

MASHUJAA · NYERI · 1940–2011

WANGARI

*The Woman a President Called Mad,
and the Trees She Planted*



BEATEN AT FREEDOM CORNER. NOBEL PEACE PRIZE, 2004.

GRAHAM KASINDO

WANGARI



M A S H U J A A

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*The Woman a President Called Mad,
and the Trees She Planted*

G R A H A M K A S I N D O

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First edition, 2026

“Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it, and make it survive, you haven’t done a thing. You’re just talking.”

— Wangari Maathai

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Prologue

KARURA FOREST, NAIROBI. 8 JANUARY 1999.

They came to plant a tree.

There was a small group of them: a woman of fifty-eight, six opposition Members of Parliament, journalists, international observers and activists. They walked into **Karura Forest**, on the northern edge of Nairobi, where land was being cleared for private development.

They were met by men waiting for them.

The attackers set on the group. The woman was injured. So were four of the MPs, journalists, and German environmentalists who had come to watch.

When she went to the police to report it, they refused to arrest anyone.

But it had been filmed. Within days, the pictures were around the world. Students in Nairobi took to the streets.

The woman's name was **Wangari Maathai**. The President of Kenya had once called her "a mad woman."

Five years after Karura, she would be the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

CHAPTER ONE

Ihithe

IHITHE, NYERI. 1 APRIL 1940.

Wangari Muta was born on **1 April 1940** at **Ihithe**, in Nyeri, in the highlands below the Aberdares.

She was a bright child in a colony that did not expect much of African girls. She went to school at St. Cecilia's, a boarding school, and then to **Loreto High School** in Limuru. In **1956**, she came first in her class.

Kenya was in the middle of the Emergency. The Mau Mau were fighting in the forests above her home.

She was about to get a way out.

CHAPTER TWO

The Airlift

NAIROBI TO KANSAS. 1960.

In **September 1960**, Wangari was chosen as one of about **three hundred** young Kenyans to study in the United States, in what became known as the **Kennedy Airlift**. It was funded through a foundation of the family of Senator **John F. Kennedy**.

She went to **Mount St. Scholastica College**, in Atchison, Kansas. In **1964**, she graduated in biology. In **January 1966**, she took a master's degree at the **University of Pittsburgh**.

Then she came home, to a Kenya that was now independent.

CHAPTER THREE

The First

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, NAIROBI. 1966–1977.

She began at the University College in Nairobi as a research assistant in zoology.

In **1971**, she earned a **PhD** in veterinary anatomy. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate.

She kept climbing. Senior lecturer in **1975**. Chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy in **1976**. Associate professor in **1977**. According to her biography, she was the first woman in Nairobi to hold any of these positions.

In **1969**, she married **Mwangi Mathai**, another Kenyan educated in America. They had three children: **Waweru**, **Wanjira** and **Muta**.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Strong-Minded

NAIROBI. 1977–1979.

The marriage did not survive.

The couple separated in 1977. In 1979, her husband filed for divorce. According to the accounts of the case, he told the court she was “too strong-minded for a woman,” and that he was “unable to control her.” The judge found in his favour.

She said in a magazine interview that the judge must be either incompetent or corrupt. She was charged with **contempt of court**, convicted, and sentenced to six months in jail. She was released after three days.

Her husband demanded, through his lawyer, that she stop using his surname.

She did not drop it. She added a letter. **Mathai** became **Maathai**.

CHAPTER FIVE

Seven Trees

KAMUKUNJI PARK, NAIROBI. 5 JUNE 1977.

On **5 June 1977**, World Environment Day, she led a small procession from the Kenyatta International Conference Centre to **Kamukunji Park**, in Nairobi.

There, they planted **seven trees**.

It was the beginning of the **Green Belt Movement**.

The idea was simple. Rural women needed firewood, clean water and food. The land was losing its trees. So the movement paid women a small sum for every seedling they planted that survived. The women grew the trees; the land came back.

“Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it, and make it survive,” she said, “you haven’t done a thing. You’re just talking.”

Over the years that followed, according to the movement, it planted more than **51 million** trees.

CHAPTER SIX

The Tower in the Park

UHURU PARK, NAIROBI. 1989.

In **1989**, the government announced a plan for **Uhuru Park**, the green heart of Nairobi.

It would build a **sixty-storey** tower there: the **Kenya Times Media Trust** complex. It would house the headquarters of the ruling party, KANU, and its newspaper, the Kenya Times. There would be a statue of President **Daniel arap Moi**.

Wangari Maathai wrote letters. She wrote to the newspaper, to the Office of the President, to the city, to the provincial commissioner, to ministers, to the United Nations, and to the British High Commissioner. The main foreign investor in the project was the British businessman **Robert Maxwell**.

The government's answer was contempt.

In Parliament, on **8 November 1989**, MPs attacked her for writing to foreigners. They called the Green Belt Movement “bogus” and its members “a bunch of divorcees.” They suggested she go and live in Europe.

On **12 December 1989**, President Moi said that those who opposed the project had “insects in their heads.” According to the

accounts of his remarks, he said she should be “a proper woman in the African tradition,” respect men, and be quiet.

She was not quiet.

In **January 1990**, the foreign investors pulled out. The tower was never built.

Uhuru Park is still a park.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The List

NAIROBI. JANUARY 1992.

By **1992**, Kenya was fighting for multi-party democracy, and Wangari Maathai was part of the fight.

In **January 1992**, pro-democracy activists learned that a list of people had been drawn up for assassination. She was on it.

Police surrounded her home for three days. Then they broke in and arrested her. She was charged with spreading malicious rumours, sedition and treason.

After a day and a half, she was released on bail. Eight United States senators, among them **Al Gore** and **Edward Kennedy**, had pressed for her release.

The charges were dropped in **November 1992**.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Freedom Corner

UHURU PARK. 28 FEBRUARY – 3 MARCH 1992.

The Moi government was holding political prisoners.

On **28 February 1992**, a **hunger strike** began at a corner of Uhuru Park to demand their release. The corner became known as **Freedom Corner**. Wangari Maathai joined it.

On **3 March 1992**, the police came to clear them. Maathai and three others were beaten **unconscious**, and taken to hospital.

President Moi called her “a mad woman,” and “a threat to the order and security of the country.”

The protest did not end. The protesters moved to **All Saints Cathedral** and went on. It lasted until early **1993**, when the prisoners were released.

CHAPTER NINE

Karura

KARURA FOREST. 1998–1999.

In **1998**, she learned that the government was giving away parts of **Karura Forest**, the great forest on Nairobi's northern edge. The land was going to private developers and to political allies, for housing and a golf course.

The Green Belt Movement went into the forest to plant trees where the bulldozers had been.

On **8 January 1999**, they were attacked.

The film of the attack went around the world. Students protested. On **16 August 1999**, the government announced a ban on the allocation of public land.

Karura is still a forest.

CHAPTER TEN

Tetu, and Oslo

2002–2004.

In **December 2002**, the opposition finally united and defeated KANU. Wangari Maathai stood in **Tetu**, in Nyeri, near where she was born.

She won with **98 per cent** of the vote.

From **January 2003**, she served as **Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources**, under President **Mwai Kibaki**.

In **2004**, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded her the **Nobel Peace Prize**. She was the **first African woman** to win it, and the first environmentalist.

“Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya,” the committee said.

It was not a year without controversy. A Kenyan newspaper reported that she had said AIDS was created by Western scientists to destroy Africans. She denied it. “I neither say nor believe that the virus was developed by white people or white powers in order to destroy the African people,” she said. “Such views are wicked and destructive.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Unbowed

NAIROBI. 25 SEPTEMBER 2011.

She wrote a memoir. She called it *Unbowed*.

In **2007**, she lost her seat in Parliament.

Wangari Maathai died on **25 September 2011**, of complications of ovarian cancer, in a Nairobi hospital. She was seventy-one.

In **October 2016**, Nairobi renamed **Forest Road** after her. It is now **Wangari Maathai Road**.

Epilogue

Uhuru Park and Karura Forest. Today.

In Uhuru Park, there is no sixty-storey tower and no statue of Moi. There is grass, and trees.

In Karura Forest, there is no golf course. There are trees.

They called her a crazy woman, a mad woman, a divorcee. A President told her to be a proper woman, and be quiet. Police beat her unconscious in a park.

She dug holes, and planted trees, and watered them until they survived.

Fifty-one million of them.

THE RECORD

NAME	Wangari Muta Maathai
BORN	1 April 1940, Ithithe, Nyeri
EDUCATION	Kennedy Airlift, 1960; Kansas; Pittsburgh; PhD Nairobi, 1971: first woman in East and Central Africa
GREEN BELT MOVEMENT	Founded 5 June 1977; 51 million+ trees
UHURU PARK	Stopped the 60-storey KANU tower, 1989–90
FREEDOM CORNER	Beaten unconscious, 3 March 1992
KARURA FOREST	Attacked, 8 January 1999; public land allocations banned
PARLIAMENT	MP for Tetu, 2002 (98%); Assistant Minister
NOBEL PEACE PRIZE	2004: the first African woman
DIED	25 September 2011, aged 71

They told her to be quiet. She planted a forest.
 Cover illustration: an artist's impression.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

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Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*