Amoko has a negative view of the way Ngugi draws her, suggesting that there is a “conceptual emptiness at the heart of all her thoughts and actions. Her embrace of Christianity seems so devoid of specific doctrinal content that it amounts to little more than mindless obedience to the dictates of a fanatical father...Her embrace of tradition seems equally superficial. Even though she says she desires to learn the ways of the tribe, that entire tradition is reduced, in her rendering of it, to a single contentious cultural practice.”

As for Waiyaki, he too is initiated, but considering he's the savior of the tribe, he certainly demonstrates extreme ambivalence about the tribe’s rituals. First, he is afraid even though he has waited all his life for this. Second, he is interested more in demonstrating his physical strength rather than tapping into any spiritual experience. Third, and perhaps most important, he was conflicted about participating in the dance. He is embarrassed by his people’s behavior and even though he does let go and experience the ecstasy of freedom, “he felt hurt. He had laid himself naked, exposed himself for all the eyes to see” (43). Waiyaki’s shame resembles the shame of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in regard to their nakedness, which makes sense because Waiyaki has been absorbing the lessons of the white man at Siriana.

The time after Muthoni’s death is a pivotal one for the tribe, one that is rife with bad omens and confusing developments. Critic Michael Loudon writes, “insofar as the circumcision ritual

serves as a central metaphor for Kikuyu tradition and values, it becomes the center of conflict.” People at Kameno think the missionaries poisoned Muthoni; Joshua blames it on the devil and the tribe’s “pagan” behavior; Chege warns of future turmoil but dies not long after; the Siriana school refuses to allow students whose parents do not renounce circumcision to enroll; and the British move forward in their plans to confiscate and tax the land. Kabonyi leaves Joshua so he can move into a better position to take over leadership of the tribe, and Waiyaki struggles to fully embrace his role.

That role for Waiyaki is, at least in his mind, wholly centered on education. We will delve into this in further analyses, but Waiyaki has decided that education matters most to the tribe and that it alone can bring unity; he thinks the white man’s knowledge will allow the tribe to push the white man out.

## **Summary and Analysis of Chapters 15-20**

### **Summary**

#### **Chapter 15**

Waiyaki yearns for someone to talk to, someone to share his desires with. He wonders about even knowing what those desires are, especially as he thought he loved the hills and their people now believes that they are not enough for him.

Waiyaki is superstitious and the Mission has not changed this. He thinks about how the white man came here and found no resistance. Ever since Muthoni’s death, things are only getting worse, and Waiyaki wonders if he is able to create order and bring light to dark.

A mist clouds his thoughts and he can see the shape of a woman coming toward him. She vanishes and he gets out of bed. Outside, the bright moon illuminates everything, making it unearthly and alluring. Waiyaki listens for voices but there are none. Oppression steals over him, and he wants someone to talk to. He thinks life might be all yearning.

Suddenly he realizes he wants freedom and wants to run anywhere, or maybe just hover like a spirit. He moves down to the river and goes to the next ridge, thinking he might go see Kamau.

He stops abruptly and sees Nyambura in front of him. He hadn't seen her for a long time, but now he recognizes the shape in his mind.

Nyambura fears her father and is often lonely. She likes to go to the river by herself and cry; pain fills her every day. The river is her only companion. She grows colder towards her father. She knows what Muthoni did is a sin, but she is still hard-pressed to think Muthoni herself sinned. She often thinks of Waiyaki and how she barely understood him—how could he be educated at Siriana and then lead the elements that broke away? She wishes he were on their side.

They awkwardly say hello and walk together. Waiyaki realizes he does not really want to see Kamau. The moon lights their path and he knows that something passed between the two of them as human beings, untainted by religion or culture.

The moon seems to root them to the spot. Waiyaki wishes he could touch her but controls himself. She says she would like to see his school and they agree she can come tomorrow. She says goodbye and Waiyaki goes home.

## **Chapter 16**

Four o'clock arrives and Nyambura does not show up. Waiyaki is upset and puzzled, and he goes home.

It is the season of the long rains, a favorite with the people. A good harvest is likely. However, the last few years have been tough. The pattern of seasons seems broken: it rains less and the soil does not respond to the people. Perhaps it is due to the white men and the blaspheming of Makuyu.

Waiyaki often thinks about the prophecy and wonders if Chege really thought it was him. He wishes he understood better. He also thinks of Kabonyi and wonders if the man thinks of *himself* as the savior. Kabonyi is much older and he challenges everything Waiyaki says at the meetings of the school-governing committee.

Waiyaki is back in his hut ruing the fact that everyone watches him. He knows people would not have liked to have seen him with Nyambura. His thoughts turn to his father and he admires him greatly. He decides he must be like him and serve the tribe. He will open more and more schools and even a college, and maybe he will get teachers from Nairobi.



He watches a small flame in his hut and tries to touch it. A knock sounds and Kinuthia enters. He is nervous and asks if Waiyaki is in the Kiama. He'd heard Kabonyi saying Waiyaki was too young to be let in on the secrets of the tribe, and he warns Waiyaki about him. Waiyaki asks why Kabonyi would not like him, and Kinuthia replies "jealousy."

## **Chapter 17**

Joshua usually has a full church and people find his preaching rousing. They admire his fidelity; he will never compromise on the tribe's practices being sinful.

Waiyaki occasionally goes to his church and does not quite know why he does so. Today he is thinking of Kabonyi and the Kiama.

Waiyaki marvels at how Joshua knows the Bible so well and mixes his own words with scripture. Waiyaki's thoughts go back to himself and how it might be difficult to unite the ridges. Does he even know himself?

Joshua is at the pulpit, condemning, coaxing, and warning. Waiyaki feels guilty but does not know why. Perhaps he is an intruder or a spy. As the hymns swell in the church, he realizes that he was disappointed not to see Nyambura there today.

Waiyaki is in the Kiama; an elder came to tell him. He knew they might not like him in this church, but he believed they'd always stick by him. His knowledge can uplift the tribe and make it strong enough to push away the settlers and the missionaries.

On the way out, Kamau finds him and says hello. Nyambura is passing at a distance, and both look at her. Waiyaki remembers that Kinuthia told him Kamau thought he saw him in Makuyu that night. Kamau asks him pensively what he thinks of that girl; Waiyaki lies and says he didn't see her. Kamau muses that she is beautiful and Waiyaki fills with jealousy.

Nyambura is waiting for Waiyaki in the next valley. She felt guilty for not going to Marioshoni that day but did not want to disobey her father. Regardless, she has a strange longing for Waiyaki and wishes she could see him.

Now they are face-to-face and Waiyaki realizes she came to see him. He wants to tell her he loves her, but he does not.

Nyambura returns home with a glow inside. Her mother notices but does not know why.

## Chapter 18

Waiyaki is constantly busy with his schools and the Kiama. People call him “Our Teacher” and believe he will help the tribe. Waiyaki cares more for the teaching, but sometimes feels a surge of idealism and patriotism.

It is the day for the parents to gather from all over the ridges. Waiyaki is convinced that he must press for unity between Kamenno and Makuyu; it is the time. It had been a temptation, an echo, a possibility—and now it is a need.

Everyone is there, many to see the Teacher. They think he will help the tribe regain its purity and power. The school seems to be a symbol of their defiance of the foreign ways. The parents walk around and admire it, and they admire Waiyaki as well.

Kabonyi does not like this. He thinks Waiyaki is an upstart and just a boy with silly ideas. His own son, Kamau, is older and just as good of a teacher. He thinks of the prophecy and worries that Waiyaki might be the one.

The meeting finally starts. Children come and sing songs, which Waiyaki had taught them from his own days at Siriana. The last line of the song is “I want the shield and spear of learning,” (93) and some parents shed tears. Waiyaki must be their savior; he opened their eyes and woke the sleeping lions.

Kabonyi writhes with anger as he sees the good impression the young man is making. Once the songs are over, Waiyaki stands and speaks of his plans for Marioshoni.

Kabonyi stands next and reminds people of the poverty of the land and how there are more pressing needs than school buildings. It is better to drive the white men away altogether. The people must be warriors and restore purity and wisdom to the tribe.

Kabonyi’s words stir something in the people. Many feel that Waiyaki is too young and they’re not cowards. However, most people are on Waiyaki’s side. Waiyaki, hurt by the elder’s words, stands. His eyes and voice brim with defiance and he sounds like Chege of old. He tells them all he knows he is young and that the elders must guide the youth. He only wants to serve the ridges, and learning is very important. People shout and cheer. An inter-ridge committee is formed afterward, and Kabonyi is not on it.

Kamau leads his father home. Kabonyi is almost crippled with rage and spits out that his son should have supplanted him. Kamau broods.

More schools are put up in the next few months. Everyone talks of Waiyaki, and his fame is cemented. Waiyaki seems a match for the white men; the faith in him is strong. Eventually, the Kiama forces him to take an oath of purity and togetherness in the tribe, but he does not stop to think if there is any danger in it. He only sees schools everywhere. Education is life. Only fleetingly does he remember that he did not preach for unity.

## **Chapter 19**

Joshua has been working toward winning people to Christ for a long time now, but it seems like maybe fate is going against him. He listens to what the Mission says even when it sounds puzzling. The problem right now is not that some people return to the old rites, like circumcision, but rather that the young Waiyaki is rising. In response, he has Siriana open up two more schools. Joshua decides to hold a meeting in Kamenno and it goes rather well; a few people are converted. This is a good challenge to the elders.

Waiyaki knew of this meeting but is indifferent about it. After all, he'd had some Christian teaching. The thing he wonders about now is if his moment to preach on unity had passed. He had been intoxicated with wonder and said nothing. Now he just tells himself it will be next time, or another time. Education is his mission and his passion. He even resigns from the Kiama so he can focus on it.

Waiyaki knows he loves Nyambura. They meet very rarely, but there is still a gulf between them. On the day of another Christian meeting, Waiyaki sees her and his heart skips a beat. Nyambura is rarely happy anymore. She hates living in her father's home and thinks incessantly of Waiyaki. She is weary of Joshua's religion. She knows she cannot be a rebel like Muthoni, but she wants a God who can give her the fullness of life and still her restless soul. She clings to the idea of Christ and his love. It seems like Waiyaki is a Christ of sorts, and she begins to think she can only be saved through him, her black Messiah. She often doubts, of course, and she prays for forgiveness. Nevertheless, church wearies her and she skips it sometimes to go to the Honia.

Today she walks into the river. Waiyaki watches her and it seems like a holy light emanates from her body; he thinks the place will forever be sacred to him. He is a little frightened, though, for it seems like she is a sacrifice. He thinks he must run away but she raises her head.

Her intensity thrills him. She tells him not to run away, calling him “Teacher.” This excites him. They talk about the river, being alone in their family, and the bravery of Muthoni. Waiyaki muses that maybe Muthoni did find something true.

He steps toward Nyambura and tells her he loves her. She feels joy and sorrow, and she does not resist him holding her. He asks her to marry him, but she says no—even though she wants to. Her father will not approve, she cries, and rumors are already spreading. She runs off. Waiyaki walks away slowly.

Kamau emerges from his hiding place, burning with rage, jealousy, and humiliation. He had always loved Nyambura. Now Waiyaki is his rival until the death.

## **Chapter 20**

Waiyaki travels from ridge to ridge with his message of education. The elders embrace him and his passion never dims. He does wonder how to get more teachers, though, and he finally approaches some men who had just graduated from Siriana.

At home, the Kiama is gaining power. Its message is to keep the tribe pure and to fight for the land that had been taken by the settler, the government, the missionary. The Kiama wanted people to take the oath, and the people were glad Waiyaki had taken it. Thus the old rivalry continues. Waiyaki sees himself in the middle and is committed to reconciliation, especially as things are worsening. Waiyaki’s guilt at not having said this earlier eats at him. He must bide his time, though, and wait for the right moment.

Waiyaki works hard. He often thinks of Nyambura. One day, Kinuthia comes to him nervously and says some people are saying he is one of Joshua’s followers now and he was seen in the church. Others say he wants to sell the tribe out to the white men. Waiyaki laughs at this calumny.

Kinuthia is still serious and finally asks if he is going to marry Nyambura. Waiyaki is shocked. Kinuthia presses on, saying he is the symbol of the tribe and is born again in its might. People take the oath in *his* name. He had best be careful not to let his name be his ruin. Waiyaki calms him and says she would not marry him.

A few weeks later, he meets with an elder who praises his father and grandfather. Waiyaki glows with pride, but then feels a sense of foreboding as Kinuthia’s words come back to him.

Christmas is approaching, and it coincides with the tribal ceremonies and rituals. Many come to talk to Waiyaki, but he is losing contact with them because he does not participate in the rituals.

One day, news spreads that one of Joshua's followers' huts was burnt. This makes Waiyaki think of the Kiama, and with a shock, he realizes he never should have resigned. Its power is everywhere.

## **Analysis**

Events begin to escalate in this series of chapter, and things that were long simmering begin to come to a head. Joshua is no longer comfortable with the pace his conversions are going at, and expands his reach into Kamenno. Kamau and Kabonyi begin to plot against Waiyaki, their jealousy and frustration with the young man beginning to come to a head. The two most important things, however, are Waiyaki's continuing struggle with the mantle of leadership and what that really means for himself and for the tribe, and his budding relationship with Nyambura.

First, Waiyaki realizes that he is lonely and has "the desire to share his hopes, his yearnings and longings with someone" (71). In his position of power (he is now called "Teacher"), he is isolated and cannot help but acknowledge that "he thought he loved the hills and their people" (71)—but it is not enough. He ponders if life is nothing more than yearning for something, and he wishes he could be truly free. Even though he is occasionally shortsighted, he does see well enough to know he is being watched by everyone. He worries about Kabonyi and about the Kiama, of which he is a part and from which he eventually resigns.

Waiyaki's problems, however, stem not from the things he does realize but rather from the things he does not. He does not think too deeply about taking the oath, which Ngugi foreshadows as a problem. He is also devoted single-mindedly to education for his people, and although he feels convicted that there needs to be unity between Kamenno and Makuyu, when the time comes for him to say something, he does not. He pushes it to the back of his mind, only allowing for pangs of guilt every once in a while. He also does not know where he truly stands in regard to the tribe's position on the white man. He attends Joshua's church to see what it's like, but he feels like a spy. He admits that "he loved some Christian teaching" (100).

As ever, Waiyaki is full of ambivalence, constantly wondering if he's betrayed the tribe or is doing the right thing by it. Ngugi is not subtle about Waiyaki's vacillation, writing, "His god,

education, guided him...He had not yet stopped to think where all this was leading” (109) and “Waiyaki was losing that contact with people that can come only from taking part together in a ritual. He was becoming too obsessed with the schools and the widening rift and divisions” (113). Critic Ato Sekyi-Otu notes that the focus on the white man’s education is problematic in and of itself, for Siriana and Waiyaki’s attitudes are contradictory: “it is a symptomatic contradiction whose deeper roots are to be found in the power relations of the colonial situation –power relations which, intimately connected with the politics of land alienation, determine the character and goals of educational practices, the entire sphere of intellectual and cultural production, no less than the relations of material production.” Thus, it is ironic and inherently problematic that Waiyaki thinks he can use the language and “magic” of the oppressor to combat that oppressor. Charles E. Nnolem suggests that as a tragic hero, Waiyaki’s tragic flaw is not indecision and certainly not hubris: “it lies squarely in his failure to achieve self-knowledge, in his blindness to the impregnable obstacles he is up against (obstacles born of the contradictions inherent in his chosen course of actions.”

The other thing that is distracting Waiyaki from what is going on is, of course, his relationship with Nyambura. The two fall in love at the river, the symbolic neutral ground between the ridges, but once they are away from the river, their love is fraught with peril. There is the jealous Kamau for one, but at the point at which they meet, the traditionalists and the converts are even more divided than ever. There is little likelihood that open-mindedness and acceptance will be freely given to these lovers.

## **Summary and Analysis of Chapters 21-26**

### **Summary**

#### **Chapter 21**

Nyambura thinks about Waiyaki all the time and wishes she could be with him. She wonders why she said no to marrying him, but it is difficult to rebel against her father. She vacillates back and forth, but she fears her father knows something. Her mother likes Waiyaki because of Muthoni, and she prays for him to convert to Christianity.

Nyambura goes to their place by the river but it no longer soothes her; she also knows Waiyaki will not come.

When she goes home, Joshua sternly asks where she was and with whom. She says she was with no one, and he accuses her of lying. His voice is filled with malice, and he threatens that she must never be with Waiyaki. Nyambura's mind cannot be quieted. She has lost her man and her salvation.

## Chapter 22

The people sing Waiyaki's praises on every hill. He procured teachers from Siriana and is a great man. Kinuthia practically worships him, but he fears for him because he can see things his friend cannot, such as Kabonyi's hatred for him.

One day the friends are walking along the river and Waiyaki is talking about how he is getting more teachers. He muses that he will build more and more schools. Kinuthia wonders if he knows that people want action now—that the awareness and enthusiasm demand more than education now. He will tell him one day, but not today.

Two days later, Waiyaki is lying in bed; he feels exhausted in body and spirit. He has a feeling of foreboding but clings to his vision. The white man's education is the instrument of enlightenment and advance but has to be used well. He worries if he is really the savior. Chege certainly placed a burden on his shoulders. He plans to tell the people next year about unity, but for now, he is dreaming the dream of education.

Suddenly in his vision of his plan for his people he sees Nyambura, and the people are tearing her apart. Then he sees it is actually Muthoni. She wanders away and then Nyambura is there. He tries to touch her but cannot.

His mind flashes to how she told him she would not marry him. He is plagued with guilt about her and the people; darkness threatens to overtake him. He then thinks about Christmas and the initiation day coming soon.

Waiyaki stands to leave the hut and his mother, now old and wizened, asks where he is going. She then, trembling, asks him if he will marry Nyambura. Waiyaki hates hearing of these rumors and decides he hates Nyambura for the path she chose. Then he realizes he hates himself. His mother tells him he must not marry her because of the Kiama—and he must fear the voice of the Kiama.

Suddenly, Kamau knocks on the door and says the elders and Kiama want to see him. Waiyaki looks at his mother, who appears scared and frail, but agrees.

## **Chapter 23**

It is dark outside as Kamau and Waiyaki walk. Waiyaki feels a strange thrill move through him. At the hut, the elders do not greet him with the same warmth as they always do, and they do not call him Teacher.

Kabonyi begins speaking. He mentions the upcoming ceremonies, Muthoni's death, and the fact that Joshua corrupts some people here. Kabonyi continues that it is bad when a leader is touched by the impurity of those teachings. As he talks, Waiyaki becomes annoyed, thinking of how he teaches their children.

Finally, Kabonyi looks straight at Waiyaki and says he touched Muthoni, a dying woman, and was not cleaned. That is the first thing he has done to the tribe, but he has also been in Joshua's church numerous times and he went to Siriana to get teachers—is he selling the tribe to the white man? When he hears this, Waiyaki yells at him in anger but realizes he cannot speak like that to an elder. Another elder speaks up and says betrayal is a bad thing for a man of influence. He is being warned, and they must know if he is marrying Nyambura.

Waiyaki tries to remain calm. He explains that Muthoni was not considered unclean before the initiation, so he is not unclean; he could not have let her die, and after she died he did not touch her. At Siriana, he never entered into any negotiations with white men. As he is speaking, he reminds himself to make his stand clear and not to come under the sway of Kabonyi. He continues to them that he is concerned with the purity of the tribe and desires unity. It is important to know what the white man knows.

Kabonyi gleefully butts in and says they need a political leader. He then brings up Nyambura again, and Waiyaki refuses to say anything about her. He says the oath does not preclude him from loving people. Kamau glares at him.

Waiyaki realizes that even Kamau hates him, but he is also annoyed at himself for not putting up a good fight. He leaves, the word “traitor” trailing after him. Kabonyi triumphantly faces the elders and tells them that Waiyaki should not continue to be a teacher and they should not follow him. An elder sadly says Waiyaki has always been like that.



## Chapter 24

A few days later, Kinuthia rushes up to Waiyaki and says the Kiama is saying that Waiyaki is no longer a teacher. Waiyaki sighs, and bitterness fills him. He replies that only the school committee can do that, but he tells Kinuthia what happened with the elders. Kinuthia says that it is all Kabonyi, and everyone thinks Nyambura corrupted him. They will not stop at this, and they say he has broken the oath. Kinuthia suggests that he flee, especially from Kabonyi.

Waiyaki thanks him sadly but says he will not leave. He will go to Makuyu to warn Joshua. Kinuthia groans, but Waiyaki cannot be stopped. He has both agitation and steely determination in his eyes.

Waiyaki walks over to the church, and when he enters, everyone looks at him. He politely apologizes for the interruption and tells them he thinks they are in danger. Joshua rages at him to get out, and Waiyaki is stung by rejection and humiliation. He sees Nyambura in the church. Kamau and his four men, who were lurking and spying, see Waiyaki at the church and are stunned at how far his treason has gone. They must do something.

When Waiyaki enters, Nyambura's heart skips a beat. She sees her man; she sees the Teacher. She'd been thinking of him and preparing for him for some time now. She knows she wants a religion that would give life, love, and peace to all, and no longer wants Joshua's type. So, when Waiyaki is in the church, she stands up and calls him Teacher in front of everyone. She states that he is not lying; she tells everyone that Kamau wanted her to marry him and that when she refused, he said he would do something bad.

Joshua fumes as he hears this, but Waiyaki is only sad. The people don't want him, and maybe Kabonyi is actually the savior. Joshua orders him out of the church. Nyambura walks up to Waiyaki, takes his hand, and tells him he is brave, and she loves him. Joshua is stunned at his daughter's behavior and renounces her in thunderous tones.

Both Waiyaki and Nyambura leave. Nyambura shivers with the weight of her rebellion. Waiyaki tells her to go back, but she will not. Part of Waiyaki wants to flee with her, but he cannot help but remember his father's words. Nyambura presses his hand and says she will go where he goes. The two come to their sacred area and sit together, feeling a throb spread through their bodies.

Waiyaki feels his soul calmed by the girl, even though he knows he will soon have to choose between her and the tribe.

Back at his hut, Kinuthia is waiting. Waiyaki decides to go to the sacred grove tomorrow and says that he will speak to the people tomorrow after sunset at the Honia river. There he will fight in the open with Kabonyi because he cannot run away. Kinuthia promises he will never leave his friend.

## Chapter 25

At the tree the next day, which still appears strong and firm, Waiyaki is weary. Its mystery envelops him, and he struggles with strange forces. He is afraid, and he blames himself. Maybe he shouldn't have resigned from the Kiama; maybe he betrayed the tribe he meant to unite. However, not everything of the white man's was bad, and even his religion wasn't inherently bad. The white men just didn't understand they couldn't get rid of people's traditions overnight. Their religion has to take into account the people's way of life; it has to be a living experience. Joshua simply smeared himself with everything white and renounced all the ways of the tribe. Muthoni tried to bring the two sides together; she had courage, but it did not work.

Waiyaki sits for a while in the sacred grove but does not feel comforted. He has a vision of the other ridges uniting together against the white man and suddenly is aware of what the people want. He feels their shame of the land being taken and the humiliation of paying taxes to the white man's government. People want action now; they are awakened. But what action do they need? He decides it must be political action, education, and unity.

Before he leaves the grove, he worries if the elders will ask him to give up Nyambura; he cannot bear for this to happen.

Many people have gathered, bewildered by the call they received from Kinuthia and his messengers. Most still love their Teacher and cannot believe he would betray them. He awakened them and gave them a unity. He'd also taken the oath, so how could he go against that? They sit and wait, looking forward to his arrival and thinking about initiation day tomorrow.

Kabonyi and the elders wait, too. Kabonyi trembles with what he knows. He hates Waiyaki with his entire being and he identifies it with "the wrath of the tribe against impurity and betrayal" (144). He thinks *he* is the savior who will unite the ridges.

The sun is going down and people are becoming impatient. Some of Joshua's followers, including Miriamu, watch on the hill. It seems like the sun is setting in a blaze of flames; Kinuthia sees a vision of Nyambura and Waiyaki within them.

Finally, Waiyaki strides in, looking strong and beautiful. The crowd quiets.

## **Chapter 26**

The words of Chege's prophecy come back to Waiyaki as he surveys his tribe. He knows they need him; he knows Nyambura needs him.

He begins to speak. He thanks the people, outlines their struggles, speaks of the waking of the sleeping lions, and says that, if some want to accuse them, then they ought to do it publicly. Kabonyi stands. He speaks of Muthoni being unclean, and the tribe needing to take action against the menace of Waiyaki. Waiyaki is in league with the white man and his taxation. He speaks of Waiyaki's journeys to Siriana. Waiyaki is confused as to why he says nothing of Joshua and Nyambura yet.

Waiyaki speaks next. He reminds the people in strong words that Kabonyi was one of the first to go to the white man. He then reminds them of their glorious past and the united hills that made the victories of old possible. He speaks of Mugo's prophecy and says that they must not choose violence: they must unite or the white man will always be on their back. At this, the people cheer and seem very moved.

The people begin to move toward Kabonyi angrily, but Waiyaki calls out that they must not touch him. It is almost as if he realizes at that moment what Kabonyi and the Kiama mean for the tribe. Kinuthia watches, a sense of terror pervading him. Something is wrong.

Kabonyi speaks again. Everyone is listening to his broken, grief-stricken voice. He is reminding them of the oath Waiyaki took to never tell the tribe's secrets. Waiyaki is getting nervous. Kabonyi blurts out that he can prove Waiyaki is in league with Joshua, and he brings forth Nyambura. Kabonyi tells Waiyaki to deny her.

The call for the denial bounces around the ridges but the river thrums on. The people shout "the oath! The oath!" Waiyaki looks at his love and knows he cannot deny her, nor can he go back on his love. Everyone is silent. He walks up to her and takes her in his arms. The oath does not

preclude love, and he wants to say that. A woman yells out “the oath!” before he can, though, and a ripple of rage spreads through the people. How could their Teacher betray them?

No one will listen as Waiyaki tries to calm them. An elder stands and proclaims that Waiyaki and Nyambura will be put in the hands of the Kiama, which will judge them and decide what to do with them. It is the best thing. The crowd roars back agreement and they quickly move away into darkness.

The land is silent. The ridges lie side by side and the river flows between them through the valley of life.

## **Analysis**

In this last block of chapters, Waiyaki seems as if he were on top of things, but there are indications that his fall is imminent. He stresses continuously over Nyambura refusing his offer of marriage but is also annoyed that others keep asking him about her. The pressures weigh on him and “he felt exhausted in body and spirit” (119). He stresses over Chege’s prophecy and wonders “Was he that savior? Was he the Promised One or had Chege’s mind been roving? How would he save them? Chege had placed a burden on his shoulders, a burden hard to carry” (119). Waiyaki is perspicacious to an extent, but he still firmly believes “the white man’s education was an instrument of enlightenment and advance if it only could be used well” (119). Pangs of guilt assault him because he didn’t talk about unity, but he still tells himself, “Another time. A next time...next time” (121).

Ngugi heavily foreshadows Waiyaki’s reckoning; it does not come as any surprise whatsoever. Even though Waiyaki is committed to education, others know it is not the end-all-be-all. Kinuthia privately wonders if his friend knows “that people wanted action now, that the new enthusiasm and awareness embraced more than the desire for learning. People wanted to move forward” (118). Education is all well and good, but their lands are being taken and they are being taxed. When the Kiama calls for Waiyaki, his fate is not yet sealed—but it certainly does not go well. Kabonyi accuses him of several things he cannot adequately explain away, and his yelling at an elder does not augur favorably. After he leaves them the elders begin discussing him in a rueful way, starting to shift the narrative about him.

Waiyaki's time at the sacred grove provides illumination, but it will not prove to be enough. His fate is sealed when he will not renounce Nyambura when standing before the tribe. His breaking of the oath is perceived as too consequential of a thing to ignore, and the fact that he had been estranged from the tribe for a while now means that he cannot explain himself. Waiyaki is, as Linda Jordan Tucker notes, "ultimately failing the people and placing himself in danger...he has a messianic vision of himself but is not able to fill it." In defense of Waiyaki, it is almost an impossible prophecy that Chege laid out for his son. Apollo O. Omoko sees this as the basis for the novel's tragic elements, for "its ill-fated hero is burdened with the weight of an unrealizable but authoritative prophecy. That Waiyaki fails to lead the people beyond coloniality calls into question the founding authority of prophecy and the organic community it would foreordain." It would seem as if Ngugi is antipathetic towards all single, solitary figures who claim to have the solution to the tribe's problems—Joshua, Chege, Waiyaki, Kabonyi—and that there needs to be a more collective, communal decision-making.

Returning to the issue of Waiyaki and Nyambura specifically, the fact that they proposed a middle way of sorts but could not be allowed to enact it is a reflection of Ngugi's pessimism regarding the ability to achieve reconciliation. Elias Bongmba explains that "Waiyaki stands precisely between these two worlds as a symbol of this syncretic possibility, offering a third discourse in the form of African nationalism"—but neither side is willing to embrace it yet.

The novel thus ends pessimistically, its final image of the Honia a significant one, as Charles E. Nnolim writes: "It is a disturbing end, a tragic one, for Ngugi seems to look on Honia River as symbolizing the continued and eternal strife between the Makuyu and Kamenio tribesmen."

## **Symbols, Allegory and Motifs**

### **Symbol: Honia River**

Honia is a symbol of ideological division, as it flows in between the two rival communities. However, it also serves as a place that unifies them, as the people, animals, crops, and plants depend on its water. Moreover, both communities perform their rituals there: while the Christians baptize the faithful in the river, the tribes on the other side celebrate the ritual of circumcision.

**Symbol: Kamenno and Makuyu**

The two ridges Kamenno and Makuyu represent the opposing communities of traditional and Christian people. Their hostile relationship is illustrated by the geographical features of the ridges, which appear "like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region."

**Symbol: Muthoni**

Muthoni is a symbol of the unification of traditional and Christian beliefs. She respects and follows elements of both faiths. For example, she believes in God and Jesus, but she also wants to become a full member of her tribe by getting circumcised, which is condemned by the Christians. However, her death indicates that it is impossible to unite them.

**Symbol: The Schools**

The schools in the story are a symbol of knowledge—in particular, the knowledge to improve the lives of the tribe and gain independence from the colonialists. However, the Christian schools, representing the knowledge that the colonialists introduce to the country, are not condemned. Instead, they are seen as an inspiration, as Waiyaki repeatedly mentions that the knowledge of the white man is important for their own growth. Therefore, he adopts elements of the foreign curriculum and implements them in his traditional setting.

**Motif: Shepherds**

A common motif in the story is the image of the shepherd. Both Waiyaki and his Christian rival, Joshua, are depicted as shepherds who lead their followers—the metaphorical flock of sheep—to a better life. This is also an allusion to the Bible, where Christian leaders, particularly Jesus, are portrayed as shepherds. Therefore, the two leaders are considered saviors by their people.

**Metaphors and Similes****Simile:****Waiyaki's Burden**

When Chege tells his son Waiyaki that he is the last of his line and that he is supposed to fulfill the prophecy of saving their people, Waiyaki "felt as if a heavy cloud was pressing down his soul." The simile emphasizes how Waiyaki feels crushed by the immense weight of the burden which his father put on him. Waiyaki will labor under this burden for the entire text. Even while

he is proud of his accomplishments, he cannot help but dwell on the prophecy and wonder whether or not it really pertains to him.

### **The Trance**

Taking part in the ceremonial dance before his circumcision, Waiyaki "felt as if a hand soft and strong had held his soul and whipped it off." This simile illustrates his state of trance, where he forgets all his sorrows temporarily and finally feels free. Indeed, the only thing he clings on to is now "this mad intoxication of ecstasy and pleasure." Waiyaki rarely allows himself to indulge like this, and when he is finished he feels embarrassed. This foreshadows his growing estrangement from the tribe.

### **Waiyaki, the Shepherd**

Talking to his community about education, Waiyaki is portrayed "like a shepherd speaking to his flock." This simile alludes to Jesus speaking to his followers, as the image of Jesus as a shepherd is a common motif in the Bible. Therefore, Waiyaki is seen as the savior of the tribe, leading his followers to the land of education. It is also important that Ngugi uses a Christian allusion because it reveals how Waiyaki straddles both the white and the Kenyan worlds.

### **Darkness and Sin**

Ngugi writes of Joshua, "He realized the ignorance of his people. He felt the depth of the darkness in which they lived. He saw the muddy water through which they waded unaware of the dirt and mud" (29). There are several metaphors here, all of which suggest that Joshua is very antagonistic towards the tribal customs to which he used to adhere. He depicts the people in a darkness; they need the light of Christ to save them. He also suggests that the people are through the mud, meaning they are soiled as they slog along. They need to be cleansed by Christ, which is what Joshua hopes to do for them.

### **Religion and Joshua**

Of his own family, Joshua thinks, "Religious uniformity in his own home was binding. He meant to be an example to all, a bright light that would show the way, a rock on which the weak would step on their way to Christ" (30). First, Joshua uses the metaphor of a bind to suggest how tightly his house is run; it is clear why Muthoni and Nyambura feel stifled in his household. Second, Joshua envisions himself as a light that can show the people immersed in darkness the

errors of their ways. And third, Joshua uses the metaphor of a rock that provides a foundation for the people to walk upon. These three metaphors indicate that Joshua thinks very highly of himself.

## **Irony**

### **Dramatic Irony: Waiyaki**

The greatest irony is that Waiyaki, who tries to unite the two rival communities, fails in his endeavor because the inhabitants of the two ridges are more hostile than ever. Instead of leading his tribe to a better life, he ends up losing all his schools, which means that all his hard work and dedication was in vain. This is ironic because Waiyaki was "The Teacher": the Messiah, the savior, and the hero of the tribe. He was supposed to unify the people, but he could not do so.

### **Dramatic Irony: Waiyaki's Second Birth**

The people attending the ceremony of Waiyaki's second birth expect it to be a happy experience for him. After all, he is now one step closer to becoming a man and a full member of the tribe. However, the outcome is the opposite: he keeps crying, which frightens the people around him because this was not what usually happens. The irony is heightened in the sense that he is their future savior: the son of Chege, the chosen one.

### **Situational Irony: Christianity**

When Muthoni tells her sister that she wants to get circumcised, Nyambura points out that this tradition is a sin and the work of the devil. However, Muthoni reveals the irony of their own Christian community: "Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians" (26). Therefore, she emphasizes that the Christians seem to be inconsistent in applying their own rules when it comes to converting people. Joshua is one of the most ardent Christians and is circumcised; Muthoni cannot help but point this out to her sister.

### **Dramatic Irony: Joshua's Prayers**

When Joshua sees the tribes prepare for their pagan rituals, he prays to God: "O, God, why don't you descend on this wicked generation and finish their evil ways? Circumcision is coming. Fight by me, Oh Lord. Bring down fire and thunder, Bring down the flood." Right in the next sentence, the irony is revealed: "Nothing happened" (32). This is irony on the part of the narrator,



who makes it clear that Joshua doesn't have a direct line to God even though he zealously promotes the faith.

## **Imagery**

### **The Sacred Grove**

When Chege brings Waiyaki to the Sacred Grove, the tree on top of the hill is depicted as a mighty deity ruling over nature and everyone living in it: "It was a huge tree, thick and mysterious. Bush grew and bowed reverently around it." Waiyaki feels a sense of awe when the tree is personified, standing there, "towering over the hill, watching, as it were, the whole country." This image conveys the ancient and powerful history of Kenya and its people; because Waiyaki comes here and receives the prophecy, it connotes the fact that Waiyaki is also powerful and descended from this line.

### **Joshua's House**

Joshua's house is described as a "tin-roofed rectangular building standing quite distinctly by itself on the ridge," indicating its isolated location. This suggests that Joshua and his followers are still outliers. However, it is decaying, as the roof is so broken that it cannot protect the inhabitants from rain any longer, so this image of the house represents the gradual process of colonization.

## **Rain**

Chapter 13 begins with the image of rainfall. While only a few isolated drops fall at first, soon they are described as participating in a race, eventually replaced by jets of water. The onomatopoeia "drip" illustrates the sounds of the rain, while the simile "like soldiers marking time" connotes military discipline. The rain is also portrayed as a kind of savior reviving nature, as "the grass outside, which for a long time had been scorched and sickly, was now beginning to wake up refreshed." This imagery suggests how important nature is to the people of the ridges, and how it can be both good and bad.

## **Miriamu**

Ngugi writes of Nyambura and Muthoni's mother and Joshua's wife, "one could still tell by her eyes that this was a religion learnt and accepted; inside the Gikuyu woman was sleeping" (34). This is a potent image because it shows how even though Christianity is taking a foothold, many

people are loath to give up their tribal beliefs and customs. It is telling that Miriamu, the wife of Joshua, is not a true convert to the white man's faith.

## **Christianity in Kenya**

The main tension of *The River Between*, at least on a high level, is that of Christianity's incursion into Kenya. We will look at that from a historical perspective to further contextualize what is happening in Ngugi's work.

Christianity (specifically, Catholicism) came to East Africa in the earliest years of European exploration, became entrenched in the 19th century. A CMS missionary settled near Mombasa in 1844, and when a settlement for freed slaves opened in Freetown near Mombasa, the first Kenyans were ordained there in 1885.

Missions began to proliferate in the region following the establishment of an Anglican Diocese of Eastern Equatorial Africa, which was formed in 1884. The missions underwent a series of setbacks, including the murder of the first Bishop, but they persisted.

In 1889 the British East Africa Company made inroads into the area and Britain began its colonial rule. The creation of the Uganda railway facilitated the further spread of Christianity, especially out of Nairobi. Several of the most prominent missionary societies were established near the turn of the century: Gospel Missionary Society (1897), Church of Scotland Mission (1898), Holy Ghost Mission (1899), Church Missionary Society (1901), and Africa Inland Mission (1901). The University of Pennsylvania details some of the further splits, noting, "In Kenya there are also several independent Christian churches that have broken ties with other Christian or Protestant denominations. The largest of these independent churches was the Nomiya Luo Church, whose founder, Johana Owalo, was an early convert to Christianity in 1900. In 1907 he had a vision in which he was taken up into heaven by the angel Gabriel. He saw that Europeans and Asians, and even the popes, were not allowed to enter heaven. Later, he converted to Islam and began to preach that mission churches were in opposition to traditional beliefs. His mix of Christian, Anglican, and traditional practices attracted many followers."

The Kikuyu, in particular, resisted the Christians, opposing their attempt to outlaw the clitoridectomy. When some Christians refused to take the Mau Mau oath in 1952, they were killed.

Jomo Kenyatta famously said, “when the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.”

After Kenya achieved independence in 1964, many chose to join the Christian faith. By 2000 over 75% of the population claim to be Christian or Catholic. There are more than 4,000 registered churches in Kenya.

Persecution of Christians is a problem in contemporary Kenya; it mostly stems from the Islamic militant group, al-Shabaab.

## **Literary Elements**

### **Genre**

Novel; Allegory

### **Setting and Context**

20th-century, pre-independence Kenya

### **Narrator and Point of View**

Third-person omniscient narrator

### **Tone and Mood**

Tone: optimistic, meditative, sincere, nervous

Mood: foreboding, tense, lonely

### **Protagonist and Antagonist**

Protagonist: Waiyaki. Antagonists: Joshua; Kabonyi

### **Major Conflict**

While Waiyaki tries to reconcile the two rivaling ridges by providing education, Kabonyi and the elders of his tribe work against his ambition because they want to defend their own interests.

### **Climax**

The climax occurs when Waiyaki is accused by the people of breaking the oath. He had just made a case for himself and defended Nyambura; there is a moment where things might seem to go well for him, but then the people turn on him and seal his fate.

## **Foreshadowing**

1. When Muthoni and Nyambura go up the hill after getting water from the river, Muthoni's barrel falls off and rolls back down to the river. Nyambura thinks this is a bad omen, and, indeed, Muthoni's plan to become a circumcised member of her tribe fails because she dies of her infected wound shortly after. (27)
2. Chege sees what happened to Muthoni as a warning to the hills.
3. The narrator writes that Waiyaki did not stop to think what taking the oath might mean to him, foreshadowing his eventual downfall

## **Understatement**

When Muthoni reveals to her sister that she plans to get circumcised, Nyambura warns her of her father Joshua, who "will be very cross" with her. This is an understatement because Joshua later becomes furious and disowns Muthoni because of her disobedience. (25)

## **Allusions**

1. The head missionary Livingstone may be an allusion to the pioneer missionary David Livingstone, who explored Africa in the late 19th century.
2. There are many allusions to Christianity—God, Jesus, sin, redemption, prayer, etc.
3. "...giving unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (32) refers to Jesus's words in the synoptic gospels
4. Joshua thinks of the sufferings of Job, a biblical figure whom God tested by making his life miserable

## **Paradox**

Joshua preaches that traditional practices such as circumcision are a cardinal sin, yet the Christians allow circumcised people to convert. In fact, Muthoni points out that Joshua and his wife are both circumcised.

## **Parallelism**

1. Both Waiyaki and Joshua are seen as saviors by their followers. Both share the same enthusiasm and dedication for their cause.
2. Waiyaki thinks to himself while he is in pain, "Livingstone in his way was like Chege...standing for the other side...no... confusing the two" (46); the two men parallel each other as visionary leaders.

## **Personification**

1. The story starts with the description of the sleeping ridges, which illustrates how secluded the people were, not caring about anything outside of their lands, with no desire to move forward. This ideal of keeping things the same is emphasized by the personification of the river, which "went on in the same way, never hurrying, never hesitating. People saw this and were happy." (1)
2. "And there the ancient tree stood, towering over the hill, watching, as it were, the whole country." (15)
3. "Yet the hopes and desires kept haunting him. They had followed him all life" (71)
4. "The moon was also awake. Her gaze was hard and looked brittle" (73)