I, Rigoberta Menchú

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RIGOBERTA MENCHU

Rigoberta Menchú Tum is a member of the Maya-Quiché Indigenous community in Guatemala who has devoted her life to protesting the atrocities committed against Indigenous people in her native country. Through her activism in a variety of political groups from an early age, she has sought to educate poor Guatemalans about economic exploitation and resistance to violent repression. After several members of their family were violently killed by the Guatemalan army, Rigoberta's siblings decided to join the guerrillas fighting the government, while she continued her campaigns of education and training for vulnerable communities in the countryside. After being forced into exile in Mexico, she published her autobiographical book *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), based on her interview with Elisabeth Burgos. This book had a huge international impact, bringing to light the brutal military violence that was oppressing Indian communities in Guatemala. As a result of this international attention, Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her work as a social justice leader and an advocate for Indigenous rights in Latin America. She became the youngest person to ever receive this prize. Since then, she has received many prizes over the course of her lifetime for her role as a social justice activist. Although she has returned to Guatemala on various occasions, death threats have forced her into exile. She has continued to play an important role in Guatemalan politics, taking part in peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas at the end of the Guatemalan Civil War in 1996. She has also taken on an international role as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, defending the rights of Indigenous peoples around the world. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray is a Venezuelan anthropologist, historian, and writer. She met Rigoberta Menchú in Paris in 1982 and interviewed her for a week, in order to collect the courageous young activist's life story. Although she structured Rigoberta Menchú's life narrative, she did not modify her interviewee's words, thus allowing the final text to faithfully reflect Rigoberta Menchú's self-expression.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rigoberta Menchú's narrative covers the period of the Guatemalan Civil War, which opposed the Guatemalan state and leftist guerrilla groups from 1960 to 1996. This war reflected the international dynamics of the Cold War, which was a conflict between the Capitalist Bloc led by the United States and the Communist Bloc led by the Soviet Union. In this context, the main international supporter of the Guatemalan government was the United States, whereas the leftist rebel groups received support from communist Cuba. In Guatemala, the guerrilla groups, who fought against unfair land distribution, were supported by the rural poor, of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage. Military dictators such as Generals Kjell Eugenio Laugerud García (1974–1978) and Romeo Lucas García (1978–1982)—whom Rigoberta Menchú mentions in her narrative—were responsible for ordering brutal violence against Indigenous peasants who protested the unequal distribution of land. Human rights abuses were widespread, as the army, police, and secret services took part in the torture, forced disappearance, and murder of over 200,000 people. The scale of these killings, which included the massacre of entire villages of unarmed civilians, is considered a genocide. Collectively, these events are known as the "Guatemalan Genocide," "Maya Genocide" (given that most victims were of Maya origin), and the "Silent Holocaust." A former Guatemalan military dictator, General Efraín Rios Montt, was indicted on the charge of genocide in 2013, but he died before the jury reached a verdict.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rigoberta Menchú's autobiographical narrative is considered a pillar of Latin American "testimonial literature." In testimonial works, a first-person witness gives an account of an oppressive or exploitative situation in order to denounce injustice against a marginalized group. The first example of Latin American testimonial literature is Cuban writer Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966), which recounts the story of a fugitive slave during the Cuban War for Independence. Historical fiction can also be included in testimonial literature. For example, Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) represents through symbols and imaginary events the centuries-long violence and oppression that has plagued many Latin American countries. Other works, such as Chilean writer Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits* (1982) and Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat* (2000) examine dictatorships in Chile and the Dominican Republic. They serve as prominent examples of literature's ability to give a vivid account of political violence in Latin America. In the setting of the United States, 18th- and 19th-century autobiographical slave narratives can be considered early forms of "testimonial literature." For example, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1855) both bring to light the experiences of slaves in the U.S. In this way, they help tell the stories of marginalized groups, victims of racism and violent oppression, to the public.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala
- **When Written:** January 1982 (interview between Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos)
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1983 (Spanish edition)
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Autobiography; Testimonial Literature
- **Setting:** Guatemala from the 1960s to the early 1980s
- **Climax:** The Guatemalan army murders Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio.
- **Antagonist:** Ladinos; the Guatemalan government; the Guatemalan army
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Woman of the People. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* elicited controversy after anthropologist David Stoll accused Rigoberta of describing events that she did not personally witness or experience. Rigoberta Menchú agreed that she had indeed included stories of other community members in her autobiography, but that she did this in order to represent the entirety of her community's experiences, instead of focusing exclusively on her life story. In this way, she confirmed that her role was not to focus on her own experience, but to serve as a spokesperson for the marginalized Indigenous people of Guatemala.

Speak Up. In addition to her native Quiché, Rigoberta learned Spanish in order to turn the language of the Spanish colonizers against her Indigenous community's oppressors. Rigoberta has also taught herself different Mayan languages so that she can communicate with Indigenous communities besides her own.

PLOT SUMMARY

I, Rigoberta Menchú is an autobiography transcribed by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray after interviewing Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum in 1982. At the time of this interview, Rigoberta Menchú is a 23-year-old member of the Indigenous Maya-Quiché community in Guatemala.

Rigoberta's childhood took place between the Altiplano mountains of El Quiché and the fincas ("plantations") on the coast. Rigoberta's parents, the founders of their village in the Altiplano, played an important role in protecting the community. Within the Indigenous group's system of collective representation, Rigoberta's parents were chosen as elected representatives in charge of defending the community's well-being and survival. For four months in the year, the villagers stayed in the Altiplano for the **maize** harvest, which gave them enough food to survive. During the remaining eight months, they worked in the *fincas* as agricultural workers, collecting plants such as cotton and coffee.

The *fincas* were part of a system of exploitation geared toward robbing poor Indians of their hard-earned salaries. Landowners and their overseers used every available occasion to mistreat workers, lying about their debts and deducting money from their salary as punishment. Two of Rigoberta's brothers, Felipe and Nicolás, died on the *fincas*: Felipe of poisoning due to the chemical products sprayed onto the plantation, and Nicolás of malnutrition. Experiences such as these made Rigoberta angry, as she realized that her mother worked extremely hard but that her family still didn't have enough money to buy basic needs like medicine. Rigoberta thus developed a deeply rooted hatred of the *finca* system and the ladinos who exploited poor Indians for personal gain. In Rigoberta's view, her time in the *fincas* represents the birth of her political consciousness: her gradual understanding of the injustice that affects so many Indian people, in a system that values profit over human lives.

Rigoberta contrasts this capitalist mentality with the values that her community promotes, centered on respecting all living things: humans, animals, and plants. The ceremonies that mark Maya-Quiché life emphasize the importance of communing with nature and harming it as little as possible. Before every modification—harvesting **maize**, cutting flowers for a sacred event, or killing an animal for ceremonial purposes—a person must turn to the sun, the connection to their "one God," and ask for permission from nature to engage in such actions.

In addition to Indigenous beliefs in the connection between people and the earth, the community also integrates certain aspects of the Catholic religion in their practices. Encouraged by her parents to play an active role in the village, Rigoberta became a catechist, in charge of teaching the Catholic religion. However, after her friend María died of pesticide poisoning in the *finca*, Rigoberta felt moved by grief, frustration, and anger at her people's unjust suffering. So, she decided to explore an alternative kind of work, serving as a maid for the landowner's family in the capital, Guatemala City.

There, Rigoberta discovered that the rich *ladino* family's racism and contempt was actually worse than the backbreaking labor in the *fincas*. She befriended the other servant, Candelaria, who introduced her to the idea that instead of accepting their mistress's derogatory comments and abusive attitude, they could resist her orders in subtle ways. Emboldened by this notion of resistance, Rigoberta eventually decided that she no longer wanted to accept this situation. She decided to leave the household as soon as she received her pay. However, upon leaving the house, she learned that her father, Vicente Menchú, had been sent to prison.

In conjunction with rich landowners, government institutions were trying to keep the Indian community from fighting for its rights. Vicente was imprisoned as retaliation for his efforts to keep rich *ladino* landowners from taking over the land that belonged to the village. For over a year, Rigoberta's family and the entire village sent all of the money they earned on the *fincas* to pay for lawyers. The community's success in getting Vicente released after a year showed them that Vicente was not an isolated chief, but the spokesperson for a community that was willing to fight as a unified group against injustice.

This experience of injustice turned Vicente into an even more determined activist. Emboldened by a fellow prisoner's political ideas, he joined the newly created Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC). However, his activism brought violent consequences: he was kidnapped and tortured by the landowners' henchmen and, after surviving this brutal episode, was sent to prison once again. Thanks to help from increasingly active peasant unions, he was freed almost immediately. Knowing that his life was at risk, Vicente told his family not to put their trust in him, but in the entire community. He was forced to go into hiding, and the entire family separated in order to take part in different political activities, meant to support the Indigenous struggle for greater rights.

The oppression of Indian villages in the region gradually worsened, as the landowners and the army destroyed villagers' possessions and killed their dogs. In light of this rising violence, the village decided to use violence as a means of self-defense. When the army finally attacked the village, the community, which had been training in self-defense techniques, succeeded in hiding in the mountains. After this event, Rigoberta realized that her village was now well-organized, and that she should use the knowledge she acquired to help protect other Indian communities in the region. After joining the CUC, she traveled to different villages to educate them on political matters and help them organize.

This period was one of intense political activity for Rigoberta. Through her discussions with her compañeros of the CUC, she became more politically literate. She understood that not all *ladinos* were bad and that, in fact, poor *ladinos* suffered the same exploitative conditions as Indians. The goal, then, Rigoberta concluded, was for all poor members of Guatemalan society to unite, in order to fight for better working conditions.

During this period, the Guatemalan army took part in massacres against entire Indian villages, leaving mass graves behind. Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio was kidnapped and tortured. He was later burned alive, along with other prisoners, in front of a crowd that included his own family members. This horrific episode was traumatic for Rigoberta's entire family. At the same time, it motivated everyone to work even harder in raising consciousness about the army's brutal treatment of Indians who were fighting against injustice.

In January 1980, Rigoberta's father and many *compañeros* of the CUC planned a march on the Spanish Embassy to raise international awareness on the plight of Indians and peasants in Guatemala. However, the armed forces attacked the building, setting it on fire and killing everyone present, including Rigoberta's father and the embassy officials. This event aroused political consciousness across Guatemala, as members of all social classes grasped the scope of the government's violence. A few months later, the army kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed Rigoberta's mother.

These tragic events led Rigoberta to reflect on her own activism and her parents' legacy. In line with her father's Christian beliefs, she believed that her calling was to create a "Church of the poor" in Guatemala. Unlike the Catholic Church hierarchy, which sided with the oppressive authorities, Rigoberta's church would seek to create justice and equality. Following her mother's ideas, Rigoberta also believed that true social change could only take place if women's issues were treated with as much importance as broad problems like economic exploitation.

After spending many months in hiding, Rigoberta finally left the country, thanks to the help of the CUC. She spent time in Mexico, where she shared her story and details of the violence that Indians suffer in Guatemala at an international religious conference. Although she received international help, including offers to live in Europe, she remained committed to fighting for the poor in Guatemala, even if this meant risking her life. She concludes that the suffering, grief, and anger she has endured throughout her life have given her the strength to fight for all of her poor *compañeros*, who have become a family to her. Rigoberta also declares that she's dedicated to preserving her Indian customs and retaining its secrets, in order to safeguard her community's identity.

CHARACTERS

Rigoberta Menchú Tum – The titular narrator and protagonist of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Rigoberta Menchú Tum is 23 years old when she recounts her life story. As a member of the Maya-Quiché Indigenous group in Guatemala, Rigoberta considers herself a spokesperson for her entire community. Over the course of her narrative, she recounts her transformation from a timid girl, who let her brothers hit her without defending herself, to a prominent political activist, risking her life to denounce the conditions of poor Indians in Guatemala. Rigoberta's political consciousness was awakened by the exploitative conditions that she witnessed from an early age: her family's backbreaking work on the coastal plantations (fincas); the death of two of her brothers, Nicolás and Felipe, due to malnutrition and poisonous pesticides; and her own experience of discrimination while working as a maid in the capital. As a result of these experiences, Rigoberta developed

enormous hatred and anger toward the ladinos—the rich, mixed-race elites who governed the country. Inspired by her parents' activism, her commitment to defending her community led her to take part in political groups such as the CUC, meant to defend peasants' rights in Guatemala. Along the way, she witnessed horrific events like the torture of her brother Petrocinio by the army, the murder of her father Vicente during a protest at the Spanish Embassy, and the torture and rape of her mother. All of this trauma motivated her to keep fighting for justice and equality, so that other people wouldn't have to endure so much pain. Rigoberta's bravery and her commitment to ideals of justice and equality reveal themselves in her willingness to risk her life in the name of her family and community.

Vicente Menchú – Rigoberta's father was a calm and confident man who was devoted to his family, community, and Catholic faith. Along with Rigoberta's mother, Vicente was a founder and an elected representative of their family's village in the Altiplano mountains. His courageous fight to protect his village from aggressive plantation owners who stole the villagers' land made him numerous enemies among the ladino elite. As a result, he was imprisoned twice and was also kidnapped and tortured as retaliation for his activism. After these events, he spent the rest of his life in hiding, although he remained active in the CUC, organizing and educating the Guatemalan poor about how best to resist violent oppression. He was killed during protests at the Spanish Embassy in January 1980, after the armed forces attacked the protesters and set fire to the building. The legacy of his leadership was so strong that a political organization, the Vicente Menchú Revolutionary Christians, was named in his honor. Among his children, Vicente Menchú had a special preference for his daughter Rigoberta, whom he encouraged to become a leader in her community and to speak up in political committees. In his selfless sacrifice for ideals of justice and equality, Vicente served as a role model for his daughter and for his entire community.

Rigoberta's Mother – Like her husband, Vicente, Rigoberta's mother was a courageous woman who dedicated her life to the well-being of her family and community. Along with Vicente, Rigoberta's mother was a founder and an elected representative of their village in the Altiplano mountains. Although Rigoberta felt closer to her father while growing up, she regretted not spending more time with her mother, who was deeply knowledgeable about medicinal plants and had a special connection with nature, in particular with animals. Rigoberta's mother dedicated herself to her family, spending all of her time and money caring for her children. Her life was marked by a great deal of hard work and suffering, in particular the grief of seeing her children die: her son Felipe died of poisoning on a finca, her son Nicolás of malnutrition, and her son Petrocinio of brutal torture by the Guatemalan army. Although Rigoberta's mother was initially willing to accept suffering as an integral part of life, the horrific murder of Petrocinio turned her into a fearless activist. She dedicated the rest of her life to educating Indian women about the political struggle to secure the rights of Indigenous communities in Guatemala. Convinced that activism was the only solution to so much horror, she wanted to ensure that no other mother would have to see their child die. Although Rigoberta's mother believed in different gender roles for women and men, she also taught Rigoberta that successful political movements treated women's issues just as seriously as men's. In this sense, she was a fierce defender of women's rights, dedicated to women's inclusion in political issues. Rigoberta's mother was eventually tortured, raped, and killed by the Guatemalan army, as retaliation for her political activism.

Rigoberta's Grandfather – Rigoberta's grandfather, whom Rigoberta believes might still be alive at the time of her recounting, often shared stories with his grandchildren about the history of their Maya-Quiché community. He recalled growing up when slavery was legal and working as a slave for a white landowner. He often contrasted his childhood (when, according to him, Indians lived past 100 years) to the present problems that afflict Indigenous people, causing them to die around 50 or 60. He attributed such negative developments to detrimental aspects of modern life, such as chemicals and mechanization. Rigoberta's grandfather invoked their Indian ancestors' resistance to the Spanish colonizers in order to justify using violence as self-defense against brutal ladino landowners. His embrace of violence as resistance sparked debates among Rigoberta's relatives, as each member of the family decided for themselves how best to take part in the struggle against Guatemala's oppressive government. Rigoberta's grandfather's insistence on violent self-defense sought to overturn racist stereotypes that Indian people were stupid, lazy, and cowardly, and to ensure his people's survival.

Petrocinio Menchú Tum – Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio was the secretary of their village and thus stayed in the village after his family separated to engage in political tasks of their own. As retaliation for his family's political activities, the Guatemalan army kidnapped and tortured him for over two weeks. Petrocinio was left disfigured finally burned alive, alongside other prisoners, in a horrific display meant to subdue Indian resistance and punish guerrillas for their activities in the mountains. Petrocinio's fate was a particularly brutal illustration of how the army terrorized Indian communities in order to keep them from protesting against social issues such as unfair land distribution.

Candelaria – Candelaria, Rigoberta's friend and fellow maid in Guatemala City, was outspoken and strong-willed. She introduced Rigoberta to the notion that, instead of enduring their mistress's condescending, racist comments in silence, they could resist in a variety of ways. For example, they could talk back or refuse to do certain tasks. Candelaria had the

advantage of speaking Spanish, which she bravely utilized as a means of defending Rigoberta and herself. When Rigoberta's father asked his daughter for money to return to their village after a visit in the capital, Candelaria intervened, forcing the mistress to pay Rigoberta. Her solidarity and generosity toward her coworker played an important role in introducing Rigoberta to the idea that, despite their vulnerable position as servants, they could challenge authority figures by uniting and defending their dignity. This taught Rigoberta that vulnerable workers could achieve power when they joined forces, which influenced her belief in the value of collective organization in the face of government oppression.

The Landowner's Wife (The Mistress) – The mistress was the woman for whom Rigoberta and Candelaria worked as servants in Guatemala City. She was a racist and manipulative woman who spent most of her time complaining about her maids' insufficient work. She considered Indians like Rigoberta and Candelaria dirty, lazy, and less deserving of respect than animals. Indifferent to her maids' feelings, she expected them to "initiate" her sons sexually, as though the family owned the servants' bodies. The mistress also selfishly refused to give money to Rigoberta's father when he came to the house. It was only after Candelaria's forceful intervention that the mistress gave Rigoberta some money, which she deducted from her salary. When Rigoberta was finally paid for her work and announced her resignation, the mistress immediately begged her to stay, claiming that the family loved her and promising that she would raise her salary. This sudden demonstration of affection only highlighted the mistress's arrogant, domineering attitude: she wanted to have submissive servants at her service, but she couldn't accept that they might want to leave and that they, too, deserved dignity.

Nicolás Menchú Tum – Rigoberta's little brother Nicolás died at the age of two, when Rigoberta was eight years old. He passed away of malnutrition on the finca (plantation) where Rigoberta and her mother were working. When he got sick, Rigoberta's mother despaired at not having enough money to buy medicine for him or, later, to pay the *finca* overseer to bury her son's body on the property. Nicolás's death highlights the injustice that poor Indian workers suffered on *fincas*, and it led Rigoberta to feel intense fear and hatred for the first time in her life. She realized that, as an adult woman, she, too, would likely have to bury her own children, given how high the child mortality rate was in Indigenous communities. The death of this innocent boy thus served as an early impulse for Rigoberta to question the suffering in her community and to reflect on the possibility of escaping the cycle of poverty she grew up in.

Felipe Menchú Tum – Rigoberta's eldest brother Felipe, whom she never knew, died of intoxication on the finca after the coffee plants were sprayed with pesticides. This is one of the many deaths on the *finca* that highlight the lack of interest landowners had in their workers' safety and well-being. It also emphasizes the dangers of modern chemicals, which contrasts with Maya-Quiché people's insistence on making everything by hand and avoiding products that have been made with modern machinery.

María – Like Felipe Menchú, Rigoberta's friend María died of chemical poisoning on a finca (plantation) after the cotton fields were sprayed with pesticides. María had previously told Rigoberta that she did not want to get married, since most Indian women were condemned to seeing their children due to the high rates of malnutrition in the community. María's death forced Rigoberta, then 14 years old, to reflect on these issues herself. Like her brother Nicolás's death, this traumatic event led her to feel intense anger at the exploitative *finca* system. Ultimately, it led Rigoberta to take a bold action to try to give her life another course: she decided to leave the *finca* and work as a maid in the capital. This early train of thought shows Rigoberta's struggle to conceive of an Indigenous way of life that could turn suffering into an opportunity for action and resistance.

Petrona Chona – Rigoberta's friend Petrona Chona, who was married and had two children, was brutally murdered while working on a finca, after refusing to become the landowner's son Carlos García's lover. As punishment for this rejection, Carlos García ordered his bodyguard to cut the young woman to pieces with a machete. Petrona's was the first dead body Rigoberta ever saw. The horror of this scene emphasizes not only the physical vulnerability of poor Indians on *fincas*, but also their legal vulnerability. Indeed, when the bodyguard responsible for killing this innocent woman was not punished in any substantial way, Rigoberta realized that the entire legal and political system was set up to disadvantage the poor. The Guatemalan elites didn't about justice, preferring to bow to the interests of rich landowners like the García family.

Carlos García – The landowner's son Carlos García tried to coerce Petrona Chona, an Indian finca worker, into becoming his lover. After she refused, he sent his bodyguard to kill her in a brutal way, by hacking her to pieces with a machete. This savage crime revealed Carlos's disregard for poor Indian workers' lives, and his belief that it was his right to dispose of his people as he pleased. His actions highlight the savage violence that can accompany economic exploitation, as poor workers like Petrona had no recourse to defend themselves from their employers' cruelty.

Carlos García's Bodyguard – Carlos García's bodyguard obeyed his employer's order to cut Petrona Chona into pieces after the young woman refused to become Carlos's lover. The bodyguard was sentenced to just 15 days in prison for his crime. This punishment was intended to calm down the angry workers in Petrona's community, but it didn't actually bring about justice for the innocent woman's death. In this sense, the bodyguard's murder of Petrona shows how the rich and powerful in Guatemala weren't held accountable for their

crimes against the poor, and how the legal system sided with rich ladinos instead of defending truth and justice.

Tecún Umán – Sixteenth-century Maya-Quiché warrior Tecún Umán was killed during a battle against Spanish colonizers. Although he is celebrated as a warrior in Guatemalan schools, Rigoberta explains that, to the Indian community, his acts are not a fact of the past. For Indians, the struggle for his community's survival continues today. Honoring him as a hero devalues his work by relegating him to the past and thus making him irrelevant in the present. Rigoberta's discussion concerning the role of ancestors in Indian society highlights the gap between Indigenous traditions and official Guatemalan schooling, which borrows elements of Indian culture without fully understanding and respecting them.

The old lady – This 90-year-old lady, whom Rigoberta meets during her educational activities in the countryside, is remarkable for her bravery and resilience. Although her entire family has been murdered by the army, she resolves to confront soldiers face-to-face when they enter her village. Ultimately, she succeeds in scaring the cowardly soldiers away, because they believe that she might be part of a guerilla. This courageous deed reveals that everyone—including the supposedly weakest members of society—is capable of contributing positively to poor Indians' political struggle against the army, in possibly unpredictable ways.

TERMS

Maya-Quiché – **Rigoberta Menchú** belongs to the Maya-Quiché Indigenous group, one of the 12 Indigenous communities in Guatemala. The Maya-Quiché speak Quiché and live primarily in the mountainous region of El Quiché, in the northwestern part of Guatemala.

Ladino – The Spanish word *ladino* refers to mixed-race people in Guatemala. Although the majority of Guatemalans are of Indigenous origin, a small elite of rich *ladinos* dominate the country's political and economic system. In this sense, **Rigoberta** and her family also use the word *ladino* to refer to anyone who seeks to dominate or denigrate Indigenous groups, and those who support an oppressive racial hierarchy.

Compañero – The Spanish word *compañero* literally translates to "companion." In this sense, at the beginning of **Rigoberta**'s story, it refers to members of Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community. Later on, the term is increasingly used in a political context to mean "comrade," as Rigoberta's becomes involved in revolutionary groups. These include the CUC, labor unions, and other political organizations that promote solidarity and comradeship. The phrase "*compañeros* in the mountains" specifically refers to guerrilla groups.

Finca – A *finca* is a large plantation or estate. **Rigoberta** and her fellow Indigenous peasants work in a variety of *fincas* on the Guatemalan coast, harvesting coffee, sugar, cotton, cardamom, and other crops. Over the course of Rigoberta's narrative, the *fincas* become associated with brutal exploitation, as landowners and overseers frequently abuse or trick their poor Indigenous workers.

Altiplano – The Altiplano is the mountainous region in northwest Guatemala where **Rigoberta** and her fellow villagers live. It is where most of the country's Indigenous population lives.

Fiesta – *Fiesta* is the Spanish word for "party" or "celebration"; it's used by both ladinos and Maya-Quiché Indians. In **Rigoberta**'s narrative, *fiestas* usually honor important cultural events and might involve special activities, such as eating meat.

Machismo – *Machismo* is a system of cultural norms in which stereotypically male traits, such as physical strength, are valued more than stereotypically feminine traits. It is associated with a variety of behaviors and beliefs: for example, relegating women's activities to the domestic sphere, giving men more freedom than women, or underestimating women's courage and intelligence.

Nahual – In the Maya-Quiché Indigenous community, each person is assigned a *nahual* or natural "double" at birth, according to a special pre-defined calendar. The *nahual* can be any living thing, though it's usually an animal. It plays a role in shaping a person's personality and also marks the full integration of a child into the Indigenous community. As a result, it forms a central core of Indians' identity. This explains why **Rigoberta** prefers to keep her *nahual* secret, in order to safeguard this important aspect of her Maya-Quiché community's beliefs.

Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) – The *Comité de Unidad Campesina* (CUC) is an Indigenous Guatemalan labor organization. Both **Rigoberta** and her **father** are members of this organization, which seeks to organize poor Indigenous communities and to educate them about exploitation and oppression. It plays an important role in giving national visibility to peasants' demands for greater labor rights.

Guatemalan National Institute for Agrarian Transformation (INTA) – The INTA is a government institution in charge of land affairs in Guatemala. **Rigoberta**'s **father** appeals to them on many occasions, but they soon prove corrupt: they align with rich landowners and trick Rigoberta's village into signing documents that actually deprive them of land.

Catholic Action – Catholic Action is a religious association that seeks to convert Indigenous Guatemalans to Catholicism. Although **Rigoberta** criticizes some of the organizations political attitudes, she also learns important aspects of the Catholic doctrine from its members.

Cantina – A *cantina* is a bar on the finca that also sells groceries.

Mimbre – *Mimbre* is type of willow used for making baskets and

furniture.

Corte – *Corte* is the multicolored material that Indigenous Guatemalan women make into skirts, which form part of their traditional costumes.

Catechist – A catechist is a teacher of Catholic doctrine.

THEMES

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TOLERANCE VS. RESISTANCE

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 23-year-old Rigoberta Menchú Tum relates her life experience as a member of the Maya-Quiché Indigenous community in Guatemala. For decades, landowners and complicit government institutions have sought to keep members of Rigoberta's community and, more broadly, poor Guatemalan peasants, from owning land. As Rigoberta gives an account of her childhood as well as her adulthood as a political activist, her narrative reveals a shift in her approach to suffering and injustice: from anger, confusion, and helplessness, the young woman soon resorts to active resistance and rebellion. In the face of severe oppression, both Rigoberta and her community reject their culture's traditional principles of nonviolence for the sake of survival: instead of surrendering, they choose to fight the oppressive landowners and government that seek to destroy the community. Although endurance and resilience are key aspects of the Maya-Quiché mentality, Rigoberta's experiences suggest that passive acceptance of injustice isn't a sustainable strategy. Rather, resilience should be integrated into an active political struggle to defend people's rights.

During Rigoberta's childhood, her Maya-Quiché community defends suffering and unhappiness as a way of life: instead of striving for change, they believe that people should accept their fate with endurance and dignity. For example, as part of various Indigenous ceremonies, Indian children are taught that oppression is an ordinary aspect of life, and that they should resign themselves to a certain degree of unhappiness. On Rigoberta's 10th birthday (which symbolically marks her transition into adulthood), her parents tell her that poverty will keep her from realizing the personal goals she might have for herself, but that she should endure this fate with strength and resilience. Although Rigoberta respects her parents' beliefs, their embrace of suffering does not bring her peace. On the contrary, witnessing a variety of traumatic events—the death of her young brother Nicolás due to malnutrition, the grief and strenuous work that her mother endures without complaining, and the degrading treatment of Indian workers on the fincas—brings her much pain and anger. She develops a deep hatred of the *finca* system and the mixed-race ladinos who exploit poor Indians for personal gain. At a loss about what to do with these emotions, Rigoberta considers extreme options such as taking her own life or leaving the community to work as a maid in the capital. Without a solution to so much injustice, these emotions confuse her.

After these early years of anger, Rigoberta undergoes a shift in perspective: she realizes that she can fight against exploitation and discrimination, instead of simply accepting it as a necessary aspect of life. While working as a maid for a rich *ladino* family in Guatemala City, Rigoberta notices her coworker Candelaria's resistance to some of their mistress's commands. This behavior inspires her to reflect on her own life choices. Although Rigoberta's upbringing has taught her to work hard and obey orders, she realizes that she is not willing to accept her mistress's contempt and discrimination. In the end, she chooses to quit her job, a decision that signals her newfound willingness to stand up for herself.

This change in Rigoberta's attitude foreshadows a change in her entire community's mentality. It is precisely during this period that her father Vicente Menchú, who has been defending his village's right to own land against landowners' appropriations, is sent to prison because of his activism. Through conversations with other prisoners, Vicente discovers that the problems his community faces are common to many other poor Guatemalans. This leads him to take part in the creation of the CUC, a group meant to defend peasants throughout the country. The new ideas he brings, throughout his time as an elected village representative and as a political activist, help the community understand that the oppression they suffer is the product of an unjust system of exploitation. And by bonding together, the villagers realize that they might be able to actively combat their suffering. As a result, the community realizes that the same endurance they have used to tolerate suffering can be put at the service of a different goal: resisting their oppressors. The villagers' sense of self-sacrifice proves beneficial in their approach to resistance and social justice, as everyone—men, women, and children—agrees to take part in the fight for survival. Although the villagers know this involves risking their lives, they are used to so much suffering that they accept the risk of putting their health and well-being in danger, for the good of the community.

Experiences of brutal suffering thus motivate Rigoberta and her people to dedicate themselves to the political cause. For example, although the violent murder of Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio has the potential to make her family members give up on their political resistance, it actually has the opposite effect: it encourages them to work even harder to secure Indigenous rights, so that no one else will have to endure such a

traumatic event. Suffering, then, takes on new meaning: it remains a source of grief and anguish, but it also motivates everyone to move the political struggle forward. Endurance no longer breeds passive acceptance, but rather a steadfast commitment to resistance against cruel oppression. This shift from acceptance to resistance highlights the inner strength of courageous individuals who have endured so much suffering that they turn it into a source of motivation to defend the poor against oppression.

CLASS, RACE, AND INEQUALITY

Much of Rigoberta Menchú Tum's life story is concerned with identifying the roots of inequality and discrimination in Guatemalan society, where a minority of rich, mixed-race ladinos exploits the poor, Indigenous majority. Over time, Rigoberta, her family, and her community—all members of the impoverished Maya-Quiché population—realize that the political system sets them up to fail. Eager to expand its wealth and power, the upper class—which brings together landowners, the government, and the army—maintains an unequal system of economic exploitation and racial discrimination. In this system, the poor are even divided among themselves: many poor *ladinos* hold the racist belief that they're superior to Indians, instead of understanding that they are both members of an exploited class. This unequal system often erupts in the upper class inflicting violence on vulnerable populations, who cannot easily defend themselves against kidnappings and murders. However, the cause for such cruelty lies not in a few evil leaders. Rather, Rigoberta argues that the country's entire political and economic system is harmful: landowners, the government, and the military all seek to dominate poor Indians, in order to keep a rich *ladino* minority in power. Understanding this and uniting the lower classes, she suggests, is the only way to get to the root of the problem and change Guatemala for the better.

The oppression that Rigoberta's community faces—a combination of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and physical violence—is meant to leave the poor helpless, incapable of defending themselves either physically or legally. Government institutions, landowners, and finca overseers find myriad ways to rob poor workers of their hard-earned salaries and of their land. This includes inventing debts, lying about a worker's productivity, and tricking the Indians into signing documents they cannot read. Beyond economic exploitation, the community is also subjected to brutal acts of violence, against which it has no legal recourse. Rigoberta recalls one particularly violent episode, when the bodyguard of Carlos García (one of the landowner's sons) murdered her friend Petrona Chona for refusing to become Carlos's mistress. Although the bodyguard is briefly sent to prison, this punishment is insufficient: it merely seeks to placate the angry Indian peasants. In light of this injustice, Rigoberta realizes that no one in the legal system is interested in listening to poor Indians' version of the facts: the authorities are always going to side with the rich and powerful. These anecdotal acts of violence become large-scale when they turn into a state-sponsored campaign to suppress resistance in Indian villages. Under the guise of eliminating communism and suppressing guerrilla activity, the Guatemalan army massacres entire villages, leaving mass graves behind as a proof of their inhumane deeds. One of the most cruel and painful episodes that Rigoberta recounts is the vicious murder of her brother Petrocinio, tortured and burned alive along with other prisoners accused of belonging to guerrilla groups. The sheer horror of this scene, along with many other instances of savage violence by the army and the police, emphasizes the cruelty that Rigoberta's people are subjected to.

However, despite witnessing uncountable acts of cruelty, Rigoberta gradually realizes that the roots of such violence lie not in a few individuals but in the very structure of governance, in which a rich *ladino* majority dominates a poor Indian majority. This system of domination, which relies on racial and economic inequality, seeks to manipulate everyone into siding with the authorities. For example, despite often coming from the same villages as the Indian peasants, the overseers on the *fincas* treat the workers cruelly. In this way, their desire for economic gain and social advancement turns them into traitors to their own community. Similarly, after speaking with captured soldiers, Rigoberta and her community realize that soldiers are often forced to take part in deeds that they disapprove of. Fear, lack of education, and the threat of violence within the military itself keeps soldiers from rebelling, because they know they will be killed as a consequence. Thus, instead of defending the interests of their Indian communities, these individuals are forced to take part in a violent system of oppression. Racial discrimination also plays an important role in sustaining the economic hierarchy and dividing the poor. Although Rigoberta initially believes that all *ladinos* are evil, her interactions with *ladino* activists in the CUC convince her that this is not necessarily the case. She discovers that poor *ladinos*, too, are exploited by the system, although they might still have racist opinions against Indians. This realization convinces Rigoberta that the only solution is overcoming ethnic, racial, and linguistic divides to unite the poor. Only through unity will the poor succeed in fighting against exploitation.

Therefore, in order to fight against inequality, members of all classes and ethnicities need to realize that the current system of government is deeply unjust. The burning of the Spanish Embassy in January 1980, in which both CUC activists and embassy officials are killed by armed forces, helps raise Guatemalan people's awareness of the violent measures that the government uses to quell social protest. This event leads to a wave of support across all social classes for the fight of poor workers and peasants. It demonstrates to many Guatemalans

that peaceful democratic action lies on the side of the people, not the government. In this light, Rigoberta and her fellow activists believe that promoting education across economic and ethnic divides is the only way the entire country can come to terms with issues of injustice and inequality. Only through dialogue and political awareness will members of previously divided groups realize that they can fight together against injustice—not in order to promote their own social or economic interests, but to support universal human rights. Rigoberta's identification of the entire political and economic system as a singular oppressive force suggests that fostering unity across racial and economic divides is the only way of achieving justice and equality for all.

ANCESTORS, TRADITION, AND COMMUNITY

From the very first lines of her autobiography, Rigoberta Menchú Tum claims to be speaking not only in her own voice, but also as a representative of her entire Maya-Quiché community. What emerges from Rigoberta's narrative is the conviction that, as a member of an Indigenous group, she does not exist alone, but rather as part of a broader community that she's responsible for representing and defending. In this community-oriented approach to life, one's identity is defined in large part by one's adherence to ancestral traditions. But for Rigoberta and other Maya-Quiché people, this involves keeping certain aspects of life secret, as this is the only way to preserve the community's most sacred traditions and beliefs. Although certain external influences, such as aspects of the Catholic Church, can be combined with Indigenous customs, core elements of the Indian identity must be kept secret, in order to remain free from external manipulation. With this, the book suggests that mainstream society tends to be hostile toward Indigenous communities, and that Maya-Quiché people can only honor their ancestors and keep their culture alive if some of their traditions stay hidden from outsiders.

According to Maya-Quiché beliefs, an individual's primary responsibility is not to oneself, but to one's ancestors and to the entire community. When a child is born, it belongs not to his or her parents, but to its Indigenous community. A Maya-Quiché person's goal in life is to replace the dead: in other words, to carry on their ancestors' fight for survival and freedom. The centuries-old Indigenous struggle against Spanish colonizers is extended to the present: it takes the form of a struggle against powerful white and ladino (mixed-race) people who oppress the Indians. Part of this respect for one's ancestral legacy lies in political action, in particular the defense of the community's land from being taken by *ladinos*. In Rigoberta's village, all decisions are made collectively: the villagers gather to discuss practical issues, such as how to distribute their land or how to defend themselves against aggressive landowners. This allows them to keep a unified front against the dangerous threat of land appropriation. In addition, part of this self-defense is also cultural: the villagers must protect their customs from being changed or manipulated by outside influences. This involves, for example, refusing to use modern equipment in the preparation of **maize** for consumption, in order to keep ancestral techniques alive. More broadly, it involves keeping one's ancestral beliefs hidden from the rich and powerful, so that no one can attempt to modify or destroy these customs.

However, despite their suspicious attitude toward modern *ladino* institutions, the Maya-Quiché do welcome some external influences that conform to their belief system, such as certain aspects of the Catholic religion. Some elements of Catholicism are compatible with Indian beliefs. Given Indians' emphasis on respecting one's ancestors, Rigoberta and her community see the biblical forefathers as the equivalent of their own ancestors. This leads them to understand the Catholic religion not as a threatening, rival creed, but rather as a complement to their own customs—one that they can use as yet another means of self-expression. Traditions in Rigoberta's community thus become a hybrid mix between Catholic and Indigenous, without sacrificing core Indian beliefs. In fact, Rigoberta's first leadership role in her village is to work as a catechist, a teacher of the Catholic religion. She memorizes prayers and ceremonies—which she does not always fully understand, given that she is illiterate and does not yet speak Spanish—in order to share them with her community, so that these ceremonies might complement their own Indigenous traditions.

At the same time, as an institution, the Catholic Church can prove threatening when it sides with the Guatemalan elite, which leads Rigoberta's community to keep some of their practices secret from Catholic priests. As Rigoberta argues, some elements of the Catholic doctrine promote submissiveness and impede collective organization against injustice. Although some priests and nuns do support the peasants in their fight against oppression, others criticize the community's democratic, collective form of organization, comparing their elected representatives to "sorcerers." These negative interpretations of democratic elections, central to Rigoberta's community, leads the villagers to distrust the clergy. More broadly, Rigoberta realizes that the Catholic doctrine, as taught by many Guatemalan priests, seeks to silence resistance. Instead of encouraging the poor to fight against injustice, they teach them that they will find justice and closeness to God after death. Rigoberta concludes that such religious doctrines encourage passivity among the poor, convincing them to accept suffering as an indelible part of life instead of revolting against the dominant class.

In addition, Rigoberta realizes that the Church's hierarchical structure can be harmful to her community. Indeed, members of the Church hierarchy frequently side with the military government in Guatemala, proving that the Church can be just

as harmful as other violent institutions, like the army or the police. These considerations encourage Rigoberta's community to adopt a code of secrecy toward people outside the community. Although Rigoberta agrees to share her life story through her autobiography, she still keeps some aspects of Indigenous life secret, such as her nahual, the animal double that she was assigned at birth. This focus on secrecy keeps the community safe from external manipulation and misinterpretation. It allows them to keep their ancestral traditions alive, without the risk of losing them to modern institutions. In sum, despite integrating elements of the Catholic religion in their Indigenous customs, Rigoberta's community prioritizes cultural survival, keeping aspects of their traditions secret so that people outside the community cannot modify or destroy them.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

When Rigoberta Menchú Tum describes gender norms in her Maya-Quiché community, she often struggles to determine how they contribute to inequality. She wonders whether men and women's separate roles are a potential indication of underlying machismo, a value system in which men's behaviors and achievements are valued more than women's. In addition, as a politically conscious woman in a traditionally minded community, Rigoberta finds herself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, her duty as a woman in the community is to become a mother and have children. On the other hand, she knows that in order to defend the community's survival, she must take on a leadership role and contribute to the political struggle. As Rigoberta attempts to make sense of her own position with regard to expected gender roles, she concludes that her priority should be activism, because true social change can only take place if women are fully integrated in the fight for justice. And instead of viewing men and women as two conflicting sides, Rigoberta emphasizes that engaging both men and women in dialogue about gender equality is the only way to build a better, more equal society.

Rigoberta initially argues that gender norms in her community reflect women and men's separate yet complementary tasks, but she also recognizes that this situation is not entirely equal: boys and men are frequently accorded greater liberties than girls and women. Indeed, as Maya-Quiché children grow up, girls are taught household duties, whereas boys learn to work in the field. Rigoberta notes that both tasks are equally valuable to the community: girls' and boys' responsibilities might be separate, but they are equal in importance. However, Rigoberta also realizes that boys are sometimes valued more than girls. She notes that her community has special ceremonies to celebrate the birth of a boy, whereas the equivalent does not exist for girls. Although she says that this honors the hard work that boys will be expected to take part in, she does wonder if this might reflect greater pride in boys' achievements. In addition, Rigoberta notes that this inequality extends to adulthood as well. Unlike her mother, who has a unique role as an elected representative, many Indian women are not allowed to leave their house whenever they please, because of their husbands' jealousy. Rigoberta's reflections suggest that, despite its emphasis on complementary tasks, men and women are not entirely equal in her community.

In parallel, the emphasis on motherhood and reproduction as sacred pillars of communal life creates specific difficulties for women. In the community, women are valued primarily because of their role as mothers and are seen as connected to the earth through their capacity to give life. However, the grief and suffering that motherhood brings (given high rates of child mortality among poor Indians), leads Rigoberta and many other Indian women to question whether or not they actually want to have children. Women from Indigenous communities find themselves in a difficult bind: they're encouraged to become mothers, yet they're aware that some of their children will likely die.

This emphasis on sexual reproduction also risks marginalizing members of the community who do not conform to heterosexual standards. Rigoberta argues that discriminatory ladino attitudes, such as the condemnation of homosexuality, do not exist in her community, because Indians are taught to accept everything that nature gives in all of its diversity. However, Rigoberta's description—which compares homosexuality to a harvest that "did not turn out right"—suggests that homosexuality is still considered an abnormality, something that does not correspond to the "right" way of doing things. This attitude suggests that the community might still harbor prejudice toward sexual behavior that does not conform to the norm. In addition, the community's emphasis on women's purity can overlook underlying exploitation, as is the case with prostitution. The community blames women who engage in prostitution for not respecting their own dignity. However, blaming women for prostitution disregards the exploitative circumstances—namely, the inability to earn enough money on the fincas to survive—that force them to make such decisions. The community's focus on sexual reproduction and women's purity thus creates a difficult situation for individuals who deviate from the norm, whether to avoid the suffering of childrearing, to express their unique sexual identity, or out of economic necessity.

In line with her commitment to activism, Rigoberta concludes that *machismo* might be impossible to eradicate completely, but that political discussion among men and women is the only solution to solving gender inequalities in Guatemala. Rigoberta's personal story highlights her struggle to be both a woman and a political leader. Although she ultimately decides to forgo marriage in order to focus on her fight for the rights of the poor, she realizes that misogyny exists even within

revolutionary political groups. For example, some of the compañeros she works with sometimes refuse to follow a woman's orders. In these situations, instead of blindly imposing her authority, Rigoberta believes that engaging in heartfelt discussions is the solution: through dialogue, men can change their attitude toward women and understand that both genders are perfectly equal. Therefore, Rigoberta believes that true change can only take place if women and men unite. She argues against the creation of women-specific political groups, since women suffer from the same exploitation as men. As Rigoberta's mother argues, true change—including a more favorable position for women in society—takes place when women are capable of making their voice heard in the public sphere. For Rigoberta and her mother, fighting poverty and violence is not enough: the political movements defending the poor in Guatemala should also strive for gender equality. Without the promotion of women's rights, no political or economic achievement will ever be a full victory.

LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, AND POWER

For Rigoberta Menchú Tum, political leaders who defend the poor in Guatemala should derive their authority not from formal education, but from the personal experience of suffering. Official education, she argues, tends to give a distorted vision of Indigenous life and encourage Indian pupils to abandon their ancestral customs. However, despite her suspicion toward certain aspects of formal education, Rigoberta engages with it herself. For example, she chooses to recount her life story not in her native Quiché, but in Spanish, a language she had only recently learned at the time of the interview that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is based on. Rigoberta's embrace of Spanish highlights her willingness to use some tools belonging to the dominant, educated class, such as language, in order to give her community's problems greater national and international visibility. Her story suggests that it can be useful for vulnerable communities to adopt elements of the dominant culture in order to fight against oppression, as long as these tools are used in the service of self-expression.

Linguistic divisions and lack of education among the Guatemalan poor play an important role in keeping ethnic groups in a marginalized position and preventing them from defending their rights. As a political leader, Rigoberta travels around the Guatemalan countryside to educate Indian communities about self-defense. This leads her to realize that, despite suffering from the same problems of exploitation and violent oppression, the 12 different Indigenous groups present in Guatemala all have different languages. Although this maintains diversity in Indian customs, it also creates a significant problem for political organization, as it's difficult for these communities to communicate with one another and unite against their common oppressors. In addition, the fact that these communities do not speak Spanish leaves them in a marginalized position with regard to the Guatemalan government. As Rigoberta's father experiences firsthand, a knowledge of Spanish is necessary to navigate Guatemala's political and legal systems (for example, institutions such as the INTA). Without such linguistic competence, it is easy for landowners and government officials to manipulate Indians, for example by tricking them into signing documents that go against their interests (something that happens multiple times in Rigoberta's community). In this way, linguistic divisions impede Indians' access to government services and prevent them from defending their rights.

However, the solution for such divisions does not necessarily lie in a unified educational system. Although learning Spanish can be beneficial to Indian communities in their fight for greater political representation, this language also threatens cultural diversity in Guatemala. Part of the pride that each ethnic group feels toward its heritage involves keeping their ethnic language alive. The broad diffusion of Spanish could potentially threaten Indigenous groups' unique identities. In addition, the traditional education system in Guatemala is not geared toward Indian pupils. Rigoberta is particularly critical of the system's approach to history: for example, schools teach children that Guatemalan independence was a victory against the Spanish colonial powers. Rigoberta notes that this view of history does not take into account the Indigenous perspective. From their point of view, national independence did not bring freedom: rather, it forced Indians to defend their rights against the new dominant class, the ladinos. Official interpretations of history, Rigoberta concludes, align with the interests of the authorities: to maintain *ladinos* in power and to keep Indians from defending their cultural heritage and political rights. According to Rigoberta, even official efforts to include elements of Indian history fall short. For instance, national celebrations of the Indian "hero" Tecún Umán, who fought against the Spaniards during the colonial period, relegate the struggle for Indian rights to the past. Indian communities, by contrast, know that this fight isn't just historical—it's still very much alive in the present. The objective of this kind of education, Rigoberta concludes, is to keep pupils from questioning current social problems related to ethnic discrimination, violence, and inequality.

At the same time, integrating certain elements of the dominant culture can help Indian communities in their political struggle. Given the inadequacies of the official school system, Rigoberta believes that the people most qualified to lead the political fight for workers', peasants', and Indians' rights are not highly educated people, but rather those who have experienced suffering firsthand. These people might lack formal education, but they possess the concrete knowledge necessary to foster empathy and understanding; they do not need books to describe their oppressive reality. At the same time, Rigoberta

also recognizes that both she and her father benefited from the political analysis that educated compañeros shared with them, allowing them to understand that their problems extend well beyond their own experiences in this community. Such learning experiences have led Rigoberta to conclude that cooperation between members of different classes is the best strategy, as each can exchange bits of knowledge that expands one's understanding of the situation.

Despite rejecting formal education, Rigoberta still understands the importance of learning Spanish. Since Spanish is the language of official institutions in Guatemala, it serves as a useful tool for political groups to navigate the legal and political system and make their voices heard. Speaking Spanish also gives Rigoberta the opportunity to expand the visibility of her political cause, making it relevant and accessible to the rest of Latin America and the rest of the world. In this sense, benefiting from certain aspects of formal education—like learning about politics or learning a different language—can be a boost in the political fight against discrimination and inequality. However, the book implies that such education only proves useful as long as it allows for self-expression and the preservation of diversity, instead of imposing a different worldview on Indigenous populations.

SPIRITUALITY, NATURE, AND THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE

Respect for the natural world is one of the core principles underlying the traditions in Rigoberta Menchú Tum's community. Conscious of the fact that they share an environment with animals and plants, Rigoberta and her fellow Indigenous Maya-Quiché people ask the natural world for permission before modifying it in any way, be it through harvesting crops, gathering flowers, or killing an animal on rare occasions (for ceremonial purposes). The respect Rigoberta's community has for nature is a matter of spiritual belief: the sun functions as a father figure and a God, and the earth and water are considered sacred. In addition, these beliefs determine a moral approach to life, encouraging the villagers to accept everything that nature brings, however imperfect it might be. In this way, the community's connection to nature affects its social beliefs: it encourages them to shun violence of any kind, unless it is absolutely necessary to ensure survival. With this, the Maya-Quiché traditions that Rigoberta shares encourage a radical commitment to tolerance and equality—not only between humankind and the different elements of natural world, but also among humans themselves.

For the Maya-Quiché community, humans do not exist in a world separate from or superior to animals and plants: rather, all living things must respect each other and coexist peacefully. For Rigoberta's community, the sun is the heart of the universe and is associated with "the one father," their God. Connecting with God involves honoring the sun and the life it brings. Before going to work, for example, the men remove their hats to greet the sun. This highlights their connection to God as well as their commitment to respect the nature they use in their work as farm laborers. This respect for nature extends to all aspects of life, including food: since **maize**, a natural product of the land, is sacred, the preparation of *tortillas* and *tamales* is also considered a sacred activity. Similarly, killing animals or even cutting flowers must take place only on rare occasions, as any modification to nature must have a spiritual justification.

Furthermore, all of the ceremonies in Rigoberta's community involve demonstrating great care and respect for the natural world. A central aspect of Indians' life is their connection to a nahual, an animal that each person is assigned at birth, according to a predefined calendar. This *nahual* functions as a protective spirit as well as a child's concrete connection with nature—not only with the animal kingdom, but with everything that binds it together (the sun, the water, the earth). Given this intimate connection that links human beings to their *nahual*, killing animals is considered just as violent as killing humans. In turn, killing a human also involves destroying their animal double. Therefore, this intense connection to the earth does not only imply ecological preservation but also peaceful human coexistence. Acts such as murder and theft are considered not only an offense to one's ancestors, but also to nature itself, since all members of the community are taught to respect other living things and be content with what nature has given them.

In light of this sacred relationship to nature, the ladino landowners' violence toward the community presents an additional challenge to the Maya-Quiché's spiritual beliefs, since even violence in self-defense involves violating their own codes of behavior. When the rich landowners' henchmen come to Rigoberta's village to destroy their possessions, they break the villagers' handmade, earthenware pots and kill their dogs. These actions are as shocking to the villagers as if these violent men had taken a human life. Indeed, because of their use in the handling of maize, earthenware pots are central to the community's customs, as they symbolize the connection human beings must maintain with the natural world. In turn, given the sacredness of dogs—who not only help the villagers in everyday activities but also represent cooperation between the human and animal worlds—killing a dog is a serious offense for the community.

Together, these acts of violence and destruction—as well as the landowners' threats against people in the community—force the villagers to engage in violent acts themselves as a form of resistance. The community spends a lot of time debating this issue, given that violence against other beings violates their code of treating every life as precious and sacred. However, the group ultimately decides that this extreme measure is necessary for self-defense purposes: without it, the community risks being destroyed. Therefore, although the community's

spiritual and ethical beliefs are centered around the sacredness of every living thing, they accept that the fight for survival justifies extreme measures, such as taking part in violent actions against the enemy. This suggests that it is acceptable for a community to sacrifice some of its principles in order to ensure its own survival, as long as the end goal is the restoration of peace among humans, and between humans and the natural world.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MAIZE, TORTILLAS, AND TAMALES

For Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community, the maize cereal plant (and its associated food products, such as *tortillas* and *tamales*) represent their culture's reverence for all living things. Maize lies at the center of the community's ethical and spiritual beliefs. By harvesting and preparing maize for consumption, the plant serves a symbolic role: it encourages all members of the community to respect the earth, sun, and water that went into growing the maize, and to honor the resources that nature provides for them. The manual harvest and preparation of maize-based foods—processes that eschew technology or machinery, as all traditional activities in Rigoberta's village do—are what bind Rigoberta's community together. These activities represent their union as a community bound by ancestral traditions, but also their peaceful coexistence with everything else in the natural world. In this sense, these maize-based foods represent the care and respect that defines Rigoberta's Indigenous community, in contrast with modern society's tendency to exploit natural resources.

For Rigoberta's community, *tortillas* and *tamales* are sacred foods and thus play a crucial role in sacred events such as marriage ceremonies. This is a stark contrast to the way Guatemalans outside of their insular community treat food. For instance, at Christmas, the mistress who employs Rigoberta as a maid hands her a *tamal* in an offhanded manner. Rigoberta interprets this action as a demonstration of contempt rather than respect, since the gesture lacks the generosity and care that her Indigenous community associates with sharing food. In this way, the hardened *tortillas* that poor workers are given when working at fincas or in rich households symbolize the exploitation and discrimination that Indians face in Guatemalan society, a stark contrast to the their culture's emphasis on gratitude and respect.

MAYA-QUICHÉ CLOTHING

For Rigoberta's Indigenous Maya-Quiché community, clothing does not simply serve the practical purpose of keeping warm. Rather, it has a symbolic function: honoring one's ancestors, respecting tradition, and staying true to oneself. As Rigoberta's mother emphasizes, Maya-Quiché women in particular are encouraged to be very careful about what they wear: a woman must always take care of her corte (multicolored material that Guatemalan women use as a skirt) and wear her apron at all times. Indeed, consistency in dress and appearance represents one's integrity, as well as one's adherence to ancestral traditions. Modifying or removing such clothing, on the other hand, signals one's rejection of the community and might be associated with prostitution, which the community considers an offensive activity.

This emphasis on clothing as a sign of belonging in Indigenous groups contrasts with the way outside society treats Indians. During folklore festivals organized by rich ladinos, Indian "queens" are displayed in traditional clothing. For Rigoberta, this suggests that the upper classes in Guatemala only appreciate Indian costumes as a form of entertainment and novelty—they don't actually care about the Indigenous traditions they represent. In this way, traditional clothing proves to be yet another instrument through which *ladinos* appropriate elements of Indigenous culture for their own purposes, without actually respecting Indians or giving them a more favorable position in Guatemalan society.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Verso edition of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening words to Rigoberta Menchú's account of her life. Although most autobiographies are centered on the intimate experiences of a single person, here Rigoberta claims to be speaking in the name of an entire people: her Maya-Quiché community. In this way, her story takes the form of the "testimonial literature" genre: it illustrates a collective way of life and denounces the oppression of all poor Guatemalans.

This approach to storytelling reveals Rigoberta's sense of responsibility toward her community: she believes that her story's purpose is not to relay things that are unique to her own experience, but to illustrate the collective struggles of her people. In this sense, her first-person account illustrates the Maya-Quiché belief that, from the moment individuals are born, they belong to the community. They must live their life in a way that honors the present and past struggles of their indigenous group.

Rigoberta's mention of both suffering and joy suggests that human beings are capable of finding moments of relief even within the most violently oppressive circumstances. This capacity to endure suffering is also, as Rigoberta describes throughout her narrative, a highly valued character trait in Guatemalan Indigenous communities.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Our people have taken Catholicism as just another channel of expression, not our one and only belief. Our people do the same with other religions. The priests, monks and nuns haven't gained the people's confidence because so many of their things contradict our own customs. For instance, they say: 'You have too much trust in your elected leaders.' But the village elects them because they trust them, don't they? The priests say: 'The trouble is you follow those sorcerers,' and speak badly of them. But for our people this is like speaking ill of their own fathers, and they lose faith in the priests.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community combines Indigenous customs with certain elements of Catholicism. The Catholic religion does not function as a rival creed, but as a complement to the Indians' respect for God and for their ancestors. As Rigoberta notes elsewhere, biblical forefathers, for example, are a parallel model for the Indigenous community's commitment to honoring one's ancestors.

However, the community is willing to integrate certain Catholic beliefs only as long as the religion doesn't threaten their way of life. In this sense, the priests' denigration of the villagers' elected officials builds mistrust: their condemnation of the community's social organization threatens its core values of solidarity and collective decision-making. Indeed, as Rigoberta emphasizes, her Maya-Quiché village respects democracy: people elect the leaders whom they trust the most. In this sense, their democratic organization compensates for their exclusion from the Guatemalan political system, which is dictatorial, oppressive, and uninterested in taking the voice of Indigenous groups into account.

This quotation thus suggests that, on certain occasions, the objectives of Catholic priests can align with those of the oppressive *ladino* elite: to keep Indians from organizing and demonstrating strength as a unified group, so that they'll be forced to conform to the will of the authorities. Some members of the clergy seem to want to dominate the villagers, instead of mutually sharing their customs and celebrating God together.

❝ When a male child is born, there are special celebrations, not because he's male but because of all the hard work and responsibility he'll have as a man. It's not that *machismo* doesn't exist among our people, but it doesn't present a problem for the community because it's so much part of our way of life. [...] At the same time, he is head of the household, not in the bad sense of the word, but because he is responsible for so many things. This doesn't mean girls aren't valued. Their work is hard too and there are other things that are due to them as mothers. Girls are valued because they are part of the earth, which gives us maize, beans, plants and everything we live on.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta discusses the different roles and responsibilities that her Maya-Quiché community assigns to each gender. Although she insists that her village believes in tolerance and equality, she does recognize that boys benefit from special privileges: a special ceremony at their birth and an automatic position as head of the household. Girls, by contrast, are valued primarily because of their domestic tasks and their reproductive function.

Rigoberta attempts to give a balanced view of the situation. On the one hand, she recognizes that *machismo*—the tendency to value typically male traits over female tasks and attributes—does exist in her community. On the other hand, she denies that this constitutes a "problem." What matters more to her community is their "way of life": the respect for tradition, even if this involves a certain imbalance between genders.

Rigoberta's reflections thus demonstrate some contradictions: she insists that women's work is valued, but she also knows that it might not be valued to the same extent as men's work. Rigoberta's struggle to reach a conclusion about gender dynamics in her community reveals a tension between her deep respect for her community's traditions and her commitment to gender equality. This conflict suggests that Rigoberta realizes that some of her community's traditions might not always conform to her progressive political vision, in which women and men's work would be considered perfectly equal.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I remember going along in the lorry and wanting to set it on fire so that we would be allowed to rest. What bothered me most was travelling on and on and on, wanting to urinate and not being able to because the lorry wouldn't stop. [...] It made me very angry and I used to ask my mother: 'Why do we go to the *finca*?". And my mother used to say: 'Because we have to. When you're older you'll understand why we need to come.' I did understand, but the thing was I was fed up with it all. When I was older, I didn't find it strange any more. Slowly I began to see what we had to do and why things were like that. I realised we weren't alone in our sorrow and suffering, but that a lot of people, in many different regions, shared it with us.

Related Characters: Rigoberta's Mother, Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The members of Rigoberta's village alternate between working for four months in the mountains of the Altiplano and spending the remaining eight months of the year in coastal plantations known as *fincas*. Owners of the *fincas* treat these poor Indian workers not as human beings deserving of dignified treatment, but as objects to be shuttled back and forth. For example, they pack enclosed lorries with workers and animals, keeping everyone from leaving the lorry at any point during the strenuous 36-hour journey.

This constitutes Rigoberta's first experience with the brutal exploitation that takes place on the *finca*. Such examples of suffering show that those in power, in particular the rich *ladino* landowners in charge of the *fincas*, only care about making money: they are indifferent to the health, safety, or well-being of their hundreds of workers. As Rigoberta realizes that, over time, she did indeed get used to such pain and anger, she understands that it is possible for people to become accustomed to even the cruelest of circumstances. This helps her understand her mother's perspective: her mother has accepted that certain aspects of life are intractable and must therefore be met with resignation.

Rigoberta's life goal, however, will later be to combat such injustice—to replace such resignation with an optimistic belief in the possibility of change. In this sense, the fact that exploitation affects so many other people in different regions changes from a reason to submit to a brutal fate to a reason to bond together against their oppressors.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Watching her made me feel useless and weak because I couldn't do anything to help her except look after my brother. That's when my consciousness was born. It's true. My mother didn't like the idea of me working, of earning my own money, but I did. I wanted to work, more than anything to help her, both economically and physically. The thing was that my mother was very brave and stood up to everything well, but there were times when one of my brothers or sisters was ill—if it wasn't one of them it was another—and everything she earned went on medicine for them. This made me very sad as well.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

At the age of eight, Rigoberta realizes that she can no longer stand watching the physical, emotional, and economic sacrifices her mother makes for the well-being of their family. Moved by empathy and indignation at her mother's suffering, Rigoberta decides that she, too, will now work as an agricultural worker on the *fincas*.

Rigoberta's identifies this moment as the birth of her political consciousness, which suggests that her desire to fight against exploitation derives her personal experience of suffering and witnessing of injustice. At an early age, Rigoberta realizes that she can take action to spare her mother (and the rest of her family) unnecessary suffering. She no longer accepts her role as a dependent child: she decides to become independent girl and capable of providing for others.

Although this episode reveals how deeply brave and empathetic Rigoberta is, it also suggests that poverty deprives children of a carefree, playful childhood. Forced to engage in child labor because of poverty, Rigoberta cultivates her political consciousness, thus sacrificing innocence for her lifelong commitment to helping her family and community survive. In a bold and thoughtful way, she uses suffering as motivation to take action and enact change.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ We slept in the same clothes we worked in. That's why society rejects us. Me, I felt this rejection very personally, deep inside me. They say we Indians are dirty, but it's our circumstances which force us to be like that. For example, if we have time, we go to the river every week, every Sunday, and wash our clothes. These clothes have to last us all week because we haven't any other time for washing and we haven't any soap either. That's how it is. We sleep in our clothes, we get up next day, we tidy ourselves up a bit and off to work, just like that.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta discusses the negative stereotypes that *ladino* (mixed-race) Guatemalan society holds toward the country's Indigenous population. She explains that calling Indians dirty is deeply offensive, because it ignores the severe economic difficulties that determine Indians' appearance. Rigoberta agrees that Indians rarely wash their clothes, but she explains that this is due to poverty and hard work: lack of time and money keeps Indigenous people from washing and changing their clothes as often as they might want.

Calling Indians "dirty" is therefore deeply offensive, because it implies that there is something internally wrong about Indian people when, in fact, their behavior derives from external circumstances. Such racist beliefs fall in line with other racist stereotypes concerning the Indigenous population, such as the notion that Indians are lazy, and that this laziness keeps them poor. Rigoberta's explanation reveals that the opposite is true: Indians are so poor and overworked that they do not have the luxury of maintaining a clean-cut appearance, as rich *ladino* families might be able to.

Beyond this economic analysis, Rigoberta notes that these kinds of statements about the Indian community are deeply hurtful. Without recognizing the structural nature of poverty and inequality, such statements attribute negative qualities to an entire people, which is profoundly offensive and unfair. Racism, she argues, is fueled in part by ignoring oppressive social and economic structures—specifically, the unequal opportunities afforded to different ethnic groups in Guatemalan society.

❝ They told me I would have many ambitions but I wouldn't have the opportunity to realize them. They said my life wouldn't change, it would go on the same—work, poverty, suffering. At the same time, my parents thanked me for the contribution I'd made through my work, for having earned for all of us. Then they told me a bit about being a woman; that I would soon have my period and that was when a woman could start having children. They said that would happen one day, and for that they asked me to become closer to my mother so I could ask her everything.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother, Vicente Menchú

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community, a child's 10th

birthday marks their entrance into adulthood. On this occasion, Rigoberta's parents tell her what to anticipate in adult life. They emphasize the importance of suffering not as a harmful, external event against which Rigoberta should rebel, but as an ordinary aspect of life that Rigoberta should meet with resignation and endurance.

Some of Rigoberta's parents' advice might seem cruel. For example, they encourage her to abandon her expectations of personal happiness and to accept life as it is, without hoping to modify her circumstances for the better. However, these conclusions are the result of Rigoberta's parents' long experience with poverty: they know that it is impossible for poor Indians to lead a comfortable life or escape poverty without resorting to stealing or taking the side of cruel landowners. They do not intend for their daughter to be unhappy: they simply want her to be realistic about the problems she will undoubtedly face.

What Rigoberta's parents do not anticipate is that it is, in fact, possible for the lives of thousands of Indians to change, under the right political circumstances. These circumstances will emerge over time, as Rigoberta's father experiences torture and imprisonment and takes part in the creation of the CUC—and, more generally, as the entire Indian population becomes politically organized and unites in the name of survival and justice.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Our people don't differentiate between people who are homosexual and people who aren't; that only happens when we go out of our community. We don't have the rejection of homosexuality the *ladinos* do; they really cannot stand it. What's good about our way of life is that everything is considered part of nature. So an animal which didn't turn out right is part of nature, so is a harvest that didn't give a good yield. We say you shouldn't ask for more than you can receive.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing her Maya-Quiché traditions concerning marriage, Rigoberta discusses the topic of homosexuality. She contrasts her community's tolerance with *ladino* society's discriminatory attitude. She uses analogies of natural phenomena to emphasize her village's openhearted embrace of everything that nature gives, in all of its diversity.

However, Rigoberta's comparison of homosexuals to natural elements (animals or harvests) that "didn't turn out right" suggests that this tolerance does not equate with full acceptance. Homosexuality is considered an abnormality, a behavior that does not conform to the expected—and, perhaps, desired—norm. This judgment implies that the community does have a preference for heterosexual relationships: homosexuality might be tolerated, but it is not embraced as something fully normal.

This negative undertone can be understood in terms of the Maya-Quiché emphasis on marriage as the prelude to childbearing. In this sense, homosexual people, like harvests, do not "give a good yield," in terms of bearing children and perpetuating the Indian lineage, as heterosexual couples are encouraged to do. The lack of information Rigoberta gives about the concrete inclusion of homosexual people leaves ambiguity about the extent to which her village truly treats homosexuals as equals, and what role homosexual couples play in the community.

❝ Now, she can't leave her husband because she's signed a paper. The Church's laws and the *ladinos*' laws are the same in this—you cannot separate. But the Indian feels responsible for every member of his community, and it's hard for him to accept that, if a woman is suffering, the community can do nothing for her because the law says she cannot leave her husband.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

When discussing Maya-Quiché marriage ceremonies, Rigoberta notes that her community takes a more flexible approach than the legal Guatemalan system to such long-term commitments. Although couples are expected to work through their problems together, certain circumstances, such as excessive unhappiness, can justify the couple breaking up and allowing the bride to return to her original community. Rigoberta's description shows that, despite its strict emphasis on following ancestral rules, her Indigenous community values its members' happiness and will not abandon people who need help. She later gives the example of one of her sisters, who was able to return to her

community after finding it impossible to integrate into her husband's village, which spoke a different language.

Despite its focus on fortitude and perseverance, the community accepts that not all suffering is necessary, and that people in need should be given adequate support. In this particular respect, Indian women are given more freedom than *ladino* women, since they do not have to go through complicated legal proceedings to dissolve an abusive or unhappy marriage. In this sense, the village demonstrates the strength of its bonds of solidarity, established since everyone's birth: if people take responsibility for their community, the community also commits to protecting all of its members as best it can. Reintegrating a former community member, however, is only possible as long as that person has kept on respecting the community's norms. If that is not the case, the community might not be inclined to take them back.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ I said: 'Why don't we burn all this so that people can't come and work here any more?' I hated the people who sprayed the crops. I felt they were responsible. 'Why did they spray poison when people were working there?' I was very upset when I went back home that time. I was with my neighbours and my older sister because my father had stayed up in the Altiplano. When I got home I told my mother that my friend had died. My mother cried and I said: 'Mother, I don't want to live. Why didn't die when I was little? How can we go on living?' My mother scolded me and told me not to be silly. But to me it wasn't silly. They were very serious ideas.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Felipe Menchú Tum , Rigoberta's Mother, Vicente Menchú, María

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After Rigoberta's friend María dies from pesticide poisoning while working on the *finca*, Rigoberta is overwhelmed by feelings of anger and injustice. She realizes that spraying poison on fields on which people are working shows complete lack of respect for their lives and well-being, since pesticides are capable of killing people. This type of poisoning tragically killed María, and it also killed Rigoberta's brother Felipe years before.

Rigoberta's reactions reveal her helplessness in the situation. She debates between two violent acts: one directed toward the oppressive *fincas*, responsible for her friend's death, the other directed toward herself. Her ideal goal would be to put an end to her personal suffering and also, more generally, to the suffering of her entire community. These early reflections serve as the foundation for Rigoberta's later work as a political activist. This work will allow to use her anger and hatred for constructive instead of destructive means: to fight for a radical transformation of society, in order to eradicate deep-seated problems of exploitation and discrimination.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ When I saw the maid bring out the dog's food – bits of meat, rice, things that the family ate—and they gave me a few beans and hard tortillas, that hurt me very much. The dog had a good meal and I didn't deserve as good a meal as the dog. Anyway, I ate it, I was used to it. I didn't mind not having the dog's food because at home I only ate tortillas with chile or with salt or water. But I felt rejected. I was lower than the animals in the house.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Candelaria, María, The Landowner's Wife (The Mistress)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After her friend María's death, Rigoberta decides to work as a maid in Guatemala City, in order to explore an alternative way of living—one that might be less filled with less grief and suffering. However, when she begins to work in a rich household in the capital, she realizes that she is now exposed to new forms of suffering: in particular, the deep emotional toll of racism.

The rich *ladino* family's lack of care and respect for their Indian servants reveals itself in the food they serve them. Rigoberta is surprised to find that the hard tortillas remind her of food on the *finca*. This detail suggests, in a symbolic way, that exploitation on the *finca* and exploitation in a domestic setting might be just the same: both are based on racial discrimination and lack of respect for the poor. As on the *fincas*, Rigoberta feels dehumanized, treated with less dignity than the dog.

This poor treatment contrasts with the importance that food—and, in particular, maize-based products such as tortillas—plays in Rigoberta's community. In her village, tortillas and tamales are associated with important moments of communal celebration and sharing. In this way, Rigoberta understands that she is unlikely to find comfort in a setting as unequal and racist as *ladino* Guatemalan society. Her time as a maid, then, brings to light new problems. It confirms that the only hope for poor Indians is to radically transform society, so that racial hierarchies might be abolished once and for all.

❝ I was thinking of our humble way of life and their debauched life. I said, 'How pathetic these people are who can't even shit alone. We poor enjoy ourselves more than they do.'

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), The Landowner's Wife (The Mistress)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After months of working as a servant in a rich *ladino* family in Guatemala City, Rigoberta realizes that she's repelled by this family's way of life. She originally came to the capital city to experience an alternative mode of living, capable of shielding her from the suffering that poor Indians experience on the *fincas*. But she now understands that the values she inherited from her poor Maya-Quiché community are infinitely more valuable than the arrogance and self-importance she discovers among the rich.

In particular, she criticizes the fact that the family relies on servants for every domestic task. Rigoberta's use of a vulgar word such as "shit" reveals the depth of her anger. Usually gentle and balanced in her criticism, Rigoberta expresses deep resentment for the way in which she has been treated by this family. The family's wealth, tyrannical attitude, and dependence on servants, she argues, does not bring happiness. Rather, there is pride and joy to be found in the ordinary, humble activities that Rigoberta has learned to cultivate in her Maya-Quiché village. This confirms Rigoberta's belief that the political struggle for Indigenous rights is not aimed at acquiring greater wealth, but simply attaining peace and security.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ They turned us out of our houses, and out of the village. The Garcías' henchmen set to work with ferocity. They were Indians too, soldiers of the *finca*. First they went into the houses without permission and got all the people out. Then they went in and threw out all our things. I remember that my mother had her silver necklaces, precious keepsakes from my grandmother, but we never saw them again after that. They stole them all. They threw out our cooking utensils, our earthenware cooking pots. We don't use those sort of…special utensils, we have our own earthenware pots. They hurled them into the air, and, oh God! they hit the ground and broke into pieces. All our plates, cups, pots. They threw them out and they all broke.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta recalls the first time armed forces drove her community out of their village. In 1967, the García, a rich *ladino* family taking over territory in the Altiplano, sought to intimidate the villagers, so that they would not protest against the appropriation of their land. Later, the Guatemalan army plays the same violent role: they wreak havoc in mountainous villages in order to keep poor peasants from protesting against unfair land distribution.

Although no villager is physically harmed on this occasion, the henchmen's violent deeds are symbolic. In particular, Rigoberta is shocked by their destruction of the villagers' earthenware pots. This is one of the few moments in her life story in which she explicitly shows emotion (she exclaims, "oh God!"). This reaction has little to do with financial or material considerations. Rather, Rigoberta is offended because earthenware pots play an important role in her Maya-Quiché community's daily cultural and spiritual practices. The pots' role in preparing food, in particular the sacred maize that is transformed into tortillas, keeps ancestral traditions alive.

Destroying this pottery thus demonstrates that, beyond economic domination, the armed forces want to destroy the entire cultural fabric that gives meaning to this community. Actions such as these explain why the community wants to keep so many of its daily ceremonies and traditions secret. This keeps dangerous external actors—such as these

henchmen, but also the Guatemalan government—from manipulating or destroying fundamental elements of Indigenous culture.

> The whole community helped get my father out. The landowners thought that my father was the king, the village chief, and that if they defeated the chief, they could defeat the whole community. But they soon realized that it wasn't like that. My father carried out the wishes of the community. He didn't make the laws.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Vicente Menchú

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

After rich landowners bribe judges to punish Rigoberta's father, Vincente, for his activism against unfair land appropriation, Vicente is sent to prison. Although this event could risk making the villagers vulnerable, it actually has the opposite effect: it demonstrates that Rigoberta's community does not depend on a single leader, but on a network of solidarity. After the entire village gathers all of its resources to pay for lawyers for a year, Rigoberta's father is finally released.

These events highlight the democratic structure of Rigoberta's village, which contrasts so starkly with the corrupt, authoritarian nature of the Guatemalan legal system and government. This anecdote reveals that Rigoberta's community functions on the basis of reciprocity: Vicente Menchú serves as a spokesperson for his village, but the villagers, in turn, commit to helping him in any circumstance. In this way, the relationship is reciprocal: Vicente defends his community just as much as his community defends him.

This suggests that both Vicente and the community obey higher laws: the will of their ancestors, which everyone—leader or not—is obligated to respect. This trust in high moral values contrasts with the corruption that reigns in many other areas of Guatemalan society, such as the army, where political and economic interests prevail over bonds of solidarity and generosity.

> We began thinking, with the help of other friends, other *compañeros*, that our enemies were not only the landowners who lived near us, and above all not just the landowners who forced us to work and paid us little. It was not only now we were being killed; they had been killing us since we were children, through malnutrition, hunger, poverty. We started thinking about the roots of the problem and came to the conclusion that everything stemmed from the ownership of land. The best land was not in our hands. It belonged to the big landowners. Every time they see that we have new land, they try to throw us off it or steal it from us in other ways.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Vicente Menchú

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Despite forcing him to live an underground life, Rigoberta's father's misfortunes—his time in prison and, later, in the hospital—have some positive consequences. After meeting political prisoners and activists from other regions, he realizes that his community's problems are actually nationwide. This idea sparks intense reflection among members of his community, who begin to realize that their problems have to do with the economic and political structure of Guatemala.

This political awakening causes the shift in Rigoberta's community. The villagers realize that some of the suffering they have resigned themselves to, such as malnutrition and poverty, are not actually intractable. Rather, they are part of a national system of oppression, which involves violence (such as kidnapping and torturing activists) but also economic oppression (such as paying workers unlivable wages).

This realization suggests that, following Rigoberta's beliefs, the most effective form of education consists of understanding one's personal experiences in a broad, social and economic context. Understanding that the community's problems don't stem from the actions of a few evil individuals, but rather from an entire system of racism and inequality, plays a crucial role in determining how best to go about combating such issues.

Chapter 16 Quotes

I must say one thing, and it's not to denigrate them, because the priests have done a lot for us. It's not to undervalue the good things they have taught us; but they also taught us to accept many things, to be passive, to be a dormant people. Their religion told us it was a sin to kill while we were being killed. They told us that God is up there and that God had a kingdom for the poor. This confused me because I'd been a catechist since I was a child and had had a lot of ideas put in my head. It prevents us from seeing the real truth of how our people live.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142-143

Explanation and Analysis

As political consciousness grows in Rigoberta's community, Rigoberta reevaluates some of the beliefs she has grown up with. In particular, she interrogates the teachings of the Catholic Church, which associations such as Catholic Action have brought to the village.

She realizes that the Catholic Church is not only a source of spiritual inspiration. It also plays a political role—in particular, one that supports the oppressive Guatemalan regime. Given the violence inflicted on her community, Rigoberta argues that adopting a strictly nonviolent approach is a form of resignation: it accepts the brutal destruction of Indigenous communities. Focusing only on individual actions—in particular through the notion of "sin"—is harmful, because it keeps Indians from understanding that the very structure of *ladino* society aims to keep them in an inferior position. This is, in itself, a form of violence—a "sin."

Therefore, Rigoberta proposes a more realistic approach: one that values nonviolence and dialogue while also denouncing (and, if necessary, combating) violent oppression. She tries to reconcile Catholic beliefs with political activism in order to fulfill the promise of justice and equality in the present, not in a distant afterlife.

Chapter 23 Quotes

They said that the arrival of the Spaniards was a conquest, a victory, while we knew that in practice it was just the opposite. They said the Indians didn't know how to fight and that many of them died because they killed the horses and not the people. So they said. This made me furious, but I reserved my anger to educate other people in other areas. This taught me that even though a person may learn to read and write, he should not accept the false education they give our people. Our people must not think as the authorities think. They must not let others think for them.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta criticizes the official Guatemalan education system—particularly its version of history, which overlooks Indigenous viewpoints. Rigoberta, who has never been to school herself and who has learned Spanish on her own, values other forms of education. In particular, she believes that the most important purpose of education is to teach people to fight injustice in the present.

Teaching pupils that the Spanish conquest was a "victory" condones the violent deeds the colonizers took part in, such as brutal killings of the native populations. Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community knows that these killings continue to take place in the present—and in this sense, history cannot be separated from present social phenomena. By defining certain types of violence in positive terms, history can justify and perpetuate ideas that contribute to oppressing an entire population.

Because of this, Rigoberta values other forms of learning: the type of humility and resistance that can emerge from poverty and suffering, as well as the type of learning that emerges when people talk openly about important social issues. What should be avoided at all cost is a type of "false" learning: education that leads people to accept injustice and discrimination, instead of encouraging them to question such issues.

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother's words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be a change, and there would be no victory.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Petrocinio Menchú Tum, Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

After her mother's death, Rigoberta reflects on her mother's teachings and legacy. In particular, she realizes that her mother has played an important role in convincing her that gender equality is just as important to fight for as other types of equality, such as economic equality.

Rigoberta's mother's activism derives in part from her personal experience of suffering, and, in particular, from the brutal torture and murder of her son Petrocinio. Her argument is based on the universal nature of suffering: in a violent conflict, women suffer just as much as men. Therefore, women should play just as important a role in putting an end to this violence: women, too, should be encouraged to take on political roles. This approach challenges some of the community's norms, such as the relegation of much of women's work to the domestic sphere. In this sense, Rigoberta's mother's argument about equality—the equal suffering of men and women—nevertheless implies overcoming specifically gendered obstacles, such as the exclusion of women from political causes.

If the defense of Indians does not include women's perspective, Rigoberta's mother argues, it silences the female half of the population. This could prove to be just as harmful and unfair as other phenomena, such as the elimination of Indigenous perspectives from official Guatemalan education. In this sense, true progress can only be achieved if women make the bold decision to step up and participate in organized political action: this will ensure that their voices and stories contribute to shaping a more egalitarian society.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ In the schools they often celebrate the day of Tecún Umán. Tecún Umán is the Quiché hero who is said to have fought the Spanish and then been killed by them. Well, there is a fiesta each year in the schools. They commemorate the day of Tecún Umán as the national hero of the Quichés. But we don't celebrate it, primarily because our parents say that this hero is not dead. [...] His birthday is commemorated as something which represented the struggle of those times. But for us the struggle still goes on today, and our suffering more than ever. We don't want it said that all that happened in the past, but that it exists today, and so our parents don't let us celebrate it. We know this is our reality even though the *ladinos* tell it as if it were history.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Tecún Umán

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

In the past, Rigoberta has criticized the official Guatemalan education system for presenting Indigenous history in a negative light. For example, it depicts Indians as ignorant, passive people incapable of fighting off the Spanish enemy during colonization. Now, however, she criticizes it for another reason: for ignoring the current plight of poor Indians and relegating their political struggle to a distant past.

Rigoberta's criticism of the *ladino* celebration of Tecún Umán mirrors her condemnation of the *ladino* festivals that superficially promote Indian clothing: both events appropriate selective elements of Indigenous culture for their own benefit and enjoyment. In the case of Tecún Umán, celebrating this warrior's history actually contradicts Maya-Quiché beliefs in the legacy of ancestors. For Rigoberta's community, ancestors are not dead: their struggle remains alive, and it is the duty of every member of the community to perpetuate their beliefs and customs. In this sense, people should not celebrate the specific circumstances in which Tecún Umán demonstrated his courage—they should demonstrate the same courage in present times, to fight against injustice.

This anecdote highlights the deep gap in understanding that separates *ladino* society from Indian beliefs. This problem is, ultimately, one of political power: if Indigenous groups had

more political clout, they would be able to share their view of history without fearing cultural erasure. In the current context of oppression, however, Indian communities prefer to keep certain aspects of their customs and beliefs secrets, in order to protect them from such misrepresentations and appropriations as are visible in the *ladino* celebration of Tecún Umán.

❝ Well, the *compañeras* had to go to a cheap hotel after the presentation. This is what hurts Indians most. It means that, yes, they think our costumes are beautiful because it brings in money, but it's as if the person wearing it doesn't exist. Then they charge the people who go to the festival a lot for their tickets and get a lot of money from the presentation of the queens. Everyone has to pay to go in. Only people with money can go.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Rigoberta describes the contests to select an "Indian queen" and parade her during a special festival, organized by the rich *ladino* elite. Although the objective of this festival is to celebrate Indian clothing, Rigoberta notes that the organizers treat the poor Indian girls terribly, and that this reveals the deep, underlying racism that pervades *ladino* society.

Rigoberta argues that the only interest *ladinos* find in this event is economic: they are happy to profit off of innocent young women dressed in colorful attire. Their poor treatment of these women afterward reveals that they view them as a kind of merchandise, a useful tool that can be discarded once it has finished its performance. This illustrates the contempt that *ladino* elites have for Indian culture and, in particular, for poor peasants.

In addition, given the importance that traditional clothing plays in the lives of Indigenous people, and in particular of women, the lack of respect these *ladinos* show toward the young "queens" is all the more problematic. For Indians, traditional clothing is an external sign of one's moral worth and one's commitment to ancestral traditions. Failing to respect this clothing is therefore a sign that one lacks respect for the person themselves.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ There was something my mother used to say concerning *machismo*. You have to remember that my mother couldn't read or write and didn't know any theories either. What she said was that men weren't to blame for *machismo*, and women weren't to blame for *machismo*, but that it was part of the whole society. To fight *machismo*, you shouldn't attack men and you shouldn't attack women, because that is either the man being *machista*, or it's the woman.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

When remembering her mother's legacy, Rigoberta recalls her strong commitment to gender equality. Rigoberta's insistence that her mother never received any kind of formal schooling speaks to her intelligence: she was able to adopt a balanced, progressive mindset through open-hearted generosity and sharp judgment alone. Indeed, despite knowing no "theories," Rigoberta's mother understands that *machismo* and misogyny are structural problems: they are no one's "fault" but must be dealt with as issues that affect both women and men. Rigoberta's mother's awareness of the fact that this problem exists not only in their village, but across the entire society, reveals her ability to reflect deeply on social issues that extend beyond their village in the mountains.

Rigoberta's belief in the positive powers of dialogue reveal that she has inherited her mother's perspective. Rigoberta, too, trusts that it is only through cooperation that women and men will be able to progress toward a more equal society. This involves placing great trust in people: believing that they are both willing and capable of change, and that peaceful, friendly debates are the best way to achieve this.

Chapter 31 Quotes

But in this respect I've met serious problems when handing out tasks to those *compañeros*, and I've often found it upsetting having to assume this role. But I really believed that I could contribute, and that they should respect me. [...] It doesn't mean you dominate a man, and you mustn't get any sense of satisfaction out of it. It's simply a question of principle. I have my job to do just like any other *compañero*. I found all this very difficult and, as I was saying, I came up against revolutionary *compañeros*, *compañeros* who had many ideas about making a revolution, but who had trouble accepting that a woman could participate in the struggle, not only in superficial things but in fundamental things. I've also had to punish many *compañeros* who try to prevent their women taking part in the struggle or carrying out any task.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

After describing her mother's approach toward gender equality, Rigoberta reflects on some of the discrimination she has suffered from, as a female leader in political groups. This practical consideration of *machismo* serves as an illustration of the beliefs she shares with her mother: the importance of not blaming men for *machismo*, and of using dialogue to teach them about women's rights.

Rigoberta thus finds herself faced with a difficult situation: needing to assert her authority as a political leader for the good of the organization, but also wanting to show kindness and understanding toward intolerant members of the community. Rigoberta also discovers a paradox: that men who might be extremely progressive in one social domain (for example, economic equality) might be close-minded in others (such as gender equality).

Rigoberta's solution is to defend her leadership position but without humiliating others, which involves a delicate balance between self-confidence, authority, and camaraderie. Rigoberta's confidence in the importance of her political role, however, gives her the strength necessary to stand up to conservative men and to take decisive action—such as punishing some *compañeros*—in order to defend her core values of justice and equality.

A leader must be someone who's had practical experience. It's not so much that the hungrier you've been, the purer your ideas must be, but you can only have a real consciousness if you've really lived this life. I can say that in my organization most of the leaders are Indians. There are also some *ladinos* and some women in the leadership. But we have to erase the barriers which exist between ethnic groups, between Indians and *ladinos*, between men and women, between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and between all the linguistic areas.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262-263

Explanation and Analysis

After insisting on the importance for men to fight *machismo* by engaging in dialogue with women, Rigoberta notes that the best leaders in political groups such as the CUC are those with personal experience of oppression. This crystallizes Rigoberta's approach to suffering: now that political groups provide a structure for poor peasants to defend their rights, suffering can turn into a political instrument instead of a source of despair.

According to Rigoberta's argument, personal experiences of exploitation teach the poor more than books might, as gives it gives them firsthand insight into the causes and effects of injustice. Villagers like Rigoberta and her family understand abstract concepts such as exploitation and oppression from an intimate, emotional and physical perspective—something that most intellectuals don't have access to. The personal experience of anger, hatred, and humiliation can play an important role in bolstering peasants' long-term commitment to the political fight, because their experiences are, at once, personal and universal.

Despite this distinction, Rigoberta agrees that these political movements' goal should be to unite everyone, regardless of their background. In other occasions, she has highlighted the positive roles that intellectuals have played in the movement for peasant rights, as they have allowed Rigoberta's community to understand how deeply rooted and structural their problems are. This combination of a broad, theoretical view (provided by intellectuals) and the personal experience of suffering (provided by poor peasants) is one factor that makes these movements effective.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ Women have played an incredible role in the revolutionary struggle. Perhaps after the victory, we'll have time to tell our story. It is unbelievable. Mothers with their children would be putting up barricades, and then placing 'propaganda bombs', or carrying documents. Women have had a great history. They've all experienced terrible things, whether they be working-class women, peasant women, or teachers. This same situation has led us to do all those things. We don't do them because we want power, but so that something will be left for human beings. And this gives us the courage to be steadfast in the struggle, in spite of the danger.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker), Rigoberta's Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 274-275

Explanation and Analysis

Part of Rigoberta's objective, in recounting her life experience, is to bring to light the role that women have played in the political struggle for Indigenous and poor workers' rights in Guatemala. She knows that women's experiences are rarely represented in history and thus realizes that emphasizing women's courage and commitment to the cause is a revolutionary act in itself. It demonstrates that women are just as brave as men, and that they, too, have contributed to social progress in important ways.

Although Rigoberta hopes that other women will be able to tell their story, her mention of these events already contributes to this goal. She does not believe in creating separate women's groups to fight against exploitation and gender inequalities, but she does believe that women should recount their personal experiences and the obstacles they have faced, which are different from men's. It is only by taking women's participation into account, Rigoberta argues, that a true history of Guatemalan peasants' "revolutionary struggle" against the government can come to light.

Chapter 34 Quotes

❝ I know that no-one can take my Christian faith away from me. Not the government, not fear, not weapons. And this is what I have to teach my people: that together we can build the people's Church, a true Church. Not just a hierarchy, or a building, but a real change inside people. I chose this as my contribution to the people's war. I am convinced that the people, the masses, are the only ones capable of transforming society.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of her autobiography, Rigoberta reiterates her cultural and political commitment. Although she is critical of the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church, this does not impact her religious faith, which remains steadfast throughout the political struggle.

In addition to her understanding of exploitation and oppression, what drives Rigoberta's activism are the positive values she has found in her study of Christianity: humility, generosity, and solidarity. Therefore, instead of accepting the politically conservative attitude of the Guatemalan Catholic Church, she prefers to work hard to create a different kind of "Church": a reality in which these positive values might become the norm.

Rigoberta's goal therefore seeks to change society by changing people's minds and heart. Her belief in the power of the people to eradicate injustice derives from her firsthand experience of the selflessness and hospitality that can prevail among the poor—opposed to the greed, arrogance, and thirst for power that she has seen among the rich. Despite their political vulnerability, Rigoberta suggests, the poor have something revolutionary to offer: an attitude of kindness and generosity that can help make society better.

That is my cause. As I've already said, it wasn't born out of something good, it was born out of wretchedness and bitterness. It has been radicalized by the poverty in which my people live. It has been radicalized by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination that I've felt in the flesh. [...] Of course, I'd need a lot of time to tell you all about my people, because it's not easy to understand just like that. And I think I've given some idea of that in my account. Nevertheless, I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.

Related Characters: Rigoberta Menchú Tum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her story, Rigoberta concludes that, although she has sought to give a broad picture of her community, she still keeps some aspects of her Maya-Quiché identity secret, so that other people—"anthropologists and intellectuals," but also priests, soldiers, and government officials—cannot use this information to harm the community. In this way, she implicitly tells her readers to accept that, as people who are likely external to her community, they will never gain full access to who she is, and to what matters most to her. What Rigoberta prefers to focus on is not the intimate functioning of her Indigenous group, but rather the social mechanisms that have oppressed it for so long.

Given Rigoberta's emphasis on transforming suffering into motivation to fight a cruel system of oppression, this book becomes part of this goal. Implicitly, Rigoberta encourages her readers to develop a consciousness of their own, as they become familiar with the emotional and physical pain that has been inflicted on Indigenous Guatemalans. This act of sharing her story and her beliefs is meant to encourage new bonds of solidarity and reciprocity with readers around the world—so that they, too, might take part in the struggle to build a better world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The book's translator, Ann Wright, notes that Rigoberta Menchú's use of Spanish reflects the variety of environments in which she learned the language, from time spent with nuns to participation in revolutionary organizations. The translator keeps two terms in Spanish in the text: the first is ladino, which refers to mixed-race people but can also be used in a politically charged manner to indicate people who support an oppressive racial system. The second is compañero, which means "companion" but also acquires a more political meaning ("comrade") as Rigoberta becomes more involved in political activities

Wright's discussion of Rigoberta's language reveals the connections that exist between language and politics. The very existence of the word "ladino" reflects the tensions and hierarchies of power in a mixed-race society, as its double usage refers to external appearance but also to political domination. Furthermore, Rigoberta's use of Spanish is inseparable from her political convictions, as part of the reason she learned the language was to participate in activism.

INTRODUCTION

Writer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray describes how she first met Rigoberta Menchú and set about transcribing Rigoberta's life story through a series of interviews. The two women briefly lived together in Paris. For Burgos, the moment that cemented trust between the two of them took place when they shared **tortillas** and black beans together. They found joy in this simple food, which is central to Rigoberta's culture. In structuring the lengthy transcriptions of their interviews, Burgos sought to respect Rigoberta's voice. For example, she removed her own questions so that the text would be a monologue centered on Rigoberta's narration, even if this includes certain digressions and jumps in chronology.

Elisabeth Burgos's comment about the uniting power of tortillas beings to imply that in Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community, preparing and appreciating of food is central to their culture and traditions. Giving voice to Rigoberta's narrative also emphasizes the importance of authentically conveying one's lived experience, a value that Rigoberta also shares. For both Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos, stories that are honest and intimate are more important than official education, abstract theories, or perfectly linear storytelling.

CHAPTER 1: THE FAMILY

At 23 years old, Rigoberta Menchú delivers her life narrative, emphasizing that her tale is also her people's story, since it represents the reality of all poor Guatemalans. Speaking Spanish is difficult for her, because she has had no formal education and only learned the language three years ago. She decides to begin her story in her mother's womb because, according to her community's beliefs, a child's life begins from the very first day of the mother's pregnancy.

Rigoberta's emphasis on speaking in the name of her community underlines the political purpose of her narrative: she aims to denounce oppression and to give voice to those who have never been given the chance to recount their life stories. She also wants to defend the rights of poor Guatemalans and, in particular, members of marginalized Indigenous groups.

There are 22 different Indigenous ethnic groups (23 counting the mixed-race *mestizos* or ladinos), each with their own language. Rigoberta comes from San Miguel Uspantán, in the northwest province of El Quiché. Although the landscape is beautiful, high up in the mountains and free from big roads and cars, this territory is also marked by longstanding political and economic strife.

Rigoberta does not separate the beauty of nature from the history of the people who have inhabited it. According to her Maya-Quiché community's beliefs, nature is not separate from human beings, nor human beings from nature. All living things influence one another and should cooperate to protect the natural world from potentially destructive modern practices (for example, invasive roads and cars).

Rigoberta's mother and father moved up to those mountains in 1960; their cultivation of the land led to the foundation of their village. Her parents were forced out of their previous house when rich ladinos took over their previous lands, leading them to incur debts. They moved elsewhere so that they might work to pay back what they owed.

Rigoberta's parents' experience with debt serves as an early illustration of the inequality between ladinos*—who hold most of the political and economic power in Guatemala—and Indians. Indians find themselves in a constant state of economic and physical vulnerability with regard to ladinos, who can manipulate the system in order to extend their power over the poor.*

Rigoberta's father and his brothers had a difficult childhood after their father died. Although their mother took care of them, Rigoberta's father had to work on his own at an early age to support his family. He helped his mother, who worked as a servant in a ladino family for nine years, even though the family considered him dirty and repulsive and never taught him Spanish. At the age of 14, he went to the coast to work on fincas (large plantations). His mother, meanwhile, was coerced into serving as the employer's mistress. When Rigoberta's father had earned enough money, his mother was able to join his brothers and him on the coast.

Rigoberta's father's work as a young child illustrates the economic hardship that many Indigenous Guatemalans face, as Indian children are often forced to contribute to their families' earnings in order for them to survive. It also emphasizes Rigoberta's father's work ethic and resistance to suffering, his defining features throughout this book. In addition, Rigoberta's grandmother's experience of sexual exploitation shows that poor women face some gender-specific dangers and violence that men might be spared.

Rigoberta grew up on fincas, such as those where her father worked, where coffee, cotton, cardamom and sugar are cultivated. After working relentlessly to support his mother, Rigoberta's father was sent to the army, where he despised the use of force but also learned valuable fighting techniques. After a year, he returned home and his mother, who had a fever, soon died due to their lack of money to pay for medicine. After her death, the brothers split up and worked in different coastal areas.

Rigoberta's grandmother's early death signals a problem that recurs throughout the story: poor people aren't able to afford medicine. This highlights the unequal access to healthcare that divides social classes in Guatemala. In parallel, Rigoberta's father's experience in the army also shows that, despite taking part in an institution that represses Indians, many soldiers do not actually choose to join the army but are coerced into doing so.

Rigoberta's parents met in the Altiplano (highland). After getting married, they set up a village in the mountains. Thanks to the little savings they acquired through their work in the fincas, they were able to pay the government a fee to settle there and to clear the land, although it took eight years for the land to start to produce. Rigoberta and her five siblings grew up during this period. During her childhood, Rigoberta saw two of her brothers die from a lack of food. She notes that malnutrition is common among Indians, making it difficult for children to make it past the age of five.

Rigoberta's parents' willingness to spend eight years waiting for their land to be fertile underlines their endurance and strong will. It also reveals their belief in the importance of respecting and revering nature. Having to pay a fee to the government to cultivate the land, on the other hand, highlights the economic and political tensions surrounding land ownership, as poor Guatemalans like Rigoberta's parents must compete with rich, aggressive landowners.

Over the years, more people came to populate this area and cultivate the land despite the difficulty of reaching the village on foot. The landscape is beautiful, and although Rigoberta did not spend much time playing as a child, she always enjoyed the work clearing the undergrowth while listening to the birds singing. Rigoberta's mother worked in a finca for months and returned home less than a month before Rigoberta was born.

Throughout her narrative, Rigoberta insists that, due to economic hardship and her family's struggles, she was not afforded a true childhood. Rather, she spent most of her time working. Her appreciation of nature, however, suggests that some forms of work can bring a special kind of satisfaction, especially when it is self-led and connected to nature. This pleasure contrasts starkly with the exploitative conditions on the coastal fincas.

Rigoberta's memories begin when she is five. She remembers spending four months in their home in the Altiplano and the remaining eight months down at the coast, working in fincas. Her family would cultivate **maize** and beans on the Altiplano, but the land wasn't very fertile, so they would always need to return to the *fincas* to earn money. Her parents, she notes, withstood these difficult conditions but never escaped poverty.

The cycle of Rigoberta and her family's different work environments symbolizes the cycle of poverty that they're caught in: no matter how hard Rigoberta's parents work (whether on the finca *or on their own land), they are unlikely to escape poverty. Many poor Guatemalans lack such basic job security, and thus find themselves trapped in a system that keeps them from achieving economic and social advancement.*

CHAPTER 2: BIRTH CEREMONIES

Rigoberta describes the social organization of her Maya-Quiché community. Members of the community elect a representative, who functions as a father figure for everyone. Both of her parents were the village's elected representatives. When a child is about to be born, the representatives serve as *abuelos* (grandparents) or "second parents" to this child, promising to support it throughout its life. Since any child that is born belongs to the entire community, the "second parents" choose godparents to support the child, so that they will stay on the right path and not adopt harmful habits if ever their own parents pass away.

Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community functions independently from the official Guatemalan political system. The community's support system creates a sense of protection, but also responsibility: everyone is responsible for one another and must strive to respect all of the community's rules and traditions. Rigoberta's description also highlights the extent to which the community depends on democratic consent, as all of the villagers have a say in who will lead them.

During the pregnancy, neighbors visit the mother every day and bring her simple gifts. The mother talks to the child constantly, even though it is still in her womb, and performs all her usual chores in order to introduce the child to the kind of life they will lead. She also makes sure to hide the birth from her other children—unless exceptional circumstances make this impossible, the newborn child must only be seen by the village leaders and two other couples, whose presence confirms that the child belongs to the entire community. Rigoberta notes that giving birth in a hospital is unthinkable for Indians. She also considers family planning to be an insult to their culture, as it has been a way of profiting off of naïve people.

Introducing an unborn child to its future responsibilities highlights the importance of work in the Maya-Quiché community: everyone is expected to perform a predetermined set of tasks, which are deemed useful to the family and the community. Rigoberta's criticism of modern methods of contraception and childbirth suggests that even seemingly helpful practices can be exploitative to Indigenous communities if they don't involve respectful understanding on both sides.

Rigoberta notes that keeping their traditions secret is a central aspect of Indian life, and that she will follow this rule throughout her narrative. Members of other religious communities have historically used the little information they had about Indian customs to misrepresent their life. For example, priests from Catholic Action (an association meant to bring Catholicism to Indian communities) have caused mistrust among Indians by criticizing the community's trust in their elected leaders, whom the priests call "sorcerers."

Rigoberta's Indigenous community has a complicated relationship with the Catholic Church, one that's characterized by misunderstanding and tension. Some priests' misrepresentation of the role of elected leaders in the Maya-Quiché community reveals underlying intolerance. They fail to understand that this mode of organization, which might not exist in ladino *society, isn't inherently harmful or inferior.*

Rigoberta continues describing the Maya-Quiché traditions concerning pregnancy and childbirth. After the baby's birth, the placenta is burned at a defined time. The community chooses not to bury the placenta in order not to harm the earth, which is seen as a another parent to the child. Rigoberta believes that many of the community's traditions, such as using special plants to alleviate pregnant women's symptoms, for example through calming baths made with herbs, are effective because of the vitamins the herbs contain. According to her, such plant usage, which brings strength, is one reason the Indian community has survived despite a long history of hunger and suffering.

Rigoberta's descriptions highlight the deep respect her community has for the earth, as they'll only modify nature if it's absolutely necessary to do so. At the same time as she describes the spiritual role that nature plays in her community, she also adopts a pragmatic approach to some traditions. For example, her belief that medicinal herbs contain useful vitamins suggests that, in addition to her adherence to her community's spiritual beliefs, she is willing to examine these practices from a critical, scientific perspective.

At the baby's birth, a fiesta (party) is organized, during which a sheep is killed. For eight days, the baby is left alone with his mother in a special location, so that he or she gradually becomes a member of the family. During this period, neighbors are expected to visit and bring gifts to the family. It's thought that a child who receives many gifts will have many responsibilities as an adult in the community.

The fact that the celebration of childbirth is not limited to the nuclear family shows that, for Rigoberta's community, one's greatest attachments in life should not be to individual people (for example, the members of one's own family). Instead, what should matter more are the rules and traditions that the community has inherited from its ancestors, and that remain relevant to this day.

After eight days, another animal is killed, and all the clothing used during this period is washed. The baby can move into the house, which has previously been washed with water and lime, a sacred ingredient in Rigoberta's culture. She believes that this makes the child physically and emotionally strong to enter the world. Four candles are arranged around the child's bed, representing the respect for the community and the household that the child is expected to feel. At the child's birth, their hands and feet are bound: this symbolizes the respect the child should have for all external living things, as well as the imperative to never steal from others. These binds are released after eight days.

These ceremonies underline the importance of symbols in Rigoberta's culture, as certain natural elements or practices are associated with the commitment to an ethical way of life. At the same time, these symbolic gestures are not entirely abstract. For example, the fact that Rigoberta's community sacrifices animals and eats meat on such rare occasions puts into practice their principle of respecting every living thing, animal or human, and promoting peace and harmony among all living beings.

The parents then tell the child about all the suffering they will have to face. Suffering, for Indians, is an integral part of life, but people must endure it with respect and dignity. A bag full of sacred plants (garlic, lime, salt, and tobacco) is placed around the child's neck to ward off harmful events. The bag represents the continuation of their ancestors' way of life.

This approach to suffering has both existential and historical components. Suffering is, of course, an inevitable aspect of human life. But it's particularly acute in Indigenous communities, such as Indian groups in Guatemala, that have suffered violent repression for centuries—first during Spanish colonization and later under ladino *rule.*

At 40 days of age, the child is baptized in the community. The goal is for the child to learn to respect and preserve ancestral traditions, such as keeping the community's secrets safe from rich people who might try to destroy their culture. The child is told to honor **maize**, as he or she is made of the maize their own mother ate. The child's life is also meant to replace the lives of the dead. At this point, the child becomes a child of God—the community's "father," associated with the sun—and can honor God by respecting beans, maize, and the earth.

In this belief system, human ancestors are not separate from the natural world. In this sense, a person's respect for a natural product such as maize also shows respect to one's ancestors, who have cultivated this way of life. One's actions in the present, then, keep the community's history alive and ensure its survival.

At the age of 10, children are prepared for adult life. They learn that they must remember the stories of oppression by white men during colonization and not trust the official narratives circulated about these events. They are told to respect vulnerable members of the community—such as their elders and pregnant women—through practical actions, such as crossing the street to let old people pass.

Indigenous Guatemalans do not learn history as abstract knowledge, but rather as a series of lessons meant to stimulate their political consciousness in the present. Formal education is less important than putting into practice the ethical and spiritual principles that one has been taught. This is why concrete, everyday practices—and not hours of formal schooling—constitute the foundation of this community.

Although there are special celebrations for the birth of a boy, Rigoberta notes that this is not machismo (a system that values men more than women), because such celebrations honor the hard work the boy will be expected to perform as a man. Boys are given more food and more responsibility, and they're considered heads of the household. However, Rigoberta insists that girls' work is also valued and is, in fact, equally hard. In addition, women receive special respect as mothers: they are valued because of their special connection to the earth, capable of giving life. Although Rigoberta insists that both gender roles are complementary and equally important, she does concede that the community—and, in particular, fathers—are happier when a boy is born.

On one hand, Rigoberta's reflections on gender dynamics in her community reflect her trust in the positive value of many of her community's traditions. On the other hand, they reflect a willingness to be honest and identify certain practices that might perpetuate gender inequality. For example, her mention of the special ceremonies and joy around the birth of a son suggests that is an underlying preference for boys, which contrasts with the principle of gender equality that Rigoberta defends throughout her life.

A child's education centers on playing an active part in the community and having a generous, open heart. The community's long stretches of poverty have made solidarity a core value among the villagers. Children learn their responsibilities through play, and learning prayers is a central feature of everyone's upbringing.

These descriptions attribute a positive side effect to poverty: the development of solidarity and generosity. This suggests that, even if Rigoberta fights against the violent inequalities that cause so much suffering in her community, she also wants to protect her community from other dangers, such as selfishness and greed.

In addition, children learn by imitating their parents: girls learn to cook from their mothers, and boys learn to work outside in the field from their fathers. They are given tools—a hoe, machete, and ax for boys, a washing board and other domestic items for girls—in order to learn what their tasks will be when they grow up. The eldest son is responsible for the house, serving as a second father to all. The mother, on the other hand, is responsible for managing the household's money. A father has the right to scold or even beat his children if they do not respect their duties, which are thoroughly explained to them.

The early emphasis on the tasks that children will have to perform suggests that these gender norms are largely imposed from the outside. Girls learn that it is their duty to take care of the household, whereas men must work outside, with little leeway to invert such roles. The fact that a father has a right to hit a child suggests that the community treats children like adults—that is, they assume that children should be capable of understanding their role in the community. But it also reveals a certain brutality that contrasts starkly with the community's insistence on dialogue and nonviolence.

CHAPTER 3: THE NAHUAL

All Maya-Quiché children have a nahual, an animal that serves as a protective spirit, allowing the child to communicate with nature. This double is very important to the community, as hurting a human also hurts their animal double. The *nahual* is determined by the child's birthday, according to a fixed calendar. But people are only told what their *nahual* is once they've grown up, so that children will not justify their behavior by referring to their *nahual*'s personality traits and can grow up in a natural way. However, people often feel strong bonds to their *nahual* even before they know which one is theirs.

Like many Maya-Quiché beliefs and traditions, the nahual *unites ethical and ecological practices with spiritual devotion. The community's emphasis on respecting animals helps explain why, later in the book, Rigoberta and her fellow villagers are particularly horrified when they witness violence against animals. In their view, animal life should be just as respected as human life.*

Humans, Rigoberta insists, are integral parts of the natural, animal world. Given the important identity that the nahual confers, Rigoberta notes that the *nahual* must be kept secret, as this protects Indian culture from being stolen. This is why she will keep her own *nahual* a secret from her readers.

This is one of several moments in which, despite her willingness to share her story with the reader, Rigoberta honors the importance of secrecy in her community. Only through such secrets can she ensure that the most intimate, vulnerable aspects of her culture can be preserved from possible intrusion or manipulation.

CHAPTER 4: FIRST VISIT TO THE FINCA. LIFE IN THE FINCA

After 40 days, the child can accompany his or her family to work in the fincas. Rigoberta explains that Indians are taken to work in enclosed lorries, full of people and animals. The trip takes over 36 hours and, since people vomit and urinate on the way, the atmosphere in the lorry is terrible. By the time workers exit the lorry, they are all in shock, physically and emotionally stunned. Due to these trips in an enclosed vehicle, Rigoberta never saw the beautiful countryside of her homeland until she went to the capital with her father.

Rigoberta realizes that, in the Guatemalan economic and racial hierarchy, inequality is so severe that poor Indians are often treated like animals. Although taking a 36-hour lorry trip is considered part of ordinary life for many Indians, it is one of the many facets of the exploitative, dehumanizing finca *system. The fact that the landowners subject their employees to these sorts of conditions shows that they don't care about the workers' well-being, only their labor.*

On the fincas, recruiting *caporales* (agents) behave like the landowners that employ them. They speak Spanish and can thus function as intermediaries. Despite often coming from the same villages as the Indian works, the *caporales* treat the peasants with disgust and contempt, insulting the workers and constantly putting pressure on them to increase their productivity. Workers are fed **tortillas** and beans that are often rotten. Any additional ingredient served, such as an egg, is deducted from workers' pay.

This description reveals that even members of an oppressed community can turn against their own members for personal gain: the caporales, *for example, hope to climb the social and economic hierarchy by siding with the landowners. Given the importance that maize-based products such as tortillas play in Indigenous traditions and beliefs, the bad food they're served is an additional insult, a form of disrespect to their culture and their basic human dignity.*

The cantina (a bar where groceries are also sold) on the finca serves sweets and alcohol, which often leads workers to accumulate debt. Sometimes, when Rigoberta's father (whom Rigoberta calls a sensitive man) was under stress, he would drink too much and end up owing all of his wages to the cantina. Rigoberta's family then had to work even harder to pay back these debts. Because of this, Rigoberta's mother, worried about incurring even more debt, would tell her children not to touch anything in the *cantina*, so that they wouldn't have to pay for it.

This description highlights a difference in behavior between Rigoberta's parents: while Rigoberta's mother maintains strict discipline in the face of temptations such as the cantina, *Rigoberta's father uses drinking as an outlet for his negative emotions. Her father's alcohol use emphasizes the need for many of these workers to numb their pain and fatigue in one way or another, in order to face their heavy load of suffering.*

Overseers can kick workers out of the finca without paying them, as once happened to Rigoberta's family. The overseers are usually ladinos but are also occasionally Indians from the Altiplano. These Indian behave in harmful ways toward their own community, stealing from them in order to accumulate wealth. The overseers' cruelty and the intensity of the work on these farms made Rigoberta furious. She also noticed another injustice: during their trips back and forth, drivers would often stop to rest but would never let the people out of the lorry. As Rigoberta grew up, she found that her rage against these types of events lessened. She came to understand that her family had to accept these conditions out of necessity, and that this was a plight shared with the rest of the community.

This description once again highlights the fact that oppression is not necessarily divided perfectly along ethnic lines, since even members of Indian communities can turn against their own people for personal profit. Rigoberta's private rage highlights how she's internalized her parents' teachings that suffering is an integral part of Indian life and must be met with dignity and endurance. However, Rigoberta later rejects such resignation.

When Rigoberta was 12, the landowner, accompanied by 15 soldiers, visited the workers' barracks and began talking to them about elections. Rigoberta's mother understood a little Spanish, but none of the workers considered that the ladino government was their own. However, under pressure from the landowner and the soldiers, all workers were forced to cast a vote on a piece of paper—otherwise, they would be thrown out of the finca and not paid. Rigoberta and all the children were terrified, believing that the soldiers were there to kill their parents. At the same time, Rigoberta was shocked to notice how fat and tall the landowner and his family were.

This episode highlights the exploitative nature of the Guatemalan government. The fact that workers are coerced into voting for a candidate they do not even know suggests that this government is not democratic at all: it seeks to intimidate the poor and doesn't about representing working-class people's interests.

Later, after the elections, the landowner returned to congratulate the workers because the president they voted for won. The workers did not even know who they had voted for, and they laughed among themselves, aware that the president of the *ladinos* had never represented their interests.

The workers' laughter highlights their awareness of this situation as much as their inability to do anything about it, given their absolute powerlessness when faced with the threat of violence and joblessness. Their ignorance of Spanish also plays a role in both highlighting and perpetuating their exclusion from politics. Since they don't even share a language with those in power, they can't make their voices heard.

CHAPTER 5: FIRST VISIT TO GUATEMALA CITY

At the age of seven, Rigoberta got lost in the mountains during a trip with her father and siblings to collect mimbre (willow used to weave furniture and baskets). After their dog, in charge of leading them back home, abandoned them out of hunger, the group got lost and was forced to make its way back on their own. As the youngest and slowest member of the group, Rigoberta was accidentally left behind on the path. When she realized that she was on her own and that her family couldn't hear her calls for help, she understood what it felt like to be an adult.

Rigoberta's association of fear, solitude, and danger with adulthood shows that she considers adult life to marked by suffering rather than freedom or independence. This episode also shows how, despite the community's emphasis on interdependence and cooperation with the natural world, nature can also prove threatening. Even the most faithful dog can revert to its basic, selfish needs, and people can get lost even amid the most beautiful scenery.

After seven excruciating hours, Rigoberta's family finally found her and, although relieved, got mad at her for falling behind. After three days of collecting mimbre without eating anything, the group finally found their way back to the village. The other villagers, who knew that the group got lost, were overjoyed to see them. But Rigoberta was furious at having to live in such a precarious situation: her family had to leave a lot of *mimbre* behind because they could not carry it for so long, which lost them money, rendering the trip futile.

The family's frustration with Rigoberta, and her own anger at this entire trip, reveals the emotional toll of their circumstances. Poverty does not allow them a moment of respite, and every mistake can cost them their entire wages—in the oppressive context of the finca, *but also in the more comfortable setting of their beloved mountains. Rigoberta's anger highlights her desire to rebel against these circumstances, instead of accepting such unfairness quietly.*

Rigoberta (who describes herself as her father's favorite) accompanied her father to the capital to help him sell the little mimbre they had left. Due to lack of familiarity with the capital, which kept them from knowing where to find potential buyers, Rigoberta and her father found themselves forced to sell the *mimbre* at a much lower price than expected. When they returned to the village, Rigoberta's mother was furious to discover that, after such difficult experiences, the family still had barely enough money to get by.

This episode highlights the divide between the capital and the countryside. In the familiar setting of the mountains, Rigoberta and her family know how to take advantage of the natural environment—but in the city, they find themselves at a disadvantage. Given that Guatemala City is also the seat of political and economic power in the country, this episode serves a symbolic function: it reveals the disadvantages that poor Indians face in the ladino *system, which is likely to trick them in a variety of ways.*

Despite these financial worries, Rigoberta was fascinated when she saw the capital for the first time. On the way there, she and her father traveled in a truck with windows, so she was able to admire the countryside. In the capital, when she saw cars, she believed they were animals and was fascinated by the fact that they didn't collide into one another but moved around in an ordered fashion.

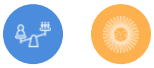
Rigoberta's surprise at seeing the countryside symbolizes the extent to which oppression keeps Indians in the dark: literally, by forcing them into closed lorries, and metaphorically, by keeping them from understanding the broader context of their lives. It is only once they understand how their personal experiences connect to a broader, national context of exploitation that they are able to resist such injustice.

In Guatemala City, Rigoberta accompanied her father to the offices of the National Institute for Agrarian Transformation (INTA), in charge of land issues. Her father explained to her that Indians like them can be thrown in jail if they do not show up to their appointment on the right date and time. Her father behaved in a meek, humble manner with the officials in the building, which confirmed to Rigoberta that the city belonged to ladinos. She found the city disturbing and monstruous, although, later in her life, she became more familiar with this world.

Rigoberta's father's submissive behavior at the INTA shows that poor Indians are not fully integrated into the legal and political system: rather, they are forced to literally and metaphorically "bow" to its laws. Not doing so always involves a violent threat, such as imprisonment. The arbitrary nature of such rules—being thrown in jail for missing an appointment—reveals the arbitrariness of the unjust system that oppresses the Indians, as well as their lack of participation in the rules that determine their fate.

During their three days the capital, Rigoberta and her father stayed with a friend of her father's on the outskirts of the city; the friend and his family barely had any food to eat. Rigoberta cried when she saw how eager the former villagers were to reconnect with nature and to return to the beautiful countryside they missed.

Rigoberta's father's friends' desire to return to the mountains suggests that life in the city does not necessarily bring greater economic comfort. It also underlines the special relationship that Indigenous groups cultivate with nature.



CHAPTER 6: AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD AGRICULTURAL WORKER

Rigoberta helped her mother from an early age, picking coffee or taking care of her baby brother so that her mother could work. Her mother was in charge of preparing food for the workers, a task that Rigoberta describes as very difficult. Her mother served others fresh ingredients even though her own family was given food that had gone bad. In addition to cooking, Rigoberta's mother also picked coffee during breaks between meals to supplement her earnings, working all day from three in the morning until nightfall. Rigoberta remembers feeling helpless at seeing such hard work: she describes this as the moment her political consciousness was born. From this moment onward, she decided to earn her own money in order to support her mother.

Rigoberta's mother is a model of endurance and devotion to her family; she spends all of her time working hard to make sure her family makes enough money, even if this involves sacrificing their own well-being. This this way, she accepts that her hard work will provide others with good food, whereas her own family might suffer from malnutrition. Rigoberta's reflection that her political consciousness was born from witnessing her mother's suffering confirms her conviction that political resistance and rebellion derive not from formal learning, but from personal experiences of oppression and injustice.

Whenever the children were sick, her mother spent all of their money on medicine. On one occasion, Rigoberta fell ill and nearly died on the finca. After this, she resolved to become tougher and to hide her physical difficulties adjusting to the abrupt change in climate between the mountains and the coast. At the age of eight, she began earning money, setting herself goals to collect 35 pounds of coffee and earn 25 cents. She sometimes had to work two days in a row to reach that objective, but she forced herself to do so out of commitment to her goals.

Rigoberta's decision to hide her physical suffering and to work as a child reveals her dedication to her family. She already behaves like an adult, aware of her responsibilities toward others and willing to sacrifice her well-being and her childhood in order to help her family get by. This attitude reveals her acceptance of suffering as a way of life: she has no other choice but to work hard if she wants her family to survive.

Rigoberta had to pick coffee beans very carefully, since breaking branches meant money would be deducted from their salary. She compares picking coffee to taking care of a wounded human being and explains that this work taught her to be extremely gentle in her actions. For years, she was paid the same amount of money, despite collecting increasingly greater amounts of coffee. Only after two years, when she was collecting 75 pounds of coffee at a time, did they increase her salary to 35 cents.

There's a vast discrepancy between the amount of coffee Rigoberta collects and her salary, which is only raised by 10 cents, despite the fact that she is collecting more than double the initial amount of coffee. This reveals one of the many injustices of this finca *system, which seeks to exploit workers and take advantage of their vulnerability, rather than pay them a fair wage for their hard work. Rigoberta's association of picking coffee with helping others highlights the fact that suffering can have some positive consequences, as people may be able to transform these experiences into generosity and resistance.*

When Rigoberta fell ill, she returned with her family to the Altiplano, where it was time to begin cultivating **maize** anyway. Her family was happy in the mountains, despite the hard work and the discomfort of the rainy, windy weather, which their house and their few clothes did not protect them from. Working together was also a source of joy, because while they were on fincas, Rigoberta's father worked away from the family and they did not see him for months at a time. Nevertheless, living conditions in the *fincas* were nearly unbearable, as hundreds of people lived together under the same roof.

Given Rigoberta's family's joy at working in the mountains, it transpires that what Rigoberta's community despises is not hard work per se, but the inhumane work conditions in the fincas. *This environment stifles any possibility of developing a caring, nurturing contact with nature and with other human beings. Harsh work conditions, Rigoberta suggests, are bearable if they are undertaken in a spirit of respect, love, and sharing, as she is able to experience when working with her family in the mountains.*

Rigoberta then explains what living conditions are like for women in Guatemala. Most women workers have nine or 10 children, half of whom are likely to die of malnutrition. Rigoberta describes these women's courage in dealing with tough situations, including being forced to bury their own children. She also mentions that men from the army often sexually abuse young girls. Some women turn to prostitution if they don't have families to help support them and do not earn enough money through their work in the fincas. She notes that this did not exist in her Indian community, where strict dress codes were respected in the name of dignity and respect for their ancestors' customs.

Rigoberta's description of the specific problems that women face reveals that poverty and exploitation create particularly difficult circumstances for women, due to their special responsibility for giving birth and caring for their children. Rigoberta's comments about prostitution equate it with misbehavior and disrespect for community rules: adopting a strict dress code, she argues, should be enough to ward off such activities. However, this perspective does not take into account severe economic pressures and gender-specific issues: the exploitative system takes advantage of women's bodies in a way that men are not as vulnerable to.

CHAPTER 7: DEATH OF HER LITTLE BROTHER IN THE FINCA. DIFFICULTY OF COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER INDIANS

Two of Rigoberta's brothers died on the finca. The eldest, Felipe, died after a plane sprayed the coffee with pesticides, causing him to die of intoxication. The youngest, Nicolás, died of malnutrition at the age of two. Since Rigoberta's mother couldn't spend all her time taking care of Nicolás (otherwise she would lose her job), the family found themselves helpless while the young boy was in agony.

Rigoberta's brothers' deaths reveal the helplessness that poor workers experience when faced with illness, since they have neither the time nor the money to care for their sick ones. Felipe's illustrates the physical dangers of working on fincas, *as well as the utter lack of care that finca owners have for their workers' safety and health.*

After Nicolás died, Rigoberta's mother didn't know how to bury her child. Because the 400-500 workers that slept together in one house all came from different communities, they didn't share the same language and couldn't communicate. The workdays, which begin at three in the morning, did not allow for people to get to know one another. The *caporal* told Rigoberta's mother that she could pay a tax to bury the child on the finca.

This episode serves as an early illustration of the difficulties that language barriers create, even within the same group of exploited, Indigenous workers in Guatemala. Rigoberta will later realize that overcoming these linguistic differences and banding together as a unified group is crucial to fighting against oppression.

Moved by Rigoberta's family's plight, one of the workers brought them a small box. The family then spent the morning burying and mourning Nicolás. As a result, the overseer told Rigoberta's mother to leave without getting paid, because of the work they missed. Without the transportation organized by the finca, the family realized that they were completely lost. Out of solidarity, some neighbors lent Rigoberta's mother money, and they succeeded in making it back to their home, although no one in the family as paid for their work. They were denied their salary for buying medicine, even though this was a lie: lack of medicine was precisely the reason Nicolás died. Once Rigoberta's father and the rest of the family returned home, they learned of Nicolás's death and used their earnings to pay the neighbor back.

This episode reveals that the finca *system does not only seek to exploit workers, making them work excessively hard—it also literally robs them of their salary. Even though Rigoberta and her family know that the overseer is lying, and that they do not own any money to the* finca *for buying medicine, their vulnerable position does not allow them to protest: they find themselves forced to bow to the* finca*'s cruel and arbitrary laws, which has benefited from their work but refuses to pay them for it. Meanwhile, small acts of generosity toward Rigoberta's family show the solidarity that can exist among the poor, as others sacrifice what little they have for those who need it most.*

After living through this, Rigoberta was furious and terrified of the adult life that awaited her, knowing that she too was bound to watch her children die. That hatred for the finca, she recalls, has stayed with her until the present. Rigoberta describes the tricks that members of the *finca* use to pay workers less, for example by tinkering with the amount of coffee weighed. She characterizes this as a system meant to rob Indians of well-earned salaries, because they are charged for everything, including their journey on the lorry. These cruel tricks, which workers cannot defend themselves against, led Rigoberta's family to return home with absolutely no money after weeks of work.

Rigoberta associates adult life with motherhood—which, in her community, is itself associated with grief and suffering, given the high rates of child mortality in poor Indigenous groups. Moments such as these nurture her doubts about whether or not she truly wants to get married and become a mother. Although she feels isolated in these fears, she later realizes that a very large number of Indian women share exactly the same doubts: this is a structural problem, not a matter of individual will. In this sense, Rigoberta begins to understand that women face specific problems related to economic inequality, and that these problems are just as much a product of injustice as overwork on the fincas.

CHAPTER 8: LIFE IN THE ALTIPLANO. RIGOBERTA'S TENTH BIRTHDAY

In the Altiplano, Rigoberta worked with her father, chopping wood like a boy. With the bare minimum that they were able to cultivate and earn in the Altiplano, the family managed to live there for a while without having to go down to the fincas. They ate chile, plants, and **tortillas**. They grew beans so that Rigoberta's mother could sell them to buy soap at the market.

The community's objective is to stay away from the fincas *as long as possible. In light of the special connection that they share with nature and the maize plant, this suggests that the community would be happy with a simple life of work in the fields. Such modest goals highlight the injustice of a system that seeks to rob them of the bare minimum, such as ownership of their own land.*

Rigoberta describes their daily activities: at three in the morning, they woke up and ground the *nixtamal* dough: a mixture of **maize** and lime, used to make tortillas. They divided up the tasks among the family: the first person to wake up lit the fire. Others washed the *nixtamal* and grinding stone, made the food for dogs, ground the maize, and made the tortillas. Around five, after eating, the men headed off to work, accompanied by their dogs. They called out to their neighbors so that all of them could go work in the fields together, as one large family. At six in the evening, everyone returned home from work, ate, and took care of the remaining chores. At nightfall, they gathered and sang until it was time for bed.

Workdays in Rigoberta's community are organized around communal work and socialization. The distribution of tasks is partially based on gender divisions, but mostly on the most efficient division of time, so that everyone's chore plays a useful role. The participation of the dogs in men's activities in the fields also highlights the cooperation that takes place between humans and animals, as both depend on each other for safety and survival. The villagers' communal singing also shows the joy and peace that they find amid their hard work, as everyone enjoys the cheerful presence of their family and fellow community members.

Rigoberta describes the layout and making of the houses in the community, noting that everyone sleeps in the same room. She remarks that, due to the lack of private space, couples sometimes have sex in the same room as their children, which leads children to become aware of matrimonial dynamics.

As Rigoberta later emphasizes, children's possible proximity to adults having sex does not necessarily translate into a transparent understanding of puberty and sex. This lack of privacy is one of the more negative consequences of communal living, in this case driven by insufficient funds to expand the house.

Rigoberta also comments on the deep rejection that society directs toward Indians, whom they call dirty. Rigoberta explains that, due to lack of time, Indians are forced to sleep in their work clothes, which they can only wash once a week. The societal rejection that Indians face because of this has left a deep emotional imprint on Rigoberta.

Rigoberta's comment shows that racial discrimination in Guatemalan society is interconnected with the rejection of poverty. Calling Indians "dirty" is deeply offensive, as it conflates external circumstances (hard work and lack of time to wash clothes) with inherent characteristics. In reality, being "dirty" is a matter of difficult living circumstances, not choice.

On Rigoberta's 10th birthday, her mother and father explained adult life to her, although she had spent so much time working with them that she felt she had already seen it all. Her parents told her that, despite the dreams and goals she was likely to have, poverty and suffering would keep her from realizing them. However, they thanked her for her contributions to the family. They also explained that she would soon get her period, which would allow her to have children.

Rigoberta's parents accept that personal suffering is an inevitable aspect of life. Although this allows them to focus on positive attributes, such as commitment to one's community, it also condemns people to self-sacrifice, as they are forced to abandon their dreams.

Rigoberta's father told her not to give in to bitterness or to escape the rules set by her parents, because respect for the rules is central to being respected by the community. The entire community observes one's behavior, which enjoins everyone to behave in obedient ways. Rigoberta's family told her that she now had the responsibility to contribute to the good of the community. In a formal ceremony with the community, she repeated her vows to do so.

Rigoberta's community is organized around a series of rules that promote obedience and respect. Although Rigoberta believes in such devotion to the common good, she will eventually realize that obeying rules is not necessarily positive: in unjust situations, it can be better to rebel and defend one's dignity.

CHAPTER 9: CEREMONIES FOR SOWING TIME AND HARVEST. RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE EARTH

On their 12th birthdays, Maya-Quiché children are given an animal to take care of so that it can later be sold. When Rigoberta turned 12, she received a pig, two chickens, and a lamb. Rigoberta was overjoyed at this new responsibility. After her pig gave birth to piglets, she knew she had to find a way to feed them. Therefore, Rigoberta began weaving during any possible break during the day. After two weeks, she weaved enough cloth to sell at the market so that she could buy food for her pigs. After seven months of such successful work, she then sold the piglets so that she could buy both food and clothing for herself. Her parents were thrilled to see how well she got along with animals.

Receiving animals as a gift allows children to learn responsibility: they must be creative and hardworking if they want to keep their animals alive and earn a profit from selling them. In this way, these enjoyable activities—spending time caring for animals and connecting with nature—serve to prepare the child for adult life, when they'll have a variety of responsibilities for both animals and other people. Rigoberta's success in this enterprise highlights her hardworking attitude, her connection to nature, and her willingness to follow the community's traditions.

Going down to the town was a rare occasion when Rigoberta was a child. When going to the market, her mother would ask other members of the village if they needed anything. The whole community took part in the enterprise, providing a horse or giving her woven objects to sell, so that they wouldn't all have to take time off work to go to town.

This communal participation in trips to the market emphasizes the community's collective organization. Its objective is not for individual people to acquire personal wealth, but rather for the entire community to thrive as a whole, sharing and distributing all available resources.

Rigoberta then describes the fiesta that inaugurates the **maize** harvest. In this ceremony, the villagers pray together, burn incense, and light candles, asking the earth permission to cultivate the land. Before placing the seeds in the ground, another ceremony is performed to honor the seed that will multiply. The families pray to the earth and the natural elements to provide food for them, promising not to waste any. Men, women, and children take part in the planting of the seeds. Later, they keep watch over the land in order to keep animals from digging them up. While the maize is growing, villagers go to the fincas to work, although some women stay home to look after the plants. Rigoberta emphasizes that maize is at the core of the Maya-Quiché culture.

The ceremony anticipating the maize harvest underscores the deep respect that the Maya-Quiché community has for their land and its products. The earth is not venerated as an abstract god, but rather respected as a concrete entity. Any human intrusion or modification must involve the earth's consent, in the same way that entering someone's home requires their consent.

Another ceremony takes place before cutting the first leaf. Villagers with the biggest leaves share them with others, and the villagers usually use them to make **tamales**. The community celebrates the harvest by thanking the earth and God for providing for them. This is a moment of joy, because no one has to go down to the fincas, and everyone can enjoy the food they have reaped. To demonstrate their gratitude, the whole village gathers in the community house and takes part in a feast.

Once again, the village organizes itself in order to pool and distribute all resources as fairly as possible. This highlights both respect for the unpredictable products that the earth might bring (a good or bad harvest) but also commitment to equality and generosity toward all members of the community, as they've all worked hard.

This community house, Rigoberta describes, is also used for village-wide discussions. Since everyone takes part in the cultivation of the land, important conversations revolve around the collective nature of the work. In her village, the community decided to divide the land into individual plots while retaining a common piece of land that everyone took turns cultivating. This common land could provide for community members in need, such as widows.

Rigoberta's village functions in a democratic way, since all decisions concerning the community's economic organization and well-being are made collectively. Such peaceful debates contrast with the Guatemalan government, which privileges the wealth and power of a few: the ladino *elite.*

CHAPTER 10: THE NATURAL WORLD. THE EARTH, MOTHER OF MAN

For Rigoberta, such intense contact with the natural world is what differentiates Indian education from ladino schooling. Respect for the sacredness and purity of natural elements, such as water and the earth, is the foundation of their upbringing. No one in the community eats food produced by machines. They must ask for permission before disturbing or harming the earth in any way, for example before a harvest.

Rigoberta insists that the cohesion and strength of her community derives not from formal schooling, but from concrete practices that are in touch with nature. The village's rejection of machines reveals its adherence to strict rules about respecting traditional customs, such as making their food by hand. The goal of preserving such traditions is not to increase efficiency, as a machine might, but to honor the legacy of their ancestors.

The recitation of prayers, honoring the ancestors and their legacy, is another crucial part of Indian education. When Indians pray, they invoke the natural elements. In particular, they ask for the sun to shine one everyone, including their enemies, which they define as people who steal or engage in prostitution. For the community, the sun represents the fullness of life and a path toward their God. The goal is to respect all living things and natural elements, including all human beings.

The community's generous prayers, which extend to their enemies, highlights their core values of benevolence and nonviolence. Their disapproval of prostitution hints that the Maya-Quiché place a high value on modesty and sexual purity. This attitude seems to overlook the fact that some women in this community are essentially forced into prostitution because they have no other way of earning a decent living—and in this way, prostitution exploits the women's economic vulnerability.

CHAPTER 11: MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

Growing up, Rigoberta learned that, as a woman, her objective was get married and become a mother. Her parents told her not to compromise her dignity by wearing makeup, as this would offend their ancestors. Women were also encouraged to ignore or defend themselves against men who talked to them in the street, because men and women should not court each other in public. However, despite children's possible knowledge about their parents' sex lives, Rigoberta criticizes the lack of education parents give concerning bodily transformations and pregnancy. She argues that ignorance of one's body is harmful to one's growth.

Rigoberta's perspective on her Maya-Quiché traditions is deeply respectful, but it also leaves space for constructive criticism. In this sense, Rigoberta does not necessarily defy certain norms concerning how women should dress and behave toward men. However, she emphasizes the importance of education, arguing that only a full understanding of one's anatomy can lead to informed choices. Although she does not say so explicitly, she implies that, in this regard, traditions and ceremonies are not enough: Indigenous women and men should benefit from modern scientific knowledge concerning sexual reproduction.

Rigoberta notes that, despite its emphasis on childbearing, her community does not reject homosexuality. Discrimination against homosexual people is, she argues, a trait of ladino society. Indians, on the other hand, accept anything that nature produces, including animals or harvests that "did not turn out right," because they are taught not to want more than what life gives them.

Rigoberta's discussion of homosexuality suggests that, although tolerated, people who deviate from heterosexual norms of behavior are not fully recognized as equals: their sexual desire and behavior is viewed as not conforming to the "right" way of being. This can be understood in terms of the community's focus on sexual reproduction as a necessary means of survival. In this context, homosexual relationships might not be valued as highly as heterosexual ones since they don't produce children. Rigoberta does not discuss the issue further, thus leaving ambiguity about the extent to which homosexual couples are actually integrated into Maya-Quiché culture.

Rigoberta describes the multiple ways in which the outside world threatens Maya-Quiché people. In the past, this has included campaigns to sterilize Indian women without them knowing, in order to control the population. For Indians, using artificial methods to prevent childbirth is a violation of ancestral laws that mandate loving everything that lives. Due to their mistrust of the outside world, the community is suspicious of people who have lived outside the community, like Rigoberta herself.

The Maya-Quiché's rejection of modern methods of family planning is explained both in terms of culture and of a history of external manipulation. Given the high child mortality in the community, this leads to a double bind: if women have children, they know that at least a few of them are likely to die of malnutrition or other ailments. Rigoberta also suggests that her own situation is ambiguous: although she has spent her life defending her community's culture, taking part in activities outside the village has actually made her suspicious of the very community she strives to protect.

Rigoberta describes different aspects of the Maya-Quiché marriage procedure. Marriage is associated with childbirth as well as a commitment to perpetuate the traditions of the community, so it is taken very seriously and involves different steps. In the early stage of the "open door," the young man proposes marriage to the young woman, but she is free to accept or reject his offer. One of Rigoberta's sisters waited seven months before committing to marrying her husband. In the meantime, the young man visits the young woman's family, bringing small gifts each time. The parents discuss their daughter's qualities, emphasizing her work ethic and dedication to the community's standards of behavior.

The Maya-Quiché emphasis on marriage as a prelude to sexual reproduction places a heavy burden on women, who know that childbirth is bound to lead to grief and suffering. This is one of the aspects of wedlock that will later lead Rigoberta to doubt whether or not she actually wants to marry.

Once the ceremony is arranged, the community prepares a celebration. The young man's parents bring a lamb and **tamales**. Only the most respected members of the community are chosen to serve the food. After kneeling out of respect, the guests stand, and the ceremony begins. Grandparents relate stories of their own lives, emphasizing moments of both suffering and happiness. Still kneeling, the married couple prays and pledges to "honour the Indian race." In a speech, they accuse the colonizers at the time of Columbus of harming their community, creating inequality, and dividing up land. This message serves as a historical reminder but also as a call to consciousness in the present. After making their vows, the couple can finally stand. Then, they apologize to the people they have offended over their lifetime and for the potential harm they might have caused to the natural world.

The sacred role of food in the community—in particular, meat, which involves the sacrifice of an animal, and tamales, made with the revered maize plant—comes to the fore in the marriage ceremony. The couple's emphasis on historical developments, such as the brutality of colonization, mirrors their grandparents' personal storytelling. Both historical narratives are meant to teach the couple lessons from the past in order to solve present struggles. In this sense, history is not relegated to the past: history continues to be made in the present, as the community fights against violence and oppression.

During the ceremony, the grandparents insist that, in the past, Indians used to live past 100, whereas now they only make it to 30 or 40. They tell the younger generation it is their responsibility to reflect on these problems. They also blame "the white man" for teaching members of their community to kill, which never happened before. Rigoberta finds much joy and meaning in these moments, as it allows the eldest members of the community to share their life experience.

The grandparents' narrative underscores the long history of racial tension in this area: it did not begin with Guatemalan independence and the power of a small ladino *elite. Rather, its source is Spain's violent colonization of the area centuries ago. The community's emphasis on personal storytelling contrasts with traditional Guatemalan education, in that it focuses on past and present suffering, insisting that the community's role is to fight against modern problems that harm the Indian community.*

After smoking and drinking, each instance of which is preceded by a prayer, the village representatives tell the couple to have children in order to continue the Indian race and their ancestors' legacies. After listening on their knees to their elders' speeches (which is an act of penitence), the couple can get up, and the rest of the day is devoted to talking. Everyone shares observations and reflections on the state of society and the evolution of their community. Rigoberta finds these final moments sad, noticing the worry that the elders feel when they compare the peaceful past to the degradation of the present.

As all Maya-Quiché are told since childbirth, suffering is an integral part of everyday life. In this sense, the grandparents' focus on the current problems that the community faces highlights the importance of accepting suffering as both a personal and a communal way of being. At the same time, these sad moments also contain within them the seeds of resistance, since they encourage the next generations to reflect on the sources of such pain—and, ideally, to try to resolve such problems.

After the discussion has ended, everyone eats the food that has been brought. A third ceremony then takes place, similar to a Catholic wedding ceremony. However, instead of being directed toward God, the couple's vows refer to the elders. The couple accepts that their family will likely suffer under the oppression of white people, but that they will endure such suffering with dignity.

Making vows to one's ancestors instead of God has one important consequence: it encourages action in the present, meant to protect and preserve the community, instead of passive submissive to a deity's mysterious will.

To represent the couple's union, different objects are brought out. Tortillas, for example, represent the sacredness of the **maize**. On the other hand, modern objects such as chocolate, bread, and coffee, represent threats to the community. Bread, for example, was created by the Spanish who came to colonize the land, and it's made with modern equipment. Indians are told that they should not eat bread but only consume tortillas, in order to respect their ancestors' way of life. They should also reject what the rich use, such as modern pots, because pottery-making is a skill that must not be lost.

The Maya-Quiché community's emphasis on respecting tradition involves rejecting modern equipment that might cause ancestral practices to be lost. This highlights the central, unifying role that shared practices—such as the handmade preparation of tortillas and pottery—play in the community. Through such customs, the community ensures the survival of an ancient way of life, even if it is more arduous and time-consuming than using modern machines.

After this third ceremony, a small fiesta gathers the family together. During this event, the father relinquishes responsibility of his daughter, since she will begin a new life in a new community. The bride's siblings thank her for everything she has done for them and tell her that they look up to her as a mother. In turn, the bride thanks her siblings and kneels to thank her parents. This is a painful moment, because leaving the community causes much sadness. The bride receives earthenware pots, made by her own mother, since Indians do not buy such utensils. She also receives a mat, woven by her mother, to symbolize a mother's connection to the earth. The family then burns some incense, a feature in all ceremonies, serving as a sacrifice to God.

The separation of the bride from her family and her community emphasizes the shared responsibilities that have bound the entire community together up until this point. Although the bride has benefited and will continue to benefit from her parents' support, she has also served as an authority figure to her younger siblings. At the same time, the endurance of these bonds is symbolized by the gifts the girl receives from her mother: these are everyday objects that serve a practical purpose but also carry on traditions. This emphasizes the cyclical nature of life in the Maya-Quiché community, as each daughter will, in turn, become a mother herself.

The fourth ceremony is the *despedida* (farewell). With sadness, the girl takes her leave from her community. Although Indians do not usually pick flowers, given that nature must not be harmed, the community collects special white flowers and arranges them as decorations around the house. All the neighbors bring the bride gifts as symbols of their affection and commitment to her.

The intimate relationship that the Maya-Quiché have with nature gives flowers a special meaning in this context. This event is spiritually important, as a member of the community is offered a new life elsewhere but maintains a steadfast commitment to her inherited traditions.

The entire community then gathers for a fiesta. During this event, the girl meets her husband's godparents for the first time. She also receives flowers from her grandmother, along with advice about a woman's behavior, in particular regarding the dangers of prostitution. The grandmother might also comment on the denaturing of Indian marriage by the Catholic Church's and the ladinos' laws, which bind people together through a piece of paper. In Indian customs, by contrast, a woman is not bound to her husband forever: if she suffers too much during her marriage, she is allowed to leave her husband and reintegrate her community.

The contrast between ladino *Guatemalan society and Maya-Quiché conceptions of marriage suggests that women are afforded greater freedom in this Indigenous group. Although celebrated as a profoundly important cultural event, marriage is not necessarily rigidly fixed, and special circumstances, such as deep unhappiness, can justify breaking up a marriage. This flexibility underscores the fact that the bride still primarily belongs to original community, which has pledged to support her throughout her life, as long as she continues to respect its traditions and norms. This gives women a certain level of security, as they know they can leave a marriage that causes them too much harm or unhappiness.*

After the *fiesta*, the bride leaves her house and is only allowed to return after 15 days. This represents the need to look forward whenever a problem arises, instead of dwelling in the past. One cannot return to childhood: the married girl is now a full adult.

This attitude of looking forward to the future rather than dwelling on the past speaks to the Maya-Quiché's general acceptance of suffering as an inevitable part of life. Rather than looking for a clear answer or an escape from her problems, the bride is encouraged to stay optimistic and patiently wait for better days ahead.

In the new community, members of the bride's new house perform a ceremony to ask the house for permission to add a new member to the household. If problems ever arise between the couple, they are meant to solve them together. However, in the case of intractable issues, the girl is free to return to her former community, as long as she has kept on respecting their traditions. If the girl disrespects their customs, however, the community might not be equally forgiving.

The community's willingness to accept a bride who wishes to leave her marriage still emphasizes the need for the couple to engage in dialogue and solve their problems on their own. This insistence on dialogue mirrors Rigoberta's mother's own belief in fostering dialogue between men and women, both in intimate relationships and in society more broadly.

Rigoberta's sister experienced problems in her marriage, because she found it impossible to integrate a community that spoke a different language and followed different customs. She ended up returning to her original community with her newly born child. The community gave them a small plot of collective land, thus demonstrating their enduring commitment to her.

This anecdote reveals the deep differences that exist between different Indigenous communities. Linguistic divisions are an important obstacle to Indigenous communities' self-preservation, as it prevents them from coming together and uniting toward a common goal. Despite cultural differences, these Indigenous groups suffer from the same political and economic exploitation.

CHAPTER 12: LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY

At the age of 12, Rigoberta began to fully take part in life in the community by working with the adults, for example during the **maize** harvest. She also began to make friends and to take over aspects of her mother's role. In addition, she gained additional responsibility as a catechist, teaching Catholic practices to her fellow villagers.

The early age at which Maya-Quiché children are considered to be adults can be understood in terms of economic need (all available help is needed, in order for the community to survive) and health considerations (many Indigenous people die at the young age of 30 or 40). However, such circumstances will later convince Rigoberta that she was never allowed a true childhood.

Rigoberta discusses the position of the Catholic religion within Indian customs and beliefs. A priest comes to the community every three months to teach Christian doctrine. The Indians have accepted these teachings not as a replacement of their ancestral beliefs, but as a useful complement. They consider the Catholic religion another vehicle for self-expression, in the same way that any element of nature, such as a tree—with its physical body but also its symbolic meaning—might be.

The Maya-Quiché spiritual openness to external influences, such as the Catholic religion, reveals the community's willingness to enrich their practices with different forms of education. This suggests that all peaceful occasions to celebrate nature and honor one's ancestors might be welcome, as long as they do not attempt to modify the community's preexisting practices.

Rigoberta also identifies many similarities between Catholic teachings and Indian customs, although the main difference is the mode of transmission: while the Bible is written, Indian traditions are passed down orally from generation to generation. One important similarity is the Bible's insistence on forefathers, which mirrors Indian beliefs in the importance of ancestors. This has allowed Indians to integrate Christianity into their own culture, as the Bible can serve as yet another means to honor their ancestors' legacies. However, this involves twice the amount of work for Indians, who must learn to pray according to both traditions. Although they do not understand Spanish, the memorize the prayers by heart and integrate them into their traditions.

The similarities between Indigenous beliefs and the Catholic religion shed light on the unity of certain spiritual practices and, by extension, on the artificiality of racial and social divisions between people. Rigoberta's village's willingness to integrate certain elements of Catholicism (historically associated with the Spanish colonizers and, later, the ladinos*) suggests that there is no deep cultural rift between the Maya-Quiché and the* ladinos*. Rather, the* ladino*'s oppression of poor Indians is purely based on greed and desire for power.*

Rigoberta's father was a devout Christian. He believed in God and in worshipping saints, which he also relates to honoring one's ancestors. When Rigoberta took over the responsibility of teaching the Catholic doctrine in the community, she had to learn the prayers by heart. Unlike her brothers who learned to read and write from their cousins, Rigoberta was illiterate.

The fact that Rigoberta was illiterate when she was working as a catechist underscores her determination and intelligence, as she memorized prayers by heart in a language she did not understand. This highlights her willingness to learn, as well as her Christian devotion, undoubtedly inspired by her father.

In Rigoberta's daily life, young boys and girls took part in different activities. With her friends, Rigoberta usually talked about work and their animals. The boys, by contrast, also played games in groups, gambling with balls made of wax and talking together in the village. Girls were not allowed to do the same, as their mothers felt strongly about teaching them domestic tasks. As a result, girls' games usually consisted of weaving together. Rigoberta has fond memories of weaving in a shady area in the field or of going as a group to fetch water in earthenware pots that they carried on their heads. The conversations the girls had during such activities were an opportunity for them to enjoy themselves.

Rigoberta's distinction between girls' and boys' activities suggests that there is some level of gender inequality in the Maya-Quiché community, as girls are not necessarily given as much time to engage in play. At the same time, Rigoberta and her friends' capacity to find moments of joy and carefree socialization while taking part in domestic tasks underscores the benefits of working in groups. It also speaks to the human capacity to find joy in work that is conducted in a peaceful, independent manner.

Rigoberta notes that, despite her passion for climbing trees, girls were not allowed such activities, and she only did this when her mother couldn't see her. Boys, however, were given more freedom. Rigoberta wonders whether this reflects machismo—or, perhaps, the specific dangers that girls can be affected by. Boys and girls were not allowed to socialize in mixed groups, even when they were part of the same family. However, Rigoberta's father encouraged her to be active in the community. As a catechist, Rigoberta collected money for the community and used it to set up a small shop. The priests supported this enterprise, encouraging villagers to unite and build collective strength.

Rigoberta's defiance of her mother's orders indicates an early inclination to reject certain gender norms. Her father—and also, in later occasions, her mother—actually encourage her to defy some of society's norms that exclude women from leadership roles. Her parents' support plays an important role in developing her sense of responsibility for her community.

Rigoberta describes the different Catholic prayers and ceremonies she helped organize in the village. The villages held regular meetings on Fridays for Indigenous cultural matters and on Mondays for Catholic ceremonies. Rigoberta and her siblings learned to play some Indigenous instruments, with which they accompanied Catholic hymns. On Mondays, they would pray for the sick and sing Catholic Action hymns. In addition to these meetings focused on spirituality, the village also held regular meetings on Thursdays to discuss important issues, which became especially necessary when the government and landowners began taking over their land. Rigoberta insists that it is crucial for Indians to make time for their Indigenous ceremonies, as well as for the Catholic religion. In her mind, this commitment to spirituality differentiates the community from atheist ladinos.

Beyond her discussion of the similarities between Indigenous and Catholic religious beliefs, Rigoberta describes the practical ways in which her community integrates both of these spiritual traditions in its everyday life. The variety of meetings that the village holds highlights its emphasis on collective dialogue and communal engagement with tradition. In this way, Rigoberta's community has a democratic, inclusive approach to both spiritual and social issues.

CHAPTER 13: DEATH OF HER FRIEND BY POISONING

At the age of 14, Rigoberta went down to the finca with her entire family. She worked there with a friend, María, picking cotton. But one day, after the cotton field was sprayed with pesticides, María died of poisoning. The group buried her on the *finca* and decided to take two days to grieve. This tragic event led Rigoberta to feel very depressed about her future. María, an active and much-loved member of the community, once told Rigoberta that she did not want to get married and see her children die of starvation. This led Rigoberta to conclude that she would not get married either.

María's sudden death mirrors Rigoberta's brother Felipe's death on a finca, *which was also due to toxic pesticides. These two episodes suggest that such deaths were not necessarily rare events—dangerous, unsanitary, and unhealthy working conditions were common on the* fincas. *Rigoberta's reflections on the dangers of motherhood will remain relevant throughout her life, as she understands the pervasive problem of child mortality.*

The traumatic event of María's death led Rigoberta to revise all of her ideas about life. She realized that two of her brothers have already died and that her mother has spent all of her life working relentlessly without complaining. This caused much anger and anguish in Rigoberta, who wondered if an alternative to this difficult life exists. She secretly wished to burn the finca down to the ground, to punish the people who sprayed the poison that killed her friend. She also expressed the desire to die. Unlike what her mother believed, these were not childish fantasies, but thoughts that she contemplated seriously.

Rigoberta contrasts her anger with her mother's apparent acceptance or resignation toward the injustices that take place on the fincas. *Moved by intense emotions, Rigoberta debates between different forms of destruction, directed at the* fincas *or even at herself. Such violent imaginings highlight the intensity of her emotions, but also the fact that she has not yet found a constructive outlet to express her anger.*

Due to these reflections, Rigoberta considered leaving the community to go to school, as she could receive a scholarship from priests. However, her father opposed this idea, arguing that she would forget her Indian heritage. If she left, he would not support her. While Rigoberta was still reflecting on ways of escaping this way of life, her sister went to the capital to work as a maid. After a while, her sister returned home, explaining that the family there treated her terribly and that rich people are bad. However, Rigoberta was still curious to find out for herself whether working as a maid would actually be worse than their current circumstances. Ultimately, she decided to go work as a maid in Guatemala City.

Rigoberta's father's distrust of the school system keeps Rigoberta from learning important skills, such as knowledge of the Spanish language. But it also reveals that the Guatemalan school system is part of a mainstream culture that doesn't value Indigenous ways of life. Rigoberta's decision to leave for the capital highlights her desperation: she's eager to explore other aspects of Guatemalan society, in order to put her own experience of suffering in perspective. This implicitly challenges her parents' attitude of accepting suffering, as it suggests that one can also try to improve one's circumstances.

CHAPTER 14: A MAID IN THE CAPITAL

Deciding to work as a maid for the landowner, Rigoberta followed him out of the finca. Her father said that he didn't know what might happen to her, but he told her that she was now a grown-up woman. When Rigoberta reached the master's home, she realized that her clothes were used and dirty because she had been working hard in the *finca*. She worked in a house with another servant, Candelaria. The only food she received were hard **tortillas** with some beans, although the dog's food consisted of leftovers of the family meal, including meat and rice. This injustice deeply hurt Rigoberta, who realized that she was considered inferior to the dog. However, she was used to these kinds of meals and ate her food anyway.

Although Rigoberta hopes that her experience in the capital city might prove to be a better alternative than toiling in the fincas *like her parents, her first experience actually suggests the contrary: that working for the rich, whether in a household or on a* finca, *involves some form of humiliation and discrimination. Rigoberta experiences this with the terrible food she is served (which recalls the food served on the* finca*) and her employers' dehumanizing behavior, as they treat their Indigenous servants worse than their dog.*

Rigoberta slowly got to know the other maid, Candelaria, who spoke Spanish and wore ladino clothing. The girl ate the family's leftovers and sometimes shared some food with Rigoberta. At three in the morning on her first day of work, Rigoberta, already awake, reflected that her family had already started working. Her own workday began at seven, when she was told to wash the dishes. However, the mistress was horrified by how dirty Rigoberta was. She told Rigoberta that she would buy her clothes and shoes, deducting the cost from her salary and adding that Rigoberta's state made her feel ashamed in front of her friends.

Rigoberta's comparison between her family's work schedule and her own suggests that she might feel guilty for having a more relaxed workday. However, her first experiences with her mistress suggest the very opposite: that she might actually face new—and, possibly, worse—difficulties than her family. Now, she must listen to derogatory comments from a tyrannical mistress. This emotional abuse, Rigoberta will soon realize, might actually be more unbearable than physical exhaustion.

Rigoberta didn't speak Spanish well enough to respond to her mistress, but she insulted her mentally. Full of hatred, Rigoberta told herself that this despicable woman would never be capable of doing the type of work her mother did. When Rigoberta received her corte, material used to make an Indian **skirt**, she cut it in half to have two separate pieces of clothing instead of the single piece the woman gave her.

Rigoberta's mental insults show that she is already beginning to resist oppression, even if it only takes place in her mind. This resistance then takes the form of external self-expression when Rigoberta makes an independent decision to cut her corte *in half. This action suggests that she will make her own decisions about what might be most useful to her, instead of following the mistress's arbitrary orders.*

After learning different chores in the house, Rigoberta realized that her grandmother was right in saying that rich people want everything, from their plates to their toilets, to shine. By contrast, Rigoberta's family did not even have a toilet at home. In the landowner's home, Rigoberta was in charge of washing, ironing, and hanging the landowner and his three children's clothes multiple times per day, because they changed clothes so often.

Rigoberta's comparison between her family's way of life and the rich landowner's house reveals not envy but, on the contrary, disdain. She implicitly suggests that having shiny toilets—or even having toilets at all—is not a sign of well-being but of superficiality. In the same vein, changing clothes three times per day contrasts starkly with the humility that Rigoberta's community has with regard to clothing. For the Maya-Quiché, changing one's clothes is viewed not as a sign of cleanliness, but rather of spiritual inconsistency.

The mistress treated Rigoberta with horrible contempt: "not as a dog," Rigoberta notes, because the woman actually treated the dog with affection and care. On Saturdays, both maids were forced to leave the house, because the mistress did not want them there. Thanks to Candelaria's contacts, Rigoberta was able to spend the night at one of her friend's house.

Rigoberta's personal experience of being treated worse than a dog reveals the racism and inequality in Guatemala. This leads some rich ladinos *to consider Indians inferior to other human beings and even, as Rigoberta suggests, inferior to animals. In these difficult circumstances, Candelaria's attitude provides a ray of hope, suggesting that solidarity can play an important role in allowing members of vulnerable groups to withstand oppressive conditions.*

The sons in the house, aged 12 to 22, treated the servants terribly, shouting at them and throwing dishes in their faces. The mistress, meanwhile, spent her time complaining about every detail in the house. Rigoberta wondered what activities the woman possibly did outside the house. When she was home, all she did was complain, sleep, and ask for her meals. The entire family yelled at the girls from their beds for their slippers and for meals to be brought. They also complained about wasting their money on the girls' salaries.

The fact that even the family's sons treated the servants so terribly illustrates the pervasiveness of racism and the deep inequality that drives this society, in which rich ladino *elites seek to keep dominating over the Indian poor, in order to stay in power. The contrast between this family's authoritarian demands and its unwillingness to pay its servants shows that they feel entitled to dominate over others, without realizing or caring about how harmful their behavior actually is.*

To protest, Rigoberta and Candelaria decided not to follow every one of the mistress's whims. Candelaria wanted to find another job, and Rigoberta realized that the mistress was angry at the young woman for not being willing to "initiate" her sons sexually, which was apparently an option in her contract.

The threat of sexual abuse that hangs over Candelaria and Rigoberta's work reveals that this family does not see them as full human beings. Rather, they're treated as bodies to use in whatever ways the family wants—whether by barking orders at the girls or by using them for their sons' sexual pleasure.

One day, Rigoberta's father came to visit. He had spent all his money during his stay in the capital, in order to solve an issue related to their land. After seeing Rigoberta's father, who appeared poor and dirty, the mistress told Rigoberta that she couldn't take him inside the house and had to talk to him outside. Used to being rejected by ladino society, Rigoberta's father understood.

Rigoberta's indignation at how she is treated in this household contrasts starkly with her father's apparent acceptance. Rigoberta's father's lack of surprise at being treated in such a demeaning way does not suggest that being the victim of racism is any less painful over time, but simply that he recognizes racism as an indelible aspect of Guatemalan society.

When Rigoberta told her father that she had no money to give him, because her mistress had not yet paid her for her work (she used Rigoberta's salary to buy her clothes), her father began to cry. Rigoberta asked Candelaria for help, and the girl, whom Rigoberta describes as very tough, stood up to the mistress. The mistress complained about Indians taking advantage about other people's money and food, but she finally gave Rigoberta some money, which allowed her father to get home. Indignant at how the mistress behaved, Candelaria decided to keep on challenging her.

Rigoberta's father's tears come as a surprise, given his usual calm demeanor and his status as a courageous leader of the community. These tears highlight the emotional toll of poverty, as certain circumstances (such as not having enough money to return home) can become a matter of life and death. Candelaria's defiant attitude shows Rigoberta that resistance to unjust authority can actually be fruitful, and that she does not always have to yield to her mistress's cruel behavior.

During her first four months, Rigoberta received no pay. However, she began to understand and speak Spanish a bit better. After eight months, when Christmas came, the maids were in charge of making **tamales**, but they decided to resist in small ways: for example, killing the turkeys without dressing them, which would cause them to rot. Rigoberta found it difficult to disobey, because her upbringing always emphasized obedience. However, after noticing that the girls were plotting something, the mistress threw Candelaria out before Christmas.

Although Candelaria's defiant attitude has had some positive results on other occasions, being fired so easily emphasizes the precariousness of these young maids' circumstances. Resistance might help them cope with the emotional toll of racism and abuse, but it does not necessarily guarantee them a more stable or fairer future. Given the importance of tamales *in Rigoberta's culture, preparing them in such a hostile environment highlights the contrast between her community's focus on generosity and this family's selfish desire to order others around. In contrast to the Maya-Quiché, the family doesn't show gratitude for the natural resources that sustain them.*

On Christmas day, Rigoberta realized that she could not bear these work conditions anymore. Although she could remember suffering as a child, none of the pain she felt then compared to her current situation, marked by rejection and humiliation. Rigoberta was even more furious when she heard the family discuss Indians' laziness. The family, drunk from Christmas celebrations, left a **tamal** for her, but they soon took back it when they wanted more food. Rigoberta was furious, but not only at seeing her food taken away: rather, she knew that the way they left her food indicated their disdainful and condescending attitude toward her. That night, she refused to pick up the plates, concluding that these people could do nothing on their own, and that the poor actually had more fun than her employers did.

Rigoberta's conclusion that racism and emotional abuse is less tolerable than working in the finca *reveals how important a role her community's support has played throughout her life. Although her life has been filled with suffering and grief, both she and her family have borne these difficult emotions together. This support system, along with her community's insistence on sharing and celebrating life together, has given her a strength and comfort. Now, she understands how important this is, given that she's on her own in an exploitative situation. She concludes that money and power are not attractive: she prefers the kindness and humility that defines life in her poor Indigenous community.*

The next day, Rigoberta cleaned up everything, although the mistress complained that she wasn't as self-sufficient as Candelaria. She told her to go to the market, but Rigoberta admitted that she could not find her way in the city. The mistress then called her an "Indian whore" and cursed at her. Later, Rigoberta overheard her telling her neighbor that their maid robs them. Rigoberta, meanwhile, hadn't eaten for two or three days.

Rigoberta's hunger reveals that her current situation is not only one of mental abuse but of nearly criminal neglect. The contrast between Rigoberta's physical suffering and the mistress's selfishness, cruelty, and unfounded criticism once again shows that this rich family does not view their Indian servants as human beings. Rather, they see their maids as submissive animals whose entire existence should revolve around fulfilling the family's every whim.

Finally, after receiving money for two months' work, Rigoberta decided to leave. Surprisingly, the mistress then tried to convince her to stay, telling her that the family cared about her and that they could increase her wage. However, Rigoberta was set on leaving. Later, she realized that she made this decision at a particularly unfortunate time: upon leaving, she learned from one of her brothers that her father had been sent to prison.

Rigoberta's decision to leave once again reveals her determination to stand up for herself and seek a better life, as she had initially sought to do by working as a maid in the capital. Although painful, her experience in Guatemala City is not wasted time: it has shown her the deep roots of racism and the cruelty of the dominant class, which treats Indians as inferior to human beings.

CHAPTER 15: CONFLICT WITH THE LANDOWNERS AND THE CREATION OF THE CUC

This was Rigoberta's father's first time in prison. Landowners bribed judges to put her father in prison for 18 years, taking advantage of the fact that Indians don't speak Spanish and cannot defend themselves. Their goal was to keep Rigoberta's father from fighting against the landowners who were trying to take over the village's lands. The entire legal system—which included officials such as the military commissioner, the mayor, and the governor, all ladinos—leaves poor, uneducated people disadvantaged. Money was used at each step of the way, whether to bribe officials or to hire lawyers.

Rigoberta's father's imprisonment marks a turning point in Rigoberta's life, but also in the organization of her community. It illuminates the injustice of an entire political and legal system that leaves poor Indians defenseless. Allied with rich landowners, the corrupt legal system seeks to suppress any possible resistance to land appropriation. This way, rich ladinos *can extend their wealth and power without considering the livelihood of the peasants they displace.*

Rigoberta's father had been fighting against two families, the Brols and the Garcías, who paid engineers and inspectors from the government to measure the village's lands in order to appropriate it. Rigoberta's father gathered signatures in the village to bring to INTA to defend their cause. However, he was then tricked into signing a paper he could not read, which asserted that the peasants were willing to leave their land. Rigoberta concludes that officials took advantage of her father's naiveté. What neither her father nor the rest of the village realized at the time, Rigoberta argues, is that the government authorities and the landowners shared the same interests. Thus, they would try to repress the peasants' desire for their own land.

Rigoberta's discussion of her father's negative experiences with the government and the law suggests that one of the obstacles to justice is educational. Without literacy or a knowledge of Spanish, poor Indians find themselves at the mercy of manipulative institutions.

In 1967, henchmen from the García family—many of whom came from Indigenous communities themselves—forced everyone out of the village. They destroyed or stole the villagers' belongings, including their precious, handmade earthenware pots. As Rigoberta relates with deep feeling, the henchman threw the pots against the ground to break them. This episode reinforced Rigoberta's hatred of the ladinos, whom she considered criminals. These men even killed the village's dogs, which, to the Indian community, is a terrible offense, given their deep link to the natural world. Killing an animal, Rigoberta concludes, is the same as killing a human being.

These events reveal that even members of vulnerable communities can turn against their own group and support violence against the poor. Although not yet directed against human beings per se, many of the henchmen's actions are deeply symbolic: destroying the community's earthenware pots equates to threatening the very foundations of their culture, since such utensils play such an important role in the community's spiritual beliefs. Killing the villagers' dogs is also egregious to the Maya-Quiché, since they consider animal life just as sacred as human life. These violent deeds reveal to Rigoberta's village that not only their physical survival, but their culture's entire way of life, is in danger.

After this event, Rigoberta's father decided that the community should resist, even if this meant putting their lives in danger. They refused the landowners' offer to work as laborers on their land, although they did not yet have the political savvy to organize as a group and plan collective protests. This led to a second raid, in which people's belongings were destroyed once again. Rigoberta's grandfather argued that, in the past, the land had neither owners nor boundaries: it belonged to everyone. He declared that, if these men killed their animals, the villagers should kill these men in return. Rigoberta's father, on the other hand, preferred to focus on defending the land.

The debates between Rigoberta's father and grandfather reveal two different attitudes toward self-defense. Her grandfather advocates for a violent strategy (which aligns with the actions of guerilla fighters, who choose violent methods to combat oppression). Her father, on the other hand, advocates for an alternative centered on self-defense and legal actions. It remains to be seen which strategy Rigoberta's family members (and members of her community more broadly) will choose.

These difficult circumstances forced the villagers to momentarily put their ceremonies aside, due to lack of time, and to unite against the landowners. The tension grew among the two groups, and the INTA finally came to the village with a piece of paper, claiming that this would give the peasants freedom over the land. Everyone in the community signed the paper. However, this was another trick. Over the course of two years, the villagers took care of their crops, buoyed by the dream of reaping what the earth would give them. But after this period of time, they discovered that the document they signed only gave them rights over the land for two years.

The villagers' willingness to sacrifice their spiritual and cultural practices in order to prioritize survival highlights a change in attitude in the villagers' approach to suffering. They are willing to endure a certain amount of oppression and exploitation, only as long as it does not put the very foundations of their community in danger. Taking over their land, however, threatens their spiritual practices and their connection with nature. This motivates the villagers to resist against aggressive landowners, even if this means temporarily sacrificing some aspects of their way of life.

This led Rigoberta's father to turn to unions for help. He spent an incredible about of time talking to lawyers, governmental agencies and unions. He knew he might be killed in the process, and he wanted his children to continue the fight if that happened. The landowners succeeded in getting him arrested, accusing him of "compromising the sovereignty of the state." For an entire year, Rigoberta, her family, and the community devoted all of their resources to paying for lawyers to help her father. Having given up her work as a maid, Rigoberta worked in the fincas. This collective support forced the landowners to realize that Rigoberta's father was not a chief acting on his own, but that he was the spokesperson of an entire community, willing to stand up for their rights.

Rigoberta's father understands that Guatemala is not a democracy, but a system based on domination by rich ladino *landowners. Any threat to this system, he realizes (such as Indians' requests for a fair distribution of land), puts this domination at risk. The landowners' reaction is to eliminate any threat to their control or sovereignty," be it by imprisoning or killing opponents. However, the capacity for Rigoberta's village to organize, in a collective and democratic fashion, reveals that eliminating Indian resistance is not as simple as killing a few leaders. Rather, it would involve fighting against entire communities.*

After one year and two months, Rigoberta's father was finally released. He left prison filled with even more courage than before, determined to fight the landowners. After a few months, however, the landowners kidnapped him. Present on the scene, Rigoberta's brother alerted the village, which armed itself and launched a search. They found Rigoberta's father lying alone, his body showing clear signs of torture. He lacked hair on one side of his head and had numerous wounds and so many broken bones that he couldn't move. They took him, dying, to a health center that refused to help after having been bribed by the landowners. Finally, they called an ambulance to take him to another part of El Quiché. Rigoberta's mother went to work in that town to pay for her husband's medication and care.

Rigoberta's' father's political engagement following many months of imprisonment serves as an early illustration of one of Rigoberta's convictions: that even the most abject suffering can have positive consequences, if anger and pain are used to fight for long-term justice and equality. At the same time, Rigoberta's father's violent fate foreshadows the terrible costs of such political resistance. The upper class in Guatemala—which is protected by an alliance between landowners and government institutions—is willing to repress peaceful resistance through violence.

The community then received a message saying that the landowners were planning to kidnap Rigoberta's father from the hospital. With help from nuns and priests, the community succeeded in hiding him away in a secret place. After nearly one year of medical care, Rigoberta's father returned home, physically incapacitated but full of renewed hatred for his enemies. This anger extended beyond the landowners to all the ladinos. In the hospital, however, after talking to various people, Rigoberta's father discovered the extent to which different Indian communities share the same problems concerning land ownership. This broadened his perspective on his own community's problems.

Rigoberta's father's experiences in prison and in the hospital have unintended positive consequences. They allow him to interact with people outside of his native Indigenous community, and to understand that the problems that affect his community are actually widespread across the country. These early experiences help explain how Rigoberta's community's experience is part of a nationwide conflict: oppression is not limited to specific geographic zones but extends to all poor Indians. Despite their divisions in language and culture, all of these groups suffer from the same oppressive circumstances.

In 1977, Rigoberta's father was sent to prison once more. Again, he told his family not to put his trust only in him, but in the entire community, which would serve as a father for them if ever he disappeared for good. The community received help from priests and nuns (who taught Rigoberta some Spanish) as well as some European benefactors. This time, Rigoberta's father was considered a political prisoner, a communist, and was sentenced to life in prison. However, thanks to the community's organization (which was strengthened throughout these ordeals) as well as the unions' activism, Rigoberta's father was soon released. Nevertheless, the authorities—who were united with the landowners—threatened him once more, telling him he would be killed if he continued his work.

If Rigoberta's father insists that his family trust not only in him, but in the entire community, this is merely out of humility. Rather, this insistence underlines his belief that he is not acting alone, but that he is keeping the struggle of their ancestors alive. In other words, what makes him admirable, is not an individual set of specific qualities, but his commitment to represent the voice of an entire community. In the same way that he sacrifices his life for his village, his village, too, devotes its resources to protecting him—he is simply one element in a large web of solidarity and cooperation. If his activism seeks to keep their ancestors' struggles alive, others—in particular, their village and his family—should work hard to replace him after his death.

In prison, Rigoberta's father met a real political prisoner who taught him about uniting the peasants in a peasants' league. The prisoner identified the root of these problems not in landowners alone, but in the entire system, which oppresses the poor. This led Rigoberta's father to discuss the creation of the CUC, or the Committee for Peasant Unity (*Comité de Unidad Campesina*), with other peasants. To avoid being kidnapped, he went into hiding. The new ideas he brought, however, led the community to realize that their suffering encompassed broader problems such as malnutrition and poverty. The community concluded that land ownership was the root of all these issues, since rich landowners had the best land in the country and were eager to maintain their dominance over the poor.

Rigoberta's father's new ideas about systemic oppression lead to a profound transformation in his community's approach to suffering. Whereas, up until this point, the villagers were willing to accept a certain degree of suffering as inevitable, they now realize that the problems they have always taken for granted are neither immutable nor acceptable.

CHAPTER 16: PERIOD OF REFLECTION ON THE ROAD TO FOLLOW

Curious about the fact that these social problems extend to other communities, Rigoberta reflects on her own life to understand the situation of other Indians. She realizes that she was never afforded a childhood, due to lack of schooling and food. In the CUC's early stages, the village reflected on the problem of poverty as a consequence of exploitation and cultural discrimination. Rigoberta recalls the brutal military dictators that came to power in 1974 and tricked villages into trusting them, only in order to brutally control them later on.

Rigoberta's personal reflections, along with the discussions in her village and in the CUC, reveal that her community's oppression did not begin with military brutality. Rather, it is possible to consider extreme poverty—the consequence of exploitation and inequality—a form of oppression, as the villagers are deprived of basic necessities like food and medicine.

As Rigoberta learned more about exploitation, she realized that not all ladinos were bad—some were as poor as her own family. However, when she tried to discuss the issue with one *ladino*, he responded to her with profound contempt, telling her that, as an Indian, she knew nothing about his situation. Rigoberta understood that the system not only isolated Indians from one another but also prevented cooperation between Indians and *ladinos*.

Rigoberta's ladino *interlocutor's reaction shows that, even though poor* ladinos *and Indians might share similar economic conditions, deeply rooted racist beliefs are a major obstacle to uniting both ethnic groups. Rigoberta's insight about this situation—despite the pain that such contempt undoubtedly generates in her—reveals her commitment to fostering unity among all sub-groups of the Guatemalan poor.*

During this period, the village decided to use violence to defend their rights and those of their ancestors. Rigoberta instructed the children in these issues. She realized that she did not need formal schooling to give speeches, because her own suffering had taught her enough already. Rigoberta began to imagine the future with enthusiasm, dreaming of a time when Indians might fully reclaim their land. In the village, everyone united and played a role in the struggle, including the children.

Given the emphasis that the Maya-Quiché places on nonviolence and respecting all living things, the decision to use violence as self-defense involves breaking their own principles to ensure their survival. The goal is to make some cultural sacrifices in the present in the hope of a brighter future: one in which Indians might secure their own land, where they'd be able to live in harmony with nature.

Rigoberta then decided to join an underground group of peasants associated with the CUC. She traveled around the countryside, gradually gaining clarity on the mechanisms through which the rich oppress the poor. She also realized that, although priests brought good things to the community, they also taught peasants to be passive. They preached that killing others was a sin—but this, Rigoberta argues, keeps poor people from understanding the systemic nature of their oppression. She found that nuns refused to answer her questions about the legitimacy of poor Indians' rebellion against the rich, which left her confused.

Rigoberta's approach to justice suggests that, in the face of violence, people should be allowed to defend themselves. In this sense, she does not believe that violent actions should be banned in all situations: rather, as her community has concluded, violence is justified if one's life (and culture) is at risk. Her criticism of Catholic doctrine, in this respect, highlights her belief in creating peace and justice in the present, not in a possible afterlife.

Rigoberta notes that her younger siblings' ideas were clearer than hers, because they never had the experience of being brought to fincas in a lorry. Such difficult experiences leave indelible marks of suffering, capable of changing a person forever.

Rigoberta's cryptic comment suggests that certain traumatic experiences and emotions are difficult to communicate to others. She suggests that her experience of the dreadful 36-hour lorry trip to the fincas *has forced her to accept a certain degree of physical suffering and humiliation. By contrast, her siblings can freely express their anger and indignation, because they have never been forced to repress these feelings.*

CHAPTER 17: SELF-DEFENSE IN THE VILLAGE

After these various painful experiences, from working as a maid in the capital to seeing her parents persecuted, Rigoberta felt confused as to why Indians were exploited and treated so unfairly. She now understood that her enemies were landowners, soldiers, and the rich. Although the term "enemy" was foreign to Indian culture, the recognition of oppression led them to use it, thus deviating from their insistence on the equality of all members of society.

Rigoberta's confusion about racism and exploitation suggests that there is no legitimate reason for so much inequality and suffering. Although her community is willing to identify new enemies, they do not seek violence per se. As they demonstrate multiple times with captured soldiers, their goal is to engage in dialogue and help others understand how unfair the oppression of Indians truly is.

When discussing self-defense, Rigoberta criticized official narratives of colonization, which affirm that the Indians did not defend themselves against the Spaniards. Her grandfather, by contrast, had told her that one of the methods that Indian used to fight the enemy were ambushes. He argued that, if their ancestors fought in such a way, it was valid for the community to fight against the landowners. Now convinced of this, Rigoberta's family gathered the village to explain that taking part in armed struggle meant that many people were likely be killed. In the meantime, as the community discussed these matters collectively, a nearby village became the target of violence: its elected representatives (along with various men, women, and children) were kidnapped after attempting to oppose the landowners' land grabs.

Rigoberta's ongoing discussion of colonization shows how history can be used to justify certain actions in the present. For example, Rigoberta's grandfather's insistence that Indians were courageous warriors suggests that, given their respect for ancestral ways of life, the villagers should adopt similar self-defense techniques. By contrast, Guatemalan schools' description of Indians as weak and passive implicitly justifies an oppressive system wherein ladino *elites dominate Indigenous people. Debates concerning history thus have concrete effects in the present, as they attempt to justify present and future actions.*

One day, 90 soldiers arrived at Rigoberta's village. They stayed for two weeks in the community house, stealing food from the fields. One night, a soldier crawled near Rigoberta's house to steal potatoes. Rigoberta's mother, initially believing the soldier was a dog, comes out of the house with her dogs and sticks, ready to beat the intruder. When the soldier called out, Rigoberta's mother told him that he should work to earn his food and that, by behaving the way he did, he was protecting rich people who did not even give him food. She told him that the village worked very hard to obtain these crops, and that she would beat him if he didn't leave at once. He hurried away, and the next day, all the soldiers left the village.

Rigoberta's mother's tough attitude toward this soldier underscores her courage, but also the strength of her convictions that stealing is unacceptable, in all circumstances. Her willingness to convince the soldier of the harmful effects of his behavior also demonstrates her belief in dialogue as an opportunity to change people's perspective.

Then, during a meeting, the community decided to organize self-defense methods, temporarily putting aside their celebrations and customs to focus on survival. They asked God to defend them in this new pursuit, knowing well that they could be tortured and murdered by opposing the powerful. At the meeting, everyone shared different tools and ideas about how to fight the enemy. One of the first measures they took was to set up the village houses closer to one another, in order form a more compact group. They also prepared secret escape routes in each house.

The villagers' decision to use violence as self-defense does not imply giving up on all of their principles. They still retain their practice of meeting as a group and engaging in democratic debate concerning issues that affect the entire village. Their decision to live closer to one another also symbolizes their collective strength against even the most powerful enemies.

Then, they prepared secret weapons, such as traps, initially meant for capturing small animals but which, when hidden in a ditch, could trap human beings—in this case, soldiers. The community knew that soldiers always came on foot, usually in a state of fright, because of their conviction that guerrillas hide in the mountains. Rigoberta notes that soldiers often had no idea what guerrillas were, sometimes believing them to be wild animals.

The soldiers' ignorance of what guerillas actually are highlights the absurdity of this conflict, in which ignorant soldiers are encouraged to fight an enemy they do not understand and could perhaps not even identify. This suggests that education of the kind that Rigoberta supports—one that promotes a clear understanding of what is right and wrong in current society—could play an important role in solving such brutal conflicts.

Through repeated practice runs, the villagers developed different methods through which they could escape if the army came. Everyone took an equal part in these strategies—men, women, and children—and all decisions were taken collectively. They decided that someone would always keep watch over the village, in order to warn if the enemy was approaching. If the army came, the villagers would all hide in a secret camp in the mountain, because hiding away was better than being massacred. The village also depended on dogs, hidden in a house on the path, as a warning strategy. In Rigoberta's view, this confirmed the village's interconnection with the natural world.

The villagers' organization highlights their deep unity: they are ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of the entire community. In line with Rigoberta's conclusion that she was never given a full childhood due to poverty, the current generation of children in the village are also forced to take on adult roles. The hope is that, thanks to such sacrifices, Indian children will one day be able to enjoy a peaceful, carefree life. The village's trust in watchdogs suggests that, although they are temporarily forced to suspend their formal cultural ceremonies in this period of violent conflict, they still maintain their core beliefs in the sacredness of nature.

The village also prepared weapons to use if ever they found themselves unable to escape. They practiced using machetes, stones, hot water, chile, salt, and even lime against their enemies. When used in a knowledgeable way, these simple methods can blind and stop the enemy, although they are not a match against machine guns. However, Rigoberta notes that their main weapon was the Bible—which, through its stories, helped to educate the villagers.

The use of simple yet effective methods against the enemy suggests that despite their humble attitude, the Maya-Quiché are more resourceful and ingenious than Guatemalan society might give them credit for. Rigoberta's trust in the Bible reveals that intellectual and emotional conviction can be more powerful than physical weapons.

CHAPTER 18: THE BIBLE AND SELF-DEFENSE: THE EXAMPLES OF JUDITH, MOSES AND DAVID

As the villagers studied the Bible, they began to understand that some of the stories it contains could supported their struggle. Rigoberta mentions the role that Moses played in Exodus, freeing his people from oppression, as well as Judith, who murdered the king in order to defend her people. These examples served for both women and men. For children, they used the story of David, who defeated the great King Goliath. Knowing that their ancestors suffered from such oppression motivated the village to fight against the powerful in the present. The biblical insistence on empathy and solidarity, as well as the right to fulfill one's needs, mirrored the Indians' striving not for wealth, but for dignity and self-sufficiency.

The villagers' discussions of the Bible are centered on practical applications: they believe that religion is an integral part of everyday life, and that Christian values should be put into practice in the present, not in an abstract afterlife. They understand biblical stories as useful historical lessons. In this sense, biblical forefathers mirror the villagers' own ancestors as they struggled fought against colonization, as well as the villagers' current struggle under ladino *oppression.*

Rigoberta concludes that God did not want the community to suffer, since the oppression from which they suffer was not divine but imposed by powerful mortals. In the same way that Christ, humble and persecuted, survives through the generations that keep his memory and deeds alive, Rigoberta suggests that the Indian community had to keep their ancestors' struggles alive.

Although Rigoberta recognizes the structural nature of the exploitation and oppression that her community faces, she also understands that these systems are fueled by human actions. Her Christian beliefs lead her to trust in the validity of self-defense.

In contrast with her adherence to biblical teachings, Rigoberta argues that religions can become coopted by an exploitative system. It is in this sense that she understands Catholic Action's emphasis on a paradise in Heaven for the poor, which forces peasants to resign themselves to their fate and keeps them from rebelling against their oppression. As these thoughts took root in the community, the villagers learned to question the beliefs they had been taught. Once they realized that they could take control of their lives, they decided, as committed Christians, to create "the kingdom of God" on Earth.

Rigoberta separates Catholic teachings in the Bible, such as the stories concerning Christian love and the fight against justice, from the institution of the Catholic Church in Guatemalan society. She argues that Catholic Action's teachings are not politically neutral: rather, they have encouraged passivity in the face of injustice. Directly or indirectly, such doctrine aligns with the interests of the oppressive ladino *government: to keep poor Indians from rebelling.*

Rigoberta does mention that some priests understood that the poor were not communists but, simply, hungry and desperate people who should be treated in a dignified way. These priests sometimes joined the people's struggle, whereas others were more interested in exerting power and safeguarding their personal interests.

Rigoberta's discussion of the priests' actions suggests that, in many ways, members of the clergy behave just like other members of society—they're interested in safeguarding their own political and economic interests. The association of the poor with "communists" refers to the Cold War context of this conflict: the opposition between the U.S.-led Capitalist Bloc and Latin American communist groups. This association is misleading, however, given that the Guatemalan peasants' goal is simply to fight for basic rights, not to join an international struggle.

Rigoberta notes that, although the villagers' weapons were quite simple, they became dangerous when used by an entire community. One day, the lookout warned the village that soldiers were on their way. Rigoberta, her brothers, and other members of the community volunteered to take part in an ambush. A young, pretty girl from the community was chosen to divert the last soldier's attention in the line by flirting with him. The girl knew that she risked being raped by taking part in this action, but she was willing to take this risk in the name of the community. The plan proved successful: the girl chatted with the last soldier on the path.

On multiple occasions, Rigoberta notes that solidarity and unity can prove just as powerful as the most modern weapons: bonding together is the main way in which the poor (a majority in Guatemala) can resist the wealthy, well-equipped rich. The girl's knowledge that she risks getting raped by the soldier implies that such assaults are common in poor Indian villages. This is one example of the gender-specific dangers that affect women in this brutal conflict.

Meanwhile, the villagers, previously hidden, suddenly jumped on the soldier, keeping him from moving. They disarmed him but, as Rigoberta notes with good humor, no one among them knew how to use mechanical weapons such as a rifle, pistol, or grenade. The soldier could easily have outmaneuvered them.

Rigoberta's comment about her community's ignorance of modern weapons reveals the extent to which her village has maintained its vow of non-violence. Now, extraordinary circumstances force the community to come to terms with a violent reality.

After blindfolding the soldier, the villagers took him to Rigoberta's house, where the entire community was waiting. For the next several hours, all the mothers and men in the village went to talk to the man, ordering him to recount his experiences as a soldier. The soldier was an Indian from another ethnic group, and the villagers insisted that, by being part of the army, he was supporting the rich who oppressed them. They also told him that they were organized and would defend themselves to the end. The soldier seemed moved by the new ideas the villagers shared with him, and the villagers were hopeful that he might change his behavior. However, after the villagers released him, he was killed by his own army, as they believed him to be an informer. Officials said that the soldier could not have escaped unscathed otherwise.

*The villagers' treatment of this soldier reveals their deep trust in education and dialogue, as well as their underlying aversion to the use of force. According to Rigoberta's community, many of their current problems derive from a lack of education. Specifically, there's a lack of understanding, among all members of society—*ladinos *and Indians, the rich and the poor—of how exploitation and oppression work. Sharing such knowledge with the soldier, they hope, could help bring some positive change. The army's brutal response to the soldier's return, however, highlights how difficult it is for soldiers to leave the army, which does not hesitate to kill its own soldiers to prevent any internal uprising.*

The village was elated after this successful ambush. However, when they opened the soldier's rifle, they felt a wave of sadness, knowing that this weapon was meant to inflict death on others. After this event, the army grew terrified of the mountain villages, which made the villagers feel proud and united. At the same time, they all decided to stay up in the mountains, knowing very well that going down to the finca or the market could lead them to be kidnapped. By the same token, the landowners also believed that they would be kidnapped if they approached the village. In light of this elation, and seeing how organized her community was, Rigoberta decided that it no longer needed a leader. She decided to travel to other communities, in order to teach them the same self-defense techniques that her village developed.

The villagers' sadness when examining the rifle shows that, despite their conviction to defend themselves from violence, they do not see violence as a virtue. Rather, they see it as a last resort that they're forced to engage in, given the extremity of their current circumstances. Despite their outward show of aggression, they remain grounded in their foundational belief in the importance of respecting all living things. Rigoberta's decision to leave her community highlights her devotion not to a personal cause, but to the defense of the Maya-Quiché people as a whole, which extends beyond the limits of her own village.

CHAPTER 19: ATTACK ON THE VILLAGE BY THE ARMY

Rigoberta's father told her that she was fully independent and could do whatever she wanted, as long as it was in service of the Indian people. Knowing that hundreds of women in other villages had been raped by soldiers, Rigoberta decided to go there, thus abandoning the relative safety of her own community. She was convinced that happiness pertained to everyone but had been stolen by a few rich people, and that it was her duty to change this.

Rigoberta's father's blessing signals that, in such violent times, ordinary steps in life—such as getting married and have children—are temporarily put aside. In this regard, Rigoberta's father is a model and a source of inspiration for his daughter. She derives confidence from his belief that all members of his family, women and men alike, should take part in the struggle to bring dignity and protection to the Indian people.

In these villages, Rigoberta met women, some of whom were her friends, who were raped by soldiers and sometimes became pregnant as a result. In one case, the community supported a woman's abortion, saying that their ancestors also did this when a woman was raped and found themselves unable to love the child. Rigoberta felt helpless, however, at witnessing these women's suffering. Two of the girls who were raped were 14, and they suffered physically and emotionally as a result.

Rape is a weapon used specifically against women, meant to instill submission and fear in the villagers. However, the Indian community's willingness to support abortions suggests that they are not willing to accept these brutal deeds passively—they aren't willing to force rape victims to carry unwanted pregnancies.

Rigoberta notes that she was lucky to speak the same language as this community. There are linguistic divisions even within ethnic groups in Guatemala, which prevents dialogue and cooperation between communities.

Despite the fact that poor Indians suffer from the same exploitation and oppression, regardless of their cultural specificities, linguistic divisions create an important obstacle to collective organizing. This makes it difficult for ethnic groups to come together against a common enemy.

One day, an old lady arrived. At the age of 90, she was extraordinarily old for these communities, since most Indians died around the age of 60. Her sons and husband had been kidnapped and killed, which is what led her to leave her village. After hearing her story, the community decided to integrate her into the village. In the meantime, they were busy installing traps for the soldiers. One day, when the army approached, the entire community prepared to go into hiding. The old lady, however, stubbornly refused to leave. She set her trap in front of the house and armed herself with different tools. The village was convinced that she would be raped and killed because, as Rigoberta comments matter-of-factly, the army enjoyed raping old people and children.

Rigoberta's comment about the "pleasure" the army derives from cruel deeds foreshadows the inhumane brutality of later episodes that she and her fellow villagers experience. It seems that the army is able to commit violence because they dehumanize their enemy: they consider Indians less than human. They also label them "dangerous communists," which identifies them as a threat to be eliminated instead of human beings who deserve fair treatment.

From a distance, the villagers heard the dogs bark but no human scream. Then, around five in the morning, after hours of hiding, the old lady suddenly joined the group, ecstatic. Suspicious of the fact that she survived, the villagers wondered if she is a spy, which happened occasionally when villagers sold themselves to the government. But the old lady soon announced something more surprising: she killed a soldier, and she was carrying his rifle and pistol as proof.

On a few occasions, Rigoberta mentions that members of Indian communities can align with the enemy and betray their own people. Although Rigoberta does not dwell at length on these issues, her comment suggests that poor Indians are not impervious to the attraction of wealth and power: when soldiers offer them money in exchange for information, they might be willing to accept the offer instead of risking their lives by defying authority.

The old lady recounted her story: she explained that the soldiers avoided the trap in front of her house and entered her home. However, hiding in a corner, the woman succeeded in hitting a soldier on the head with her axe. Seeing this, the other soldiers thought this was the action of a guerrilla and fled immediately. In their rush, one of them fell into the trap and the others shot their wounded companion. When the group went to the old lady' home, they noticed that the wound on the dead soldier's head was superficial, but that he was indeed killed by bullets.

The old lady's story reveals that age and physical condition don't prevent people from participating in the fight against cruel soldiers—both children and the elderly can help defeat the enemy. The soldiers' reactions also reveal their deep fears about guerillas, fueled in part by ignorance. It's unclear why they would shoot their own companion, but their actions nevertheless reveal the army's brutality: instead of solidarity and cooperation, the soldiers are cruel to their fellow fighters.

The entire village was overjoyed by this event. After asking the soldier caught in the trap to surrender his weapons, the villagers led him out. As in Rigoberta's village, the community then interrogated him about his activities, asking him how he could accept being a soldier and behaving in such a monstrous way. The man then began to cry, saying that soldiers are killed if they do not obey orders. Although he knew he had become an enemy of his people, he also knew that the army would kill him if he deserted. He told the villagers about the army's torture techniques, as well as the discrimination he suffered due to being an Indian. He never chose to join the army, he explained, but was forcefully taken away from his town. Upon hearing this tale, the community felt compassion for him.

The villagers' willingness to engage in dialogue with the soldier shows that their primary goal is not to participate in violent conflict, but to change society, starting with a single soldier. Their ability to feel compassion for a man who was sent to punish and kill them reveals that they understand the structural forces at play. In other words, they realize that the soldier is not responsible for all the atrocities the army has committed, but that he, too, can be considered a victim. The contrast between the villagers' unity and this soldier's confusion and isolation underlines the power of community, as opposed to institutions motivated by cruelty and fear.

The community asked the soldier questions about communists. He said that soldiers were told the communists hide in the mountains and did not look like ordinary people. After the villagers convinced him that he was defended the rich and should defect, the man agreed, promising not to return to the barracks. Rigoberta never heard of him again, although she received information that he respected his word and never returned to the camp.

The soldier's ignorance about what communists are highlights the absurdity of this conflict, in which uneducated soldiers are forced to engage in brutal acts against an enemy they do not even understand. Labeling the people in the mountains as communists simply serves to oppress peasants fighting for their rights, whether or not they are actually affiliated with any political group.

CHAPTER 20: THE DEATH OF DOÑA PETRONA CHONA

Rigoberta remembers an event that she forgot to recount. In 1975, one of her friends, Petrona Chona, worked with her husband and two children on a finca owned by the García family. The landowner's son, Carlos García, began trying to convince Petrona to become his mistress. One day, he appeared at her house, where she was temporarily alone. They argued for a long time, but Petrona did not change her mind. As retribution, Carlos decided to send his bodyguard to kill her with a machete.

Petrona Chona's story underlines the danger of challenging authority on one's own: despite her bold defense of her own dignity, she is crushed by a system in which poor Indians are treated as disposable. The young woman's violent death suggests that the economic system of the finca *is comparable to slavery: a woman is treated as a sexual object and can even be murdered for refusing to have sex with her boss.*

Petrona's was the first dead body Rigoberta ever saw. The bodyguard cut the young woman's body into pieces and severed one of her baby's fingers, because she carried him on her back. Rigoberta recalls with grief that Petrona had told her, that morning, that her family was going to leave the finca. As she was being murdered, none of the workers nearby interfered when they heard the woman's screams, because they knew they would probably be killed for defending her.

This horrific event highlights the level of fear and helplessness on the fincas, *where poor Indians are afraid to defend one another's lives for fear of being killed themselves. This scene thus sheds life on a difficult moral situation: wanting to help someone else while knowing that this might be futile and would probably lead to one's own death.*

Many workers came to see the body afterwards, but no one knew what to do with it. Upon seeing the body, Rigoberta's father cried, recalling how good and innocent Petrona was. After a few days, he took charge of the situation, saying that the young woman should be moved and buried because the body had begun to smell. The workers gathered her body parts in baskets and buried her nearby.

Petrona's death shows that the violence against poor Indians predates any particular political event. Innocent people such as this young woman are at risk of violence or death under the abusive finca *system, regardless of any external events. In this light, the Guatemalan army's brutality can be seen as the radicalization and extension of the system that's already in place.*

Three days after the crime, the mayor arrived. However, all he did was chat and laugh with the landowner. No one asked the workers to give their version of the events. The bodyguard was sentenced to two weeks in prison, simply to calm the workers down. Upon reflecting on these events, Rigoberta recalls the feeling of picking up her friend's body. For the next six years, she dreamt about Petrona every single night.

This event highlights the workers' lack of access to legal representation. Allied with authorities such as the mayor, rich landowners can get away with anything, even senseless, brutal crimes like Petrona's murder. This is one of the few moments when Rigoberta reveals the long-term emotional effects of such violence. Although she behaves courageously in the face of death and violence, events such as these take a heavy and perhaps irreparable toll on the human psyche.

CHAPTER 21: FAREWELL TO THE COMMUNITY: RIGOBERTA DECIDES TO LEARN SPANISH

In 1977, Rigoberta's father joined the CUC, still an underground organization, after leaving prison. He was forced to lead a hidden life. A fiesta was organized at their village, as a farewell; such special events represented one of the rare occasions when the villagers killed an animal to eat meat. Rigoberta's father gave a speech to the community, saying it was now his duty to help other villages, and everyone felt thankful for the leadership he'd shown them until now.

Rigoberta's father's decision to take part in a national political struggle for peasants' rights is an example of the danger that awaits those who resist oppressive landowners. But it also underscores the village's independence: the villagers have sufficiently united and organized, so that now they don't depend on a single leader

Rigoberta's entire family split, out of necessity, although Rigoberta found it difficult to accept that they would all be working in different areas. Rigoberta's father told them that they all had to carry on their important work, even if different members of the family were killed. This was the last time all of Rigoberta's siblings were together; the moment crystallized their commitment to the struggle. Rigoberta soon left to work for the CUC and to organize resistance in different communities.

Rigoberta's family knows that defying the authorities and the country's rich elite will guarantee suffering and even death. This speaks to how necessary society-wide reform is: the entire political, legal, and economic systems need to be transformed, so that the poor might be allowed to have a say in their own fate. The separation of Rigoberta's family highlights their political commitment: their first priority will remain the dignity and well-being of their entire people, even if this involves sacrificing their personal happiness.

CHAPTER 22: THE CUC COMES OUT INTO THE OPEN

Rigoberta provides some historical background concerning Guatemalan politics. General Kjell promised to launch an agrarian reform, but his promises soon proved empty: instead of giving land to the peasants, he divided the land into small plots that he gave them ownership over. Under these conditions, peasants would still have to pay the government for certain actions, such as cutting down trees. This partial land ownership was a cunning strategy to try to keep the Indians from rebelling. However, peasants soon protested against these land divisions, which kept them from living in a communal fashion. They realized that, whereas they had to pay to cut down trees, big businessmen could cut as many as they wanted.

Rigoberta does not focus very much on the specific developments taking place in the Guatemalan government. Instead, in line with her Maya-Quiché community's emphasis on the historical struggle of their ancestors against the Spanish colonizers, her objective is to highlight the long-term oppression of poor Indians. From this perspective, changes in national leadership only modify the specific methods through which the rich ladino *elite oppresses the poor—it doesn't solve the root problem.*

In May 1978, a massacre took place in a village where Indians organized against landowners. The entire group, including women and children, was viciously killed. Although news of the event made its way into newspapers, no one in the country seemed to pay attention to these poor peasants' deaths. Now sufficiently organized, the CUC then came out into the open to defend peasants' rights, fighting for fair wages and respect for the peasants' customs and dignity. The CUC called for strikes and demonstrations. In the end, they obtained a reasonable minimum wage—but this didn't translate into actual results, because landowners didn't put this rule into practice.

Both politicians' and the general public's lack of interest in news of this massacre shows how violence against poor Indians is normalized—and perhaps tolerated—in Guatemala. The fact that the CUC's success in raising workers' salaries does not translate into actual change highlights the government's unwillingness to enforce such rules and regulate landowners' behaviors. As in the case of Petrona Chona's death, the law seems more interested in placating angry peasants than enacting actual change.

In 1978, when Lucas García comes to power, full-blown repression reached El Quiché. He launched massacres in villages, and mass graves appeared on a daily basis: the soldiers created "clandestine cemeteries" after kidnapping, torturing, and raping villagers, dumping all the bodies into a pit.

Thus far, changes in the Guatemalan government haven't had a meaningful impact as far as granting Indigenous peasants more rights or adequate representation. The historic election of Lucas García (which was fraudulent) is uniquely impactful, but in a negative way: it leads to even more violence and even genocide against the Maya-Quiché people.

In 1979, as part of the CUC, Rigoberta traveled to different areas of the Guatemalan countryside. She soon realized that an important barrier is language, since communities are divided into different languages and do not speak Spanish. Rigoberta decided to learn Spanish. Some nuns in a convent taught her to read and write, which further convinced her that not all religious officials were blind to the suffering of the poor.

Much of Rigoberta's political education consists of understanding that while different institutions (such as the Guatemalan army and the Catholic Church) might be politically repressive, not all of their individual members are bad. Rigoberta's decision to learn Spanish is tied to her awareness that one means to fight an unfair system is to attack it from within, by using some of its weapons. In this case, she's using Spanish, which has historically been used to trick and oppress poor Indians who don't speak the language.

CHAPTER 23: POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN OTHER COMMUNITIES. CONTACTS WITH LADINOS

Rigoberta had not heard from her family in over a year, but she learned to find support among the compañeros of the CUC, who became like a family to her. As she stayed in different people's houses while moving from community to community, she discovered that some people's experiences were even worse than what she experienced as a child. When staying in a particularly cold village, she saw a family try to sleep in freezing weather, without a mat or cover. This made her realize that, despite her family's poverty, she was better off as a child than this family, since everyone in her household had their own mat.

Rigoberta's description of the CUC as a friendly, warm environment contrasts starkly with what the reader knows about the Guatemalan army, which a hierarchical organization that does not hesitate to kill its own members as punishment. In this way, the CUC has the potential to develop a new form of comradeship based not on fear and domination, but on dialogue and inclusion. Rigoberta's realization that her family was actually richer than others reveals the importance of learning about other people's experiences. In doing so, one can contextualize one's personal experience of suffering within a broader, social, economic, and geographic perspective.

In the CUC, Rigoberta befriended a ladino teacher who taught her Spanish. She concluded, as she observed his behavior, that not all *ladinos* were bad. The two of them spent many nights talking together, discussing the peasant struggle and the organization. Rigoberta realized that the system impeded Indians and *ladinos* from cooperating, even though poor members of each ethnic group lived in the same harsh conditions.

Rigoberta realizes that not all members of an oppressive institution or social group (like the army or the Catholic Church) mean to harm Indians. Despite the widespread racism and discrimination in Guatemalan society, some ladinos *actually believe in the defending poor Indian peasants and are willing to devote their lives to the cause.*

Rigoberta notes that, although Indians are the majority in Guatemala, exact statistics are difficult to find, because some Indians no longer take part in ancestral customs and some become members of the middle-class who reject their background. Overall, though, Indians are disproportionately discriminated against. For example, in the market, ladinos always try to trick Indians, knowing that *ladinos* can make their voice heard, through the law, in more effective ways. Rigoberta realized that, to enact change, *ladinos* and Indians had to overcome these barriers of discrimination and unite in order to reject a common oppression.

Although Rigoberta is deeply attached to her Maya-Quiché community and customs, she understands that ethnic identity is not necessarily the most important factor in a successful political group. What does matters is gathering as many people as possible, from a diversity of backgrounds, to fight against a harsh social reality: the oppression of Indian peasants. In the same way that she later preconizes cooperation between men and women to fight against machismo, *she believes in dialogue between Indians and* ladinos *to effect long-term social change.*

Rigoberta recalls her father's injunction against schooling, explaining that schools forced Indians to think differently. For example, they taught the arrival of the Spaniards as a victorious "conquest," explaining that Indians did not know how to fight and killed horses instead of humans. Indignant, Rigoberta knew that the opposite was true. She called this system "false education," capable of teaching people literacy but focused on instilling in them the same mode of thinking as the authorities.

Rigoberta's criticism of official schooling sheds light on the fact that history is not an objective narrative. Rather, it's one that's shaped by the interests and beliefs of those in power—which, in Guatemala, means excluding the perspective of Indigenous groups. Treating a savage act of colonization as a "victory" mirrors the current interests of the country's brutal, political and economic elite: to silence and kill Indians defending their own land.

Rigoberta contrasts that education with the learning what is relevant to one's community. Indians usually keep much of their knowledge secret: they do not talk about their self-defense strategies and keep their opinions to themselves when priests come to the village. The goal is to convince those in power that they are not thinking or plotting anything. Given that their views have never been taken seriously in the public sphere, they prefer to keep their opinions to themselves. They hide their identity as a form of resistance, even if this leads others to believe that they are unintelligent.

In light of her own community's refusal to communicate their thoughts in a way that might be misunderstood or misrepresented by authorities, Rigoberta's decision to dictate her autobiography in Spanish stands out as a potentially controversial choice. However, this decision suggests that silence is not always the best method: sharing one's worldview—while keeping the community's most precious secrets—can help educate people and enact political change.

CHAPTER 24: THE TORTURE AND DEATH OF HER LITTLE BROTHER, BURNT ALIVE IN FRONT OF MEMBERS OF HIS FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

In 1979, Rigoberta's younger brother, Petrocinio Menchú Túm, was tortured and killed at the age of 16. As secretary of the community, he was the only family member who stayed in the village after the family separated. In light of Rigoberta's family's resistance to the regime, the government disseminated an image of them as monstrous, foreign, Cuban communists. On September 9, 1979, Petrocinio was kidnapped. Rigoberta's mother went to the authorities to protest, willing to give her own life to fight for her son, and she discovered that a member of the community was responsible for betraying Petrocinio.

As occurs throughout this story, the use of the term "communist" is used not to define a specific political doctrine but to demonize the enemy. This is done in order to portray peaceful protests as dangerous and subversive—which justifies the use of violence against the enemy. The betrayal of a member of Rigoberta's community shows that there are bad people on both sides: even the poor can be convinced or coerced into siding with the army that oppresses their own community.

Rigoberta later learned the details of Petrocinio's imprisonment. For 16 days, her brother was subjected to beatings and sexual and psychological torture, and he was mutilated beyond recognition. The soldiers inflicted wounds on him that they allowed to become infected. They made sure to keep him alive long enough to keep on torturing him. During her attempts to save her son, Rigoberta's mother was soon told that if she kept on looking for him, she would be subjected to the same kidnapping and torture.

The brutal methods that the army uses against innocent citizens such as Petrocinio contrast with the attempts at dialogue that Indian villages took part in when capturing enemy soldiers. Whereas many poor Indians seek a radical transformation of the system, which includes open dialogue, the army wants to suppress the villagers through fear and violence.

On September 23rd, the army sent propaganda bulletins to nearby villages, avoiding Rigoberta's because they knew the community was well-organized and could fight back. They announced that everyone must come to witness the public punishment of the guerrillas in a nearby village. The villagers who did not come would be considered enemies themselves. As soon as Rigoberta's family—which had decided to gather during this moment of crisis—heard the news, they rushed out of the house to go witness the public punishment, convinced that Petrocinio must be there.

Although Rigoberta's family knows that they are all putting their life at risk by taking part in political organizing, they still try to save one another's lives. In this case, they take the risk of meeting up—which they know can get them all killed, given that they lead underground lives—in order to save Petrocinio. This decision reveals their hope that it might not be too late for them to save Petrocinio.

After passing 20 soldier-manned checkpoints, Rigoberta's family—who hid their real identity on the way—reached the village. It was completely surrounded by soldiers: armored cars and other army vehicles occupied the streets, while helicopters flew overhead to keep guerrillas from intervening. The army announced that the villagers—who had been forced to attend this event—were about to witness punishment against dangerous Cuban subversives. Rigoberta's mother was convinced that Petrocinio would be among the group of prisoners, but Rigoberta wasn't sure, because she knew her brother was innocent and was not affiliated with any armed group.

The use of terms such as "Cuban" and "communist" highlights the role of this conflict in a larger, global context of the Cold War, which had opposing Communist and Capitalist Blocs. In the context of Guatemala, however, such terms are largely devoid of meaning: they are hurled as fake accusations against poor Indians who attempt to defend their customs and their rights. Although there are indeed some politically affiliated guerilla groups in the region, many of the army's victims are innocent civilians.

The army then brought the prisoners out of a lorry. The prisoners were all in their final moments, in agony from the torture they had suffered. Rigoberta's mother then recognized her son Petrocinio, who was nearly disfigured beyond recognition and couldn't stand because of the torture they had inflicted on his feet. Every time the prisoners fell down, the soldiers forced them back up. An officer then told the villagers that they should be satisfied with their lands. He threatened them not to follow communist ideas. He pronounced the word "communist" a hundred times. At every pause in his speech, the soldiers hit the prisoners with their weapons.

The officer's excessive repetition of the term "communist," interspersed with the torture of the prisoners, points to the army's own hypocrisy. Although he accuses the prisoners of dangerous subversion, the true violence and danger lies on the side of the army, not of the people. His insistence that the villagers accept the current land situation reveals his true aim: to silence legitimate protest and rebellion, so that the poor accept the unfair distribution of land that the government has brought forth.

Everyone forced to witness this scene was crying. Rigoberta finds it difficult to recount this episode, although she cannot forget any minute of it. Rigoberta's mother was convinced that Petrocinio recognized them, but Rigoberta couldn't tell because of how disfigured his face was. After two hours, soldiers removed the prisoners' clothes with scissors—they couldn't be removed easily because the bodies were so swollen from their wounds—and the officer proceeded to describe the different torture techniques the prisoners had been subjected to. He said that anyone who tried to rebel would suffer the same treatment. In total, he spoke for about four hours.

The horror of this scene serves as a vivid and profoundly disturbing illustration of how helplessness poor Indians are before the authorities. The extraordinary length of the officer's speech suggests that he might even be enjoying himself: the army has become so cruel that it actually takes pleasure in harming innocent people. Of all the methods that leaders have used to dehumanize Indians throughout Rigoberta's narrative, this is the most extreme example of brutality against a helpless population.

Rigoberta found herself so horrified that she couldn't concentrate on anything that was happening. The officer repeated that the government was democratic and had given its people everything. Meanwhile, the workers present knew that they were powerless before the army. Rigoberta's mother almost put herself in danger by trying to hug Petrocinio, but the family quickly held her back, knowing that their safety depended on staying anonymous. Rigoberta's father was too full of rage and shock to shed a tear. The whole family shared the same anger, knowing that Petrocinio was an innocent, kind child who didn't deserve this punishment.

In the same way the army uses the word "communist," the officer's defense of democracy shows that words are simply war weapons: they are meant to force the other side to stay silent and obey a brutal government. The Guatemalan regime is far from democratic: its power derives from fraudulent elections, racial discrimination, and the use of sheer force.

Finally, the soldiers dragged the prisoners, who could no longer stand, and poured oil over them. The officer both threatened and insulted the community: he said that these prisoners must die by violence, so that the ignorant Indians in the audience would learn a lesson. The soldiers then set fire to the bodies. Although none of the prisoners had reacted until then, this final moment of agony was too much to bear, and the tortured individuals begged for mercy and desperately tried to escape. Many villagers had machetes with them because they were on their way to work when this public punishment was announced. When witnessing this terrible scene, the villagers were moved to so much anger and hatred that the army suddenly retreated, realizing that everyone, even the children, was ready to fight.

The officer's deprecating address to the Indians in the audience shows that his intention is not to educate, but to terrorize. Although the villagers aren't nearly as well-equipped as the soldiers, the army's gesture of retreat signals that they can feel the powerful indignation and hatred motivating the villagers to act. This suggests that villagers have been moved to act even if their own safety is at risk: the actions they are witnessing are so inhumane that their instinctive reaction is to rebel.

The squad withdrew, laughing and chanting slogans in support of the regime. The villagers raised their weapons, knowing that they would undoubtedly be massacred if they resisted—but everyone was so enraged that death ceased to matter. Because the water supply was far away, the villagers did not succeed in quelling the fire and saving the tortured prisoners.

The soldiers' laughter once again reveals how deeply they have dehumanized their enemies: instead of realizing how horrifically cruel their actions are, they take pride in harming others. The villagers' resistance emphasizes their courage: they are willing to die in order to defend what they consider to be basic human dignity.

In this scene of horror and disbelief, Rigoberta found herself grieving not only for Petrocinio but for all these tortured Indians. At that moment, she reached the conclusion that, if the Catholics had taught her it is a sin to kill a human being, what the regime did to her community could be nothing but a sin as well.

If the Catholic notion of sin has kept Indians from taking part in violent deeds, Rigoberta now realizes that this engagement has only been one-sided: the army has long taken part in sin. Implicitly, she decides to discard such a rigid condemnation of violence, as violence might be justified when it is used to fight against injustice.

For the next two hours, everyone in the village worked hard to cover the bodies and find coffins for them. They cut flowers to honor the dead and fetched the priest, whom Rigoberta assumes must have also been murdered since then. Although the monstrosity of the scene was paralyzing, it also gave people enough courage to bury the dead as best they could. With desperation, Rigoberta's mother embraced her dead son Petrocinio and spoke to him. The villagers promised the dead a Christian burial, and the family left, unable to withstand this scene any longer.

Rigoberta's assumption that the priest, too, must have been killed since this event suggests that some members of the clergy did sacrifice their own lives to support the Indians in their fight against injustice. It also suggests that the violent repression they were up against was very difficult to survive. Any form of collective, cultural resistance—such as Catholic ceremonies—was viewed as dangerous subversion, capable of undermining the army's control of the region.

Rigoberta's family was in deep shock. However, upon returning home, their immediate reaction was to focus on their work. Rigoberta's mother said that no one should endure what she has endured, and that she would fight hard to keep this from happening to other people. Rigoberta's father declared that he would join the guerrillas to seek revenge for his son. He left the next day. Rigoberta's mother, in the meantime, brought the "compañeros in the mountains" (the guerrillas) Petrocinio's clothes. She resolved not to cry in front of the neighbors, preferring to give a positive example by keeping up the fight. After a week, Rigoberta left too, knowing that each of them would make a separate decision about how best to take part in this fight against violence and oppression.

Rigoberta's family's reaction shows a particularly combative, hopeful reaction to suffering. Instead of giving in to despair, they all attempt to use this suffering in a constructive way, as a source of motivation in their fight against injustice. Rigoberta's parents' proximity to guerillas also suggests that, in the face of so much cruelty, certain forms of violence are acceptable. The goal, everyone understands, is to stop the army from spreading so much pain and destruction, even if that means defending their people with weapons.

CHAPTER 25: RIGOBERTA'S FATHER DIES IN THE OCCUPATION OF THE SPANISH EMBASSY. PEASANTS MARCH TO THE CAPITAL

In November 1979, Rigoberta ran into her father by chance. He praised her in front of all the compañeros of the CUC, asked them to be a father to her if he died, and insisted that his role as a Christian was to fight against injustice. He told his daughter that he would take part in an action in the capital in January, to protest against the violent oppression and kidnappings in El Quiché. Although intent on going, Rigoberta found herself involved in an important self-defense course on the day of the event, and she preferred to honor her prior commitment to the cause.

As Rigoberta later details, her father plays an important role in giving her the freedom and confidence necessary to become a leader in the political struggle for Indigenous rights. Although her mother is more vocal on gender imbalances, her father makes a point of encouraging their daughter to speak up in all circumstances, even if that involves taking a leadership role in male-dominated groups.

The march on the capital that Rigoberta's father took part in sought to bring attention to the events taking place in El Quiché. Seeking international visibility, the group decided to occupy the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City. However, a fire soon ravaged the building, killing both the demonstrators and the government officials in the building. Rigoberta's father was among those who died during this event. This violent ending was entirely unexpected: the CUC had believed that the embassy would give the protestors the status of political refugees, allowing them to leave the country to tell the whole world about their plight. They never thought that everyone would die in a fire.

The unexpected turn of events during the CUC's protests at the Spanish embassy shows how senselessly brutal the Guatemalan regime and its armed forces have become. They do not hesitate to repress peaceful protests with violence, even if this involves killing foreign nationals and giving international visibility to their brutal methods. Repression of poor Indians no longer takes place only in remote places in the countryside: it can also affect peaceful protests in the capital.

This tragic event profoundly impacted Rigoberta. However, although saddened by her father's death, she was also relieved that he has not died at the hands of torturers. Mostly, she grieved the death of so many valuable compañeros, who were simply fighting to defend their needs and dignity. In addition, she initially believed that her mother and siblings were among the dead, because she knew they were planning on going to the march. Although she later discovered that the rest of her family was safe, she found, in that moment, that she couldn't bear the thought of being the only member of her family left in the fight.

The fact that Rigoberta's sadness is not limited to her own father's death underlines her generosity and compassion, but it also suggests that she already expected her father to be murdered at some point, given his underground activities. At the same time, her anguish at the thought that she might be the only member of her family left shows that she does still depend on her family for emotional support, even if they do not see each other regularly. Although devoted to a lifelong struggle for Indian rights, Rigoberta, like any other human being, proves that she is not impervious to loneliness and despair.

This event raised political consciousness in Guatemala across social classes, as people realized that what happened in the Spanish Embassy was unacceptable. Rigoberta gives an overview of the different versions given of the event. Although the government argued that the peasants had firearms, Rigoberta says this is not possible, because the peasants only had weapons like machetes and stones. Journalists, by contrast, said that the police threw bombs, which caused the embassy to burn. Rigoberta notes that her father had five bullet holes in his body.

The description of the events at the Spanish embassy highlights the possibility for those in power to manipulate history in order to serve their own interests. As Rigoberta has argued concerning the official school system, authorities seek to justify their past and present brutality in a variety of ways. In this case, they try to frame brutal repression against unarmed protesters as an act of self-defense.

One compañero who survived the event was later kidnapped from the hospital where he was recovering. The next day, he was found dead in the street, with signs of torture and bullet wounds in his body. As Rigoberta emphasizes, this highlighted the government's unwillingness to let this *compañero* give his version of the facts. This tragic event, which marked Guatemalan public consciousness, led to a new phase in the struggle.

The government's unwillingness to let alternative versions of the events come to light suggests that their own version is probably dishonest. This reveals that the government's fight against the peasants extends beyond armed conflict: it includes a fight over which historical narrative is given weight, and which voices are silenced.

CHAPTER 26: RIGOBERTA TALKS ABOUT HER FATHER

Rigoberta recalls her father's insistence on behaving in a respectful way—not in order to receive praise from the community, but to honor their ancestors. He attributed bad habits to modern society and insisted on keeping many traditions hidden from the rich and powerful, as well as from religious officials.

It is precisely Rigoberta's father's trust in his ancestors' legacy that gives him strength. Instead of following the successes and defeats of current historical actors, he ties his convictions to the stability of the past—which can neither be modified nor destroyed, as long as Indians keep it secret.

Reflecting on these views, Rigoberta also recalls her grandfather, whom she believes is still alive at the age of 106. Her grandfather described being forced to work as a slave for white men. He shared his memories of the past, blaming the chemicals in modern food for reducing life expectancy in the community. He also cursed the Spaniards, identifying them as the root of their problems, since they were the first to steal the Indians' land and to rape the elected queens in the community.

Rigoberta's father and grandfather both blame modern society for many of the ills affecting the community. However, given her grandfather's description of slavery, it appears that modernity is not all bad: it has also brought some social progress, however minimal.

Rigoberta remembers her father as a kind, calm man, whom she is very proud of. Despite being an orphan, he remained optimistic and serenely committed to his work. She recalls different trips they took together, to the capital as well as to other rural regions. On one of these trips, they reached a community of Indians who benefited from a lot of different crops but who did not have access to **tortillas**. The children there only ate bananas and had swollen bellies from malnutrition. This convinced Rigoberta of the importance of her community's **maize** and lime, which were sacred for giving the people strength and resistance. She also recalls her father fainting on the trip back, and fearing, for the first time in her life, that he could die.

One of the qualities Rigoberta admires most in his father is his capacity to endure suffering while remaining committed to important tasks, be it his family's survival or defending the rights of an entire people. Rigoberta's comment about the sacredness of lime suggests that her community's ceremonies are based on an understanding that certain elements of nature which, beyond their spiritual importance, might have an actual impact on people's health. These considerations highlight the community's reliance on nature in both physical and cultural ways.

Whenever Rigoberta had problems, she confided in her father more than her mother. Her father defended her from everyone—including, sometimes, members of her own family (for example, if Rigoberta would not defend herself when her brothers hit her). Her father also encouraged her to present her views in gatherings, teaching her to express herself in public.

Despite Rigoberta's father's focus on enduring suffering, he also teaches her that not all harm is acceptable: she should learn to defend herself in situations in which she has the power and ability to do so. This upbringing prepares Rigoberta to be a strong leader, capable of standing up for herself even in the face of opposition.

CHAPTER 27: KIDNAPPING AND DEATH OF RIGOBERTA'S MOTHER

Rigoberta's mother was kidnapped on April 19, 1980. After the death of eight compañeros from the village in the Spanish embassy, she decided to return to the Altiplano to help the community. Although the priests and nuns tried to convince her to become a refugee and to leave the country, she refused, insisting that her role was to support her community.

Rigoberta's mother's decision to return to their village shows that the bonds that the villagers have developed are indeed meant to last for life, regardless of one's circumstances. Keeping the community vibrant and alive, Rigoberta's mother emphasizes, is more important than saving her individual life.

Rigoberta recalls her mother's activism in different villages. Her mother always encouraged women to participate, arguing that women suffer just as much as men and should therefore join the struggle. She argued that no change could be considered a victory if women did not take part in it and defend their own situation. She would tell everyone that, after seeing her son burned to death, she could not forgive her enemies. Rigoberta's mother used this anger as motivation and inspiration for other people to join the fight. She would often talk to women while they were at home making **tortillas**, so that they could go on with their work while still developing their political consciousness.

By talking to women in a domestic setting, while they set about their daily tasks, Rigoberta's mother shows great tact. On the one hand, she proves that she understands the importance of these women's activities and does not want to disturb their work. On the other hand, she insists that education is central to keeping this community—including the very activities the women are engaged in—alive. Through her actions, Rigoberta's mother thus shows that she understands the special role that women play in the community, but that this domestic function should not detract from their political consciousness.

When Petrocinio was kidnapped, all the women in the community, accompanied by their children, occupied the administrative offices in town, even taking the mayor prisoner. This was the first action of this kind undertaken by women. They knew that, had male villagers gone, they would have been kidnapped and tortured. Days later, Rigoberta's parents and the peasant community occupied the Guatemalan Congress on the Guatemalan National Day. All the demonstrators held flowers in order to defend the human right to life. The peaceful protest, which asked the army to leave their communities, did not have any positive consequences. Rather, the only effect was their decision to torture and burn Rigoberta's brother.

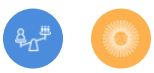
The women-led action in town highlights cooperation between men and women in this struggle, as everyone's goal is to keep more members of the community from being kidnapped. Holding flowers during a protest carries important symbolic weight, given that Rigoberta's community maintains such a precious relationship with nature. In this context, each flower can is a symbol of a human life. However, the fact that these symbolic, peaceful protests have no positive consequences suggest that the authorities are not interested in listening to the poor: they prefer to prevent any possible contestation from the people by using violence.

After being kidnapped, Rigoberta's mother was raped and tortured. Rigoberta later received the details of her mother's final days. Although her mother was raped repeatedly, and her torturers cut off parts of her body bit by bit, she still survived for a long time. Army officials took her clothes to the town hall to prove that she was under their control. They called on the children of the family to appear, but despite the pain of knowing of their mother's situation, neither Rigoberta nor her siblings came. They knew that this was a trap, and that they would be killed if they showed up.

Rigoberta's mother's agonizing final moments recall Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio's torture: both are examples of the army's excessive cruelty, meant to punish and humiliate. Rigoberta and her siblings' decision to stay hidden reveals their understanding that appealing to the authorities is useless: all the army seeks to do is kill, not compromise. This reveals a shift in mentality when compared to Petrocinio's kidnapping, months earlier, when Rigoberta's mother still hoped to save her son by appealing to authorities.

The army then left Rigoberta's mother, in agony, on a hill for multiple days. When she finally dies, in horrible pain, the soldiers urinated in her mouth. They also left a sentry next to the corpse so that no one can come recover the body. For months, the army stayed there, making sure that the animals ate the woman's body, leaving nothing left. Shocked at so much horror, Rigoberta comments that not even animals would behave in such cruel ways. Although the family was deeply affected by this event, everyone felt relieved once Rigoberta's mother died, knowing that she was finally relieved from her torture.

The army's treatment of Rigoberta's mother is meant not only to inflict unthinkable suffering but also to humiliate the entire community. By mutilating the body of a respected community leader in such a way, the army wishes to terrorize the population, so that they will no longer resist. They also simply want to take revenge on a courageous woman who has defied their threats for so long.



CHAPTER 28: DEATH

Rigoberta explains Indians' attitudes toward death. She notes that death is an event for which everyone prepares. Old people's coffins are prepared in advance so that they become accustomed to it. In the final moments of someone's life, the person dying tells the person closest to them about their life experiences and gives them advice about how to behave in their community. This allows them to fulfill their duty to the community, sharing their knowledge and wisdom. These recommendations are kept secret and passed on from generation to generation.

As is usual in Rigoberta's Maya-Quiché community, the ceremonies surrounding death are centered on sharing information from generation to generation, in order to keep the community's history alive. The goal is for one's life to serve as an example to others: to retain age-old traditions and to provide avenues of reflection for the next generation, so that it may find innovative solutions to current problems.

The community pays for all expenses related to the death ceremony. This is one of the rare occasions in which the community eats meat and prepares a ceremony similar to the one anticipating the **maize** harvest. They light candles and cut flowers, another series of sacred, rare events. Everyone talks about the dead person, in both positive and negative terms, to honor the entirety of the individual's life. The burial is an important event, as each person is buried with the objects that were dear to them and that they used regularly.

The fact that the community pays for everyone's funeral serves a symbolic role: it emphasizes that each person's life doesn't solely belong to themselves or their immediate family, but instead to the entire community. In the same way that each person strives to respect the laws set by the community, the community honors its responsibility toward all of its members by taking care of their final moments.

Death by violence is viewed as particularly intolerable by the Indian community, which rejects all forms of violence. Given how insufferable the political-military situation had become, Rigoberta supported the work of the "compañeros in the mountains" (the guerrillas), who were ready to die to defend their community's way of life. Anyone about to join a guerrilla performed the death ceremony, so that they would have passed on their secrets even if they died while fighting.

Rigoberta's support of the guerillas does not imply that she has modified her beliefs concerning nonviolence. Rather, it reflects a situation in which violence is no longer interpreted as aggression—it's a form of self-defense, meant to ensure the survival of the entire community. Instead of rigidly condemning all violence, Rigoberta understands that, in extreme contexts, violence is sometimes necessary to achieve justice and long-term peace.

CHAPTER 29: FIESTAS AND INDIAN QUEENS

Rigoberta describes the fiestas that take place in towns, which mix ancestral traditions with modern interpretations of history. Schools, for example, celebrate special days such as the death of Tecún Umán, a Quiché warrior who was killed by the Spanish during colonization. However, Rigoberta explains that Indians do not celebrate this event, because, for Indians, the struggle he represents is not a thing of the past: it continues in the present. By contrast, the ladinos present this as Indian history when it is, in fact, nothing more than their deformed interpretation. Indians also do not celebrate Guatemalan Independence Day, since independence only involved greater suffering for them and increased their efforts to preserve their traditions in the face of oppression.

The Maya-Quiché understand history not as an abstract form of knowledge, but as a vital aspect of life that should find expression in the present. This belief in the present relevance of history is evident in the community's respect for their ancestors' traditions, which they preserve through their ceremonies and daily activities. Teaching history as a series of facts that belong to the past, Rigoberta argues, runs the risk of remaining blind to injustice in the present. One should therefore see one's ancestors as powerful forces in the present, capable of leading one's actions, even if this involves challenging those in power and defying authority, as Tecún Umán once did.

The one aspect of these fiestas that Rigoberta does enjoy is the "Dance of the Conquest," which represents the Indian perspective on the conquest. During such *fiestas*, everyone drinks, including women, which is very rare. Rigoberta recalls her father going to a cantina and drinking so much that he spent all his money. Ladinos, as usual, use these events as yet another opportunity to make money.

Although Rigoberta does not dwell on these issues, her passing mention of the gender imbalance with regard to drinking suggests that, in ordinary circumstances, Indian women might be discouraged from drinking. This also relates to a divide in household responsibilities: whereas Rigoberta's father spends the family's money on alcohol, her mother, in charge of the family budget, must work hard to compensate for such expenses.

Rigoberta also comments on the process through which Indian and ladino "queens" are elected. Ordinary Indians are not allowed to choose: only *ladinos* vote, given how few Indians actually live in towns. Rigoberta finds such events sad, because they turn an Indian girl into a business. In addition, the Indian and *ladino* queen never appear together, highlighting the divisions in society. Later, a big festival is organized by important members of politics. The Indian queen is required to attend, appearing in traditional garb. The organizers do not take good care of her afterwards and send her to a cheap hotel. Rigoberta concludes that the leaders of their country enjoy the folklore of Indian **costumes** but are not interested in the actual human beings who wear these outfits.

This description of Indian "queens" recalls Rigoberta's previous comments about prostitution. Both phenomena are processes through which women's bodies are objectified. In this case, the issue of class is crucial: the celebration of Indian clothing is only for superficial enjoyment, not actual appreciation for Indigenous cultures. In this sense, this is another example of the way the rich ladino *elite takes advantage of its power and status to selectively appropriate certain elements of Indian culture, all the while economically and politically dominating peasants from that culture.*

CHAPTER 30: LESSONS TAUGHT HER BY HER MOTHER: INDIAN WOMEN AND LADINO WOMEN

Rigoberta never expected her mother to suffer a more violent death than her father, given that her father was an activist for a long time. Rigoberta recalls her mother's teachings and personality. Her mother insisted that an Indian woman must wear her full **costume** to be respected. Without her shawl and apron, she risks losing the community's respect. A woman must neither cut her hair nor modify her clothing, because each person should remain constant and consistent throughout life. Aprons, then, are sacred to an Indian woman. Rigoberta also recalls her mother's extensive knowledge of natural medicine and remedies. She had an intense connection with plants, animals, and all other aspects of the natural world.

Rigoberta's surprise at her mother's violent death suggests that she might not have fully appreciated her mother's activism when she was still alive. It also signals that women and men can play equally important roles in the struggle against oppression. Had the army not considered Rigoberta's mother a significant threat to their territorial control, they would have tortured and murdered her in such a brutal manner. Rigoberta's mother's insistence on dress signals that one's clothing is viewed in terms of a social, ethical, and spiritual commitment. This helps explain the community's approach to prostitution, which it condemns for making women abandon their traditional garb.

Rigoberta's mother also enjoyed giving people gifts. She insisted that learning to give is important, because people who give are also bound to receive help in times of need. She also taught Rigoberta to separate women and men's clothes, which represents the separation of women and men's lives, for example through bodily phenomena like menstruating. Rigoberta's mother would also give her husband the most food in the family, to encourage him in his work.

Rigoberta's mother's emphasis on separating women and men's bodies is a signal of her respect for tradition. However, this traditional perspective does not extend to her evaluation of women and men's mental capacities or civic engagement. On the contrary, when it comes to political issues, she believes that both genders should be treated equally.

In parallel, Rigoberta's mother also taught her that a woman is in charge of household expenses. Given her knowledge of medicinal plants, Rigoberta's mother was often called to assist members of the community who fell ill. This would cause her to be absent from the days for days on end, thus forcing the children to find their own food. This sometimes made Rigoberta and her siblings resentful, as they missed their mother.

Rigoberta's mother is conflicted between her obligations as the village's elected representative and her duties to her own children. This speaks to the unique struggle women face when trying to combine their professional functions and their private lives.

Rigoberta also recalls her mother saying that the entire society, not individual men or women, are responsible for machismo. She said that men and women must work together, otherwise the problem becomes intractable. Women, she argued, are better at expressing affection. Rigoberta notes that her mother, as an elected representative, was uniquely independent, as many Indian women are not allowed to go out on their own: a married woman is not always free to visit her neighbors, sometimes because of her husband's jealousy.

Although Rigoberta frequently argues that her community promotes equally between genders, here she recognizes that this is not fully the case: even as adults, women are not given the same liberties as men. Domestic dynamics such as a husband's jealousy can significantly constrain a woman's life. Having benefited from her parents' example of openness, Rigoberta, by contrast, is given the freedom to develop as an independent woman whose social function extends beyond the domestic sphere.

Rigoberta's mother emphasized that simply being a woman was insufficient: one should become a woman who is useful to the community. She encouraged Rigoberta to participate in the struggle just as much as her brothers, while also learning to carry out important tasks and defend her right, as a woman, to speak up.

Rigoberta's mother's emphasis on dialogue between genders implies courage and self-confidence. She believes that women must be brave enough to carve a space for themselves in the public sphere and make their voices heard, even if they're not always encouraged to do so.

Rigoberta praises her mother's courage. She also notes that her mother's strict attitude derived from having to face greater problems in the family than her husband. She recalls, for example, her mother's handling of problems such as the death of her young children. Rigoberta's father, on the other hand, would go get drunk to forget his problems, while her mother would sacrifice herself to assist her children. Although Rigoberta loves both her parents equally, she regrets not spending more time at her mother's side and learning more from her.

Rigoberta's recognition of her mother's courage suggests that women face certain obstacles that men might be spared, such as particular domestic obligations. In this way, women have a double task: to be leaders and public speakers, like men, but also to serve as an organized and responsible figure in the family.

CHAPTER 31: WOMEN AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT. RIGOBERTA RENOUNCES MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Rigoberta discusses the position of women in Guatemala. She explains that a woman's connection with the earth is central, since both the earth and women are capable of giving life. Men, on the other hand, do not share this special link and responsibility. Rigoberta also discusses the difficulties she has faced as a political leader in groups of men. Some men refused to follow a woman's orders, and Rigoberta was also forced to punish some of them for refusing to let their wives join the fight. Rigoberta insists that women leaders must not seek domination over their male compañeros but must always be willing to engage in dialogue with them.

Rigoberta expresses her commitment to social equality not only through her words, but also through her behavior. She aims to foster an atmosphere of comradeship in the political groups she is part of, which includes the difficult task of engaging in dialogue to solve conflict. In this way, she teaches others not by imposing her authority, but by allowing stubborn men to change their attitudes on their own. In so doing, they do not blindly obey orders—rather they're given the choice to participate in creating a more equal society.

In this regard, Rigoberta explains she has learned a lot from both her mother and women from other countries. She has concluded that women tend to put their own needs and problems asides in order to take care of others. This is harmful to women, who need to learn to solve their own problems and make their voice heard.

In society, women face a special dilemma: although they are encouraged to take on the role of a caretaker, especially in a domestic setting, these qualities do not necessarily translate positively to the political sphere. Women thus need to transfer this caring attitude toward themselves: to pay attention not only to others' problems, but also to their own. This can have broad social consequences, as it gives voice to women-specific problems that may be largely ignored in society.

Despite some of the achievements of the political movements that Rigoberta is part of, she recognizes that a deep change within society has not yet taken place. However, Rigoberta opposes the creation of a women-based activist group, arguing that women face the same exploitation as men. She believes that it is crucial for men to be present when specific problems related to women are discussed, in order for them to learn about the subject: only through such education can the activists have the true revolutionary impact they hope to achieve. Men should have just as broad an understanding of machismo as women themselves.

Rigoberta notes that women suffer from two separate but interconnected problems: economic exploitation (which they share with men) and gender-based inequality. Rigoberta's emphasis on dialogue between genders suggests that focusing on one problem over the other is insufficient, as it silences the specific mechanisms of oppression that affect women.

However, Rigoberta notes that machismo is a problem so deeply engrained in societies around the world that, although the situation can be improved, the problem is unlikely to ever be entirely eradicated. She adds that true leadership stems from practical experience, not from formal education.

Rigoberta's trust in dialogue signals that, in the same way she has expanded her perspective by learning about economic exploitation, she believes that men can expand their perspective by learning about women-specific problems. This will make them more empathetic and more capable of truly committing to social equality.

Rigoberta discusses the topic of marriage, which, despite being a much-celebrated moment in Indian communities, is also associated with grief and suffering, due to high child mortality. After discussing this issue with other women, Rigoberta realized she was not the only who has doubts about getting married, for fear of what might happen to her children—especially because her involvement in politics means she's at risk of being murdered and leaving her children orphans.

Rigoberta's discussion with other women shows that no one in the community is truly content with suffering. Although other women might have been silent up until this point, they agree with Rigoberta that their community's child mortality rate is unacceptable—and they, too, have doubts about marriage and childbearing.

Rigoberta concludes that, for the moment, she prefers to devote herself to the political cause and to her people, before focusing on her own happiness and the issue of marriage. Part of her fear about getting married, she admits, derives from having seen so many compañeros die, and anticipating the grief she would feel if her husband died in similar circumstances.

Rigoberta's decision not to marry suggests that she is bending some of her Maya-Quiché community's norms concerning women's roles: she believes that her job in society is greater than the domestic sphere, and that, like so many other men, she should be free to devote herself to the political struggle.

CHAPTER 32: STRIKE OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND THE FIRST OF MAY IN THE CAPITAL

In February 1980, 80,000 peasants took part in a strike. The army soon moved in—but peasants in the mountains built barricades and fought the soldiers back with machetes, stones, and sticks. Despite their simple weapons, they succeeded in maintaining the strike for 15 days. Rigoberta joined the strikers in the Altiplano, many of whom were not organized collectively, to tell them about the CUC. In the meantime, as she taught them how to organize, the army began a heavy campaign of repression. This included bombing people's houses and throwing napalm grenades.

The unequal resources of the army and the peasants highlight the courage and solidarity of these 80,000 peasants, who are willing to risk their lives in the name of their community's well-being. The army's response, by contrast, underscores its destructive intentions: to harm poor Indians in every possible way. This includes destroying entire villages and killing innocent citizens, regardless of their actual affiliation with guerillas.

After such severe repression, the different armed organizations in charge of defending peasants decided to unite, becoming the 31st of January Popular Front, whose name honored the events at the Spanish embassy. Their main actions, beyond self-defense strategies, were to raise consciousness and visibility concerning peasants' plight and army violence. On May 1st, 1981, they took part in a series of flash demonstrations in the capital, which were completed rapidly in order to avoid violent repression from the authorities. For an entire week, they also called factories with fake bomb threats, which forced the factories to close. These actions proved to the government that the people were getting increasingly organized and capable of making their voice heard.

The fact that poor, largely unarmed peasants are able to cause such confusion demonstrates the power of collective organizing. These events highlight the broad expansion of the movement that Rigoberta joined: from a small village organization, it has now spread to the entire country and has the power to disrupt the nation's economic and political system. The emphasis on visibility also falls in line with Rigoberta's personal project: to share her story through her autobiography, so that these issues might gain even greater, international weight.

Rigoberta emphasizes the role women played in this struggle, some carrying their children with them while taking part in political actions. She hopes that, after the victory, women will be able to tell their stories.

Rigoberta suggests that, in the same way that official Guatemalan schools only present a ladino *perspective of history, current historical accounts privilege men's stories. Her hope for the future is for history to include all of its diverse actors, including ordinary citizens.*

After the event at the Spanish embassy, an organization called "Vicente Menchú Revolutionary Christians" was formed, to honor Rigoberta's father's political and religious commitment. This Christian political commitment upset the Church hierarchy, which preferred to side with the repressive authorities. Rigoberta explains that the nuns and priests who opposed the repressive regime had to go into hiding. She mentions the cruel example of a priest who betrayed his own family, handing over his niece—whose mother was a union leader—to the military. At the age of 16, the girl was raped by so many soldiers that she could no longer talk or move, even after she had left the country.

Rigoberta's discussion of the role of the Catholic Church in this conflict shows that cruel—or, on the other hand, courageous—people exist in any group. However, her comments emphasize the hypocrisy of this religious institution: although the Catholic Church condemns violence as a sin, its leaders voluntarily take part in horrific deeds in order to protect their political interests. This shows how deeply corrupt many Guatemalan institutions are, as they to side with the violent army instead of the peaceful, democratic Indian peasants.

CHAPTER 33: IN HIDING IN THE CAPITAL. HUNTED BY THE ARMY

Because of her activism, Rigoberta had to live her life in hiding. When faced with the weight of her grief, she reminded herself that it was the suffering of an entire people. Although she tried to forget many traumatic events, she also told herself that she was now a grown woman and was strong enough to deal with them. One day, after spending time with one of her sisters, she realized that her sister was more optimistic and enduring than she was. Instead of dwelling on their parents' unjust fate, her 12-year-old sister believed that these events fueled their struggle, and that revolutionaries were not born from peaceful circumstances, but out of anger and bitterness. Her sister's strong commitment made Rigoberta more motivated to keep on fighting.

The fact that Rigoberta, now an adult, relies on her 12-year-old sister for guidance highlights the deep toll of this conflict on the entire Indian community. Instead of benefiting from a peaceful childhood, children are engaged in political struggles from an early age. This anecdote also emphasizes the importance of family bonds and solidarity. As has happened with her concerns about marriage, Rigoberta realizes that she is not alone in having certain doubts and moments of difficulty. Comradeship and dialogue play an important role in boosting her motivation and in nurturing her lifelong commitment to this difficult political fight.

Over time, Rigoberta became tired of hiding and moving from house to house. On one occasion, a jeep full of soldiers recognized her in the street. Rigoberta and the friend she was with hid in a church pew, letting their hair down, and the soldiers miraculously did not notice them: they believed the two women had escaped from the church. Rigoberta, who knew that being captured by the army would mean certain death, realized that she was willing to give her life to the cause, but that she would rather do it while carrying out a specific task for her people.

Rigoberta realizes that, despite dealing with death and grief in myriad ways, she still has a strong desire to protect her life in order to keep on defending her community. This highlights the extent to which Rigoberta has devoted her life to others: it is this pursuit of justice and equality that gives meaning to her life. Her desire to be useful to others highlights the extent to which belonging to a community has shaped the very core of her identity.

Since Rigoberta had now become well-known and was easily recognizable, she spent some time working as a maid in the Guatemala City instead of traveling in the countryside. She had to hide her real identity from the nuns. She found this particularly painful, after living through such horrors and needing someone to confide in.

Despite Rigoberta's commitment to others, she also realizes that she has specific needs and desires as an individual person: she, too, needs the help and support that the community provides. This highlights the importance of the networks of reciprocity that drive her community's life.

With frustration, Rigoberta noticed that the nuns lived in great comfort and seemed to despise the people who worked for them. She also had the feeling that the nuns might be suspicious about her. She became suspicious of a young man as well—the only man allowed within the community—whom the nuns treated with great respect, serving him coffee and cake. Later, Rigoberta learned that this man was a member of the secret police, in charge of torturing and killing people. She then realized that she couldn't stay with the nuns any longer, especially after the nuns told her not to talk to the pupils, which Rigoberta took as proof of their suspicion toward her.

Rigoberta's discovery of the nuns' complicity with a criminal network of oppression emphasizes, once again, the diversity of behaviors that exist in the Catholic Church. Although some priests and nuns have dedicated their lives to the cause of poor Indians, others only seek personal comfort. These people do not hesitate to abandon all moral values and to side with a murderous government, thus betraying the traditional Christian value of nonviolence.

CHAPTER 34: EXILE

Finally, the compañeros succeeded in helping Rigoberta leave the country for Mexico. Abroad, Rigoberta met many people who gave her just as much affection as her family. At a religious conference on Latin America, she talked about the struggle in Guatemala and tried to hold back her grief when discussing her mother, reminding herself that many other courageous women had suffered and still continued to fight in Guatemala.

Rigoberta's exile is a matter of necessity: she is now too famous in Guatemala to survive much longer. Although the political groups she belongs to accept death as a natural risk, they also seek to prevent it as best they can—hence, in this case, their decision to temporarily send Rigoberta into exile. Rigoberta's talk serves as a prelude to this book, which seeks to illustrate the plight of an entire people through Rigoberta's personal story.

Rigoberta was joined in Mexico by some Guatemalan compañeros, including her little sister, and was overjoyed. At the age of eight, her sister secretly joined the guerrillas, because she felt so strongly about defending her people. Her family only discovered this after her sister disappeared. In Mexico, Rigoberta also met Europeans who offered to help her move to Europe. However, Rigoberta says that these people did not understand that her commitment is in Guatemala: her dedication to her community was so strong that she was willing to accept any risk in order to defend their cause.

Rigoberta's little sister's decision to join the guerillas shows that different people have different approaches to the same problem. Whereas Rigoberta believes that education is an important tool to reform society, her sister believes that, without armed self-defense, no progress will be made. As Rigoberta discovered when her village first organized, these approaches are, to a certain extent, complementary: without some degree of armed resistance, many of these communities would have been decimated by the army.

After the army's repression calmed down, Rigoberta returned to Guatemala. She decided that the CUC already had enough leaders, so she joined the Vicente Menchú Revolutionary Christians. She considered this group in line with her early role as a catechist, trusting that her duty as a Christian was to fight against injustice and denounce the harmful actions of the Church hierarchy. To support this decision, she recalled the nuns' indifference to the plight of other people, focused as they were on their own comfort.

Rigoberta's criticism of some of the Catholic Church's harmful political deeds transforms into action. Instead of simply criticizing others, she takes it upon herself to provide an alternative: a group in which Catholic devotion is not separate from a commitment to social progress and justice in the present. Instead of solving problems through conflict, she argues for creating positive alternatives to harmful behavior.

Rigoberta declares that her life belongs to this political cause, and that she is ready to give her life in the name of her compañeros. Convinced that only the masses are capable of changing society, she believes in the possibility of building a true Church for the people. Her commitment is the result of much suffering and anger, radicalized by the poverty and exploitation she has both witnessed and experienced. Rigoberta is committed to fighting for Indigenous communities' customs and dignity, even if this includes traveling abroad and sharing their stories with other people. She concludes that many aspects of her community are still secret, and that she is devoted to keeping the core of this identity hidden, safe even from the investigations of anthropologists and intellectuals.

Rigoberta does not keep her personal story separate from the history and political struggle of her people. These aspects of life are interdependent, since the political actions of so many brave compañeros*—including her own—derive from the personal experiences of grief and suffering. It is precisely because of this interconnection between the personal and the political that Rigoberta prefers to keep certain aspects of her life secret. Indeed, the elements of her identity that she considers most precious are also those that are most closely tied to the survival of her community's cultural heritage—which has so often been threatened by external influences.*

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