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**Struggling Souls in Surrendering Bodies:  
A Feminist Study of Makumbi's 'A Girl is a Body of Water'**

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**Abstract:**

The current study is an endeavor to explore the patriarchal norms, and phases of womanhood leading towards the subjugation of women in Makumbi's 'A Girl is a Body of Water.' This study follows the theoretical framework of Social Feminism and explores the phases of womanhood suggested by Simone de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* (1949). This study follows the parameters of qualitative research and Makumbi's 'A Girl is a Body of Water' has been used as a primary source of data. The findings of the study unveil that the women in the selected text exhibit their growth and development going through the phases of Childhood, The Girl, Sexual Initiation, The Married Woman, The Mother, The Social Life, From Maturity to Old Age, Woman's Situation, and The Woman in Love. This study concludes that women through social norms and traditions are conditioned to surrender and comply with the stereotyped roles. The study can help its readers understand the mechanism of patriarchy and socially sponsored suppression of women where women themselves reinforce their subjugation.

**Keywords:** Makumbi, a girl is body of water, feminism, phases of womanhood, childhood, mother

**INTRODUCTION**

Women are givers for the family food, water and energy and they are doing this job without any pay and also unnoticed by the other family members for doing this difficult job. They are doing domestic tasks and they have the only authority over family decisions making. They have been living in this situation for so many years, which has resulted in a new movement named feminism.

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The purpose of this movement was that women should be treated equally to men. They want rights in decision-making, not at home but in politics, career, and child-rearing. The term feminism is derived from the Latin word *femina* which means woman. This movement was started for the rights of women who are conditioned to believe that humanity is male, and it is a man who defines a woman, not as an individual but as himself. Since the beginning of this movement, there have been various ups and downs which can significantly be described by different waves. All these different theories agree that society is wholly patriarchal. Feminism agrees that women are made by their societies in which men dominate everything because they are thought to possess the qualities of domination and power.

The present study of *A Girl is a Body of Water* will be explored in the light of feminism. The second wave of feminism is known as radical feminism and during this wave, Simone de Beauvoir gave his philosophical book naming as *Second sex*. The elements of womanhood have been analyzed in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* to explore how the seed of inferiority is inculcated in the brain of girls throughout their life from childhood to young age. In this novel, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi embeds her narrative with traditions of society for womanhood. In this novel, the main character Kirabo simultaneously rejects the traditions of society but she wants to understand the traditions of society regarding womanhood and her roots, her late mother's history. She wants to seek out what tradition permits her to forget her path into adulthood. The novel touches on various subjects including love and sex, oppression of females, and young girls being sexually violated. The researcher aims to find out how the seed of inferiority is inculcated in the brain of girls throughout childhood, as society has also played a key part in denigrating females and how a girl passes different phases of womanhood.

This study is an attempt to answer the given questions; What are the various phases of womanhood depicted in Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water*? What are the patterns of marginalizing the women oppressed in Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water*? How do women react against or reinforce patriarchal norms in Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water*?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Feminism has been concerned with exposing patriarchy, examining, revisiting, revising and redesigning the stereotyped gender roles, and making joint efforts to emancipate women from all the inequalities and atrocities inflicted upon them by this society. This study follows the theoretical framework of Social Feminism which regards women emancipation as a consequence of the cultural and economic sources of women oppression.

This study follows the theoretical framework of Social Feminism and explores the phases of womanhood suggested by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). Through the examination of these phases the researchers trace out the social, economic, political, and ideological aspects of women oppression. These phases of womanhood can be named, "Childhood", "The Girl", "Sexual Initiation", "The Married Woman", "The Mother", "Social Life", "Prostitutes and Hetaeras", "From Maturity to Old Age", "Woman's Situation and Character", "The Narcissist", "The Woman in Love" and "The Mystic". The researcher has attempted to dig out the instances of women oppression and marginalization in Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water* by applying the theoretical framework of Beauvoir's phases of womanhood. These women either struggle for social acceptance or challenge

the stereotyped gender roles imposed on women. This work further elaborates the way the structures of patriarchy work and what is the underlying mechanism which sustains this system.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Bari (2014) everyone, men and women alike, has a fixed point of view on whatever conduct is appropriate when it comes to women as can be seen in *Ice Candy Man* (1988), and *The God of Small Things* (1997). Women are expected to follow the standards, values, and expectations set for them by men. In the end, he comes to the opinion that a woman's life is a public matter. As a result, her outbursts are interpreted as a revolt against society and men. Women are held accountable for the consequences of not adhering to cultural standards and ideals and surrendering to men's will. Since the dawn of time, society has used archetypal situations of women to impose control over them and force them to conform to traditional norms.

Priyadarshini (2016) discusses double marginalization, patriarchal domination, cultural pressures, gender disparity, patriarchy, liberation, individuality, psychological stresses, bravery, conflict, and passive misery in three of Jhumpa Lahiri's novels, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *The Unaccustomed Earth* (2006). She feels that studying feminism in literature is an interesting aspect of studying different civilizations. Prakash (2014) expounds on several ladies in *God of Small Things* (1997). He observes that, due to male-controlled traditions and practices, women have always been undervalued and unacknowledged in orthodox and conservative cultures. They've been taught that their glory rests in their woes; therefore, other people's happiness is frequently given precedence over their own.

Bari (2014) says that Mary Wollstonecraft writes in *A Vindication of Women's Rights* that a baby girl is regarded as submissive, weak, and dependent on men by her mother from birth. Women are socialized to be attractive to attract men. Mothers mould and shape their daughters' personalities in such a way that they become emotional rather than rational. All of this is related to their upbringing; they rarely have any way to break free from the instructional structure. Men and women are assigned to some roles by society but men have the right to do anything by themselves and women don't have the right to follow their will but they have to follow the rules set by the male society as is seen, as Shumaila (2014) states about Qaisar Shiraz's *The Holy Woman*.

Yeasmin (2018) asserts in her article that the major character of the play *A Doll's House* (1879), Nora is an embodiment of volatile females in opposition to the male dominant society in the play. Ibsen has endeavored to show through his protagonist that a woman is strong enough to design an innovative world of amity and tranquility in which she is permitted to lead her life according to her will and be calm, contented and peaceful against societal ferocity. Singh (2012) in her research work analyzes the role of the main character of the novel *Crow Eaters* (1878), Putli as a representative of one of the phases proposed by Beauvoir's phases of womanhood. The sacrifices of one of the phases of womanhood are wifehood in which women are bound to their houses and their life is limited by the four walls. The life of the woman is like a bitter pill having a coat of sugar and woman as to save her wifehood has to bite that pill having some happiness and lots of sacrifices. Women should be admired for having the ability to sacrifice and live for the happiness of others. This has been a psychological trap for women.

Ahmed (2009) examines patriarchal norms suppressing women in *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004). The study elaborates that the husband of the main character Suraya divorced her and then forced her to marry him again. For this she has to marry some other Muslim man Shamus and then she has to get divorced and then remarry him and but she has relationships with another man and want to live with him. But she wants to live with another man with whom she already has physical relations but now she has to choose one thing between love and duty and she left both things blank. This shows that woman is suppressed by male society and don't have the right to do anything according to their will.

Literature, being a very pure reflection of society has always been examined by using the lens of different critical theories. Feminism as a critical theory has always offered insight into the patriarchal norms, women oppression and the practices of exploitation based upon gender differences. A Social Feminist analysis of Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water* will be a contribution to not only literature but cultural studies too, and there is sufficient scope for the future researchers too to explore this piece of literature in the light of other branches of Feminism.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The current research is a Feminist analysis of Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water*. Further theoretical insight has been gained from the phases of womanhood suggested by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* to trace the character development of women in the selected text. The researcher has collected passages from the text which have been interpreted and discussed to unveil the mechanism of patriarchy and marginalization of women in the societies which sponsor and sustain the suppression of women. This is done to reach into the ideological enclave of the text and how it serves as a guide to gloss over the socially sponsored subjugation of women.

### **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

*A Girl is Body of Water* (2020) deals with phases of womanhood, how women are oppressed and how some of the women are violating the set rules by male members of the society. Nansubuga has delineated different stages of a girl's life through the character of Kirabo and the way she challenges and throws away the rules set by the patriarchal society. This narrative is about the unacknowledged labour of the mothers who give birth to babies as a result of their school affairs and deals with different types of oppression of women and their reactions after being oppressed. From the very start of the novel, Makumbi described the men, and old women's view of young girls as, "an uneducated girl is an oppressed wife in the making" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 06)

Kirabo's Grandmother was a lady who took care of her granddaughter and other girls of her village and did not let them go near the boys because she doesn't want them to get pregnant and have children but, in the past, her daughter had a boyfriend and when the whole family tried to stop her to go near the boys, she eloped but in Kirabo's case she even told her how to sit, "you cannot sit like men, Always kneel" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 13). She ensured the subjugation of women before the laws set in the world of patriarchy. Kirabo told Nsuuta that she wanted to do everything that her grandmother and other people tried to stop her from because she was the type of girl who always wondered to violate the set rules of society, especially those rules which were set for girls only as she said; "I pulled down my knickers and flashed my ...ern to see whether it would die or stop bearing fruits, I fight with the boys —they don't pass the ball to me" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 20). She

told Nsuutathat she had realized that she had a bad side to herself which forced her to do bad things but it was women's inner side which wanted to be free like men and to do whatever is allowed for men only. Even once Kirabo was playing with boys, her Grandmother came and said that "and you Kirabo, climbing trees like a boy? From now on the fruits on this tree will go sour" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 50), that was also another myth always referred by Kirabo's Grandmother.

Kirabo told Nsuuta that she has two selves. One is good and the other one is bad and she doesn't want to have both selves then Nsuuta negates that "no it was not bad at all. It was wonderful for us. We were not squeezed inside, we were huge, strong, bold, loud, proud, brave, and independent. But it was too much for the world and they got rid of it. However, occasionally that state is reborn in a girl like you. But in all cases, it is suppressed. In your case, the first woman flies out of your body because it does not relate to the way this society is" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 34). Every woman has two characteristics in herself, the first one is to obey men but the second one is just to do whatever they want to. But due to the patriarchal society, so many women kill their inner side which is said to be free.

Women do have the right to live at their husbands' houses after the death of their husbands. Nsuuta told the story of Muka Mwana, a young girl who has children but after the death of her husband, her father-in-law ordered her to leave her son's house, "her husband died suddenly. He was young and rich - the only one with wealth in the family. He left her with several little ones who could not protect her, after the burial, she went home with her children. A week later, who arrives?", who? "Father-in-law, with his clan. He says, Eh, Muka Mwana? I have come for our children and property. Eh, pack your bags and go back where you come from" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 52). Women are suppressed by men because they don't own property on the Earth that is why they were being suppressed by the other men after the death of their husband. Anyone among the family members had the right to throw them out of their own house.

Nsuuta told Kirabo that any girl did not need anything in her life because no man in her life allowed her to speak in front of them. They just allowed women to obey them and treated them as their servants and slaves, "the only wealth I have is my experience, they would say. Books are a woman's friend... they don't know prejudice ..., don't look right, look straight--- at the blackboard... knowledge will set you free". (Makumbi, 2020. p. 79). She said that it's only your knowledge and your studies which will be helpful for you to break down all these laws of society. But all women were not the same, some of the wives dared say what they want from their husbands but their elder women stopped them because such rebellion can invite the wrath and reaction of men. When Kirabo's father brought her home, her stepmother was not ready to accept her because she believed that if she accepted Kirabo her husband will have /will not have?? another child, "this one was born before---" It does not matter. If I had a child, would Tom have married me?" "It is not the same; he is a man" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 97), but Nnambi was not ready to hear anything and in the end, her husband Tom came to know that she did not want Kirabo to stay at her home. He ordered her to leave his house "pack your bags and go back to your parents" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 117).

Throughout the narrative, the only person who believed in the equal rights of women and who wanted to be a positive influence on all other women in society, is Kirabo's boyfriend, Soi. "I know women have suffered throughout time. I would not want my daughter to go through that. I think it is time we stopped it. I try not to contribute to women's suffering. Dad does too. He said I should

treat women the way I would want to be treated. But Mum is too Christian. God created Adam from earth but Eve was made from Adam's rib. To her how can a rib be equal to a whole person?" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 168), that was the actual reason that men treat women just for the sake of their physical pleasure and just to take care of their children.

Kirabo's Grandmother always asked her to stay away from the men of the society because she knew the actual thinking of men towards the women of the society. She told her that actually men of the society were wandering like animals to seduce the young girls of the society, and to spoil their life, "this was a society gripped not just by the fear of teenage pregnancies but by a certain nature in men. Boys and men were wolves --- they had this overwhelming desire which, if stirred, made the animal. It fell on girls not to awaken the animal in men" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 82). Grandmother taught Kirabo how to stay away from men and also told her that it was females who provoke men to attack them.

Some women don't care about the rules set by the society, they have done whatever they wanted. Kirabo's aunt Abi suggested her to do if she wanted to have a boyfriend, there will be no problem just share it with her and then she will be allowed to do everything. "if you are virgin on your wedding night? yes? it is cooked without salt" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 104). But on the other hand, in the village Kirabo was not allowed to leave her house without any family members because her grandmother doesn't want her to be pregnant before her marriage.

When Kirabo's father brought her to his home her stepmother was not ready to accept her. Because she believed that if she accepts his daughter, he will bring some more children because it was the custom of that society that men have children in different places on the earth and their wives are bound to accept them. Even Nnambi's father had so many children on the earth and her mother was the lady who had to accept them. Nnambi's mother told her a woman cannot do anything in front of her husband because men did not allow them to speak or cry about their sufferings in front of them. She told her how she could use her children to access her husband. She said "no man is worth your tears; you hear me? Keep them from your children" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 111). So, she had to accept her husband's daughter if she wanted to enjoy her good married life.

When Kirabo was studying in the city she forgot all the rules and all the pieces of advice given to her by her Grandmother. In the city, her broadminded aunt Abi told her that she could do here whatever she wanted to do but before doing anything she had to consult her. Kirabo started meeting Soi, "Kirabo loved Soi, the way she could not love her mother" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 156). Soi also loved her; he came to Kirabo's hostel to meet her. They even started meetings in hotels through which it was shown that whenever the young girls and boys found some space, they disregard the patriarchal practices and exhibited their consciousness of awareness of their basic rights.

Then there is another phase of womanhood depicted in Alikisa's and Nsuuta's childhood to wifehood. They have both been friends since their childhood. They said "we should marry the same man", "Alikisa dropped the stone. I have had the same thought before, but--." It has just occurred to me that if we marry the same man, we will be friends forever". It was their childhood phase when they wanted to marry the same man. Destiny played an important role in that as Nsuuta loves a person but she wanted to study more. After being rejected, Miiro proposed Alikisa. Alikisa wrote a letter to Nsuuta and told her the news: "you will not believe this; the banns for our wedding were announced in church" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 234). Nsuuta was happy with this news and Alikisa was

also happy that she had saved her friend's lover from being someone else. But after being married, she did not want to share him with Nsuuta. But Nsuuta came to the village after completing her education and after a few days, she said that she was expecting Miiro's child, from this point their friendship was changed into enmity.

Nsuuta rejected Miiro's proposal and the very first hint happened in the novel when a man was asking woman for love not only asking but requesting her not to leave him, he asked "Nsuuta, don't make me beg just because you are beautiful and it makes you feel big" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 234), but she was the lady who had done whatever she wanted to. She loved Miiro but her priority was to complete her education after completing her job she wanted to be the nurse and then marry him. Nsuuta said that "but if you are still studying to be a farmer, why should I not study to be a nurse? Because you are a woman; you don't need more education. I do because a home does not need both husband and wife to work" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 224). It was also one of the traits of men that all they just need is a woman who is nothing but an object meant to embellish men's lives. When Nsuuta's aunt came to know that she had rejected Miiro she said that she did not have any sense she told Nsuuta that "men are scarce, rich men are rare, good rich men are a miracle (Makumbi, 2020, p.234). But Nsuuta did not hear anyone and left the village to get her education and from there, she wrote letters to Alikisa and asked about her love.

There were two sides to which Alikisa could be seen as a friend and as a wife. As a friend, she wanted to meet her friend but as a wife, she wanted to protect her husband from that girl whom her husband loved the most. She wrote a letter to Nsuuta and requested that she wanted to meet her but along with that love, she asked her why she did not marry any doctor instead she knew that she loved Miiro the most. "please come and say hello so we are reassured. I have two daughters but, they don't even know you, their other mother" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 249). It showed that she still remembered her promise that she will just take care of Miiro for Nsuuta but after some words, she became a possessive wife who did not want to share her husband with anyone "you can marry a doctor who can give you servants and drive you in a car" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 249)?

After the death of Tom, his wife was also in tension but all other females in the family were claiming that she was the only reason for Tom's death and they cursed her. Even they did not allow her to sit near her husband. Aunt Abi and Nsangi both played their role as authoritative ladies who cursed another lady for that mistake which was actually not done by her. Nsangi even asked her "in Luutu's family, our men are quiet, you can walk all over them, but not us women, hmm, hmm. Me, I watch my brother's wives with a sharp eye. I will not let a wife grow horns around my brother. I have trained my nieces on how to be women and I am glad my effort has not been wasted" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 266). Then Miiro entered the house and he protected poor Nnambi and told everyone how it was possible that a wife could kill her husband and called her to sit near her husband for the last time. Here we can see that a male played the role of protective of the females of his family.

After all rituals of Tom, Miiro called his three grandchildren and told them that the younger two have to follow all instructions of their elder sister even though he told them to call Kirabo Baba because she will play the role of their father from now onward. It was not the custom of their society to make any female head of the family but it was Miiro who broke the rules of the society to make females equal to the men or they could play their role in the absence of their males. And on the other hand, he ordered Kirabo "in the absence of your father, you look after them in every way

you can. They don't call you Baaba for nothing. You set an example. You love them whether they love you back or not. Be easy to approach. I don't want to hear that nonsense of half- this or half that" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 282).

Kirabo came to know her real mother and the actual reality of her mother that she was the sister of Nnambi who was her stepmother. Nnambi and Tom were in love but after their relationship when Nnambi saw Kirabo she went back and told her father that Tom had a daughter who looked like same as her sister Nnakku. Nnakku (Kirabo's mother) did not deny her reality of giving birth to a child but she said she did not see that child and never wanted to see her in her life. Kirabo's grandfather told her "none of us knew she had a child. She and Jjali, her mother hid it from us" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 283). Kirabo asked Nnambi and her family "does she want to know how I am? Ssemwaka Kaye sighed. You must understand that your mother was a child when she had you" "is she still a child?" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 284). It was the time when Kirabo was passing through a difficult phase of her life. She lost her father and became the head of the family at an early age and came to know about her mother for she had searched throughout her life but along with the reality of her mother a bitter reality came in front of her that her own mother actually did not want to see her.

Then came the time of the division of Tom's property. Half of his property was sent to his son and the other half was distributed among his daughters but nothing was left for his wife. There was a condition that how Nnambi could use her husband's wealth and that was through her children. She could live at her husband's house till her second marriage but if she got married to any other person, she will not get anything from Tom's belongings. As for as, the property was concerned the two daughters of Tom were not actually the real owners of that property but that was given to them just because of their safety in case of a bad marriage and that will be returned to Tommy after the death of his sisters. Miiró gave them an example that his own sister also had property but "the land of my father gave to our sisters Nsangi will not go to her children, it will come back to either mine or Levi's daughters; whoever Nsangi chooses to give it to. And then to their brother's daughters, through the generations. What we do not want to see are destitute daughters in our family" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 302). They gave the property to their daughters but not permanently.

Then there was also the harsh side of females which can be seen when Kirabo visited her stepfather's office because she wanted to see her mother once. Her stepfather allowed her to visit her house whenever she wanted to but her mother was not ready to look at her once. "Look, you are welcome to my house, Kirabo, if you ever wanted to meet" (Makumbi, 2020, p. 318), but when Kirabo found her mother so harsh lady who was not ready to have a look upon her then Kirabo addressed her mother for the first and last time in her life, she said "look at you Nnakku. Why are you still alive? Why did not you die instead of my father?" (Makumbi, 2020, p.319) there must be the two reasons of Nnakku of accepting her daughter; one that she never met her throughout her life she just gave her birth and handed her over to her father and might be that's why she did not love her and the other reason could be that no one knew about her past in the society and she did not want anyone to know that she had a daughter before her marriage.

The thing which was seen as common among Kirabo and her grandmother was that both of their best friends Giibwa and Nsuuta got pregnant by their boyfriends. Soi told Kirabo that Giibwa is pregnant. Soi told Kirabo Giibwa accepted in front of everyone that she was carrying his baby. He



told her “I know you will not believe me, but I don’t love her. It happened when I took a massage to her from her parents. Oh God, this is a nightmare” (Makumbi, 2020, p. 189) and on the hand, Alikisa was the best friend of Nsuuta and when Alikisa came to know that she was pregnant by her husband, Alikisa became happy on hearing that news but then after the very next night Nsuuta slipped and she lost her baby. She requested the doctor to operate on her because she did not want any more pregnancy, she knew that she was going to be blind soon but it was Alikisa who gave her own son Tom. But Kirabo hated Giibwa till the end of her life because Soi did not love Giibwa and Giibwa became pregnant and she did not have any regret spoiling her best friend’s life.

## CONCLUSION

The present research aims to probe into the phases of womanhood and to locate the instances of women’s oppression and their reaction against the patriarchal structure of the society in Makumbi’s *A Girl is Body of Water* (2020). The text excerpts have been collected, studied and analyzed by seeking guidance from Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* (1949).

This research has three main questions and all the three have been addressed by using textual analysis. Makumbi has very beautifully delineated the phases of womanhood through the character of Kirabo and Alikisa, Nsuuta, and Nnambi and an analysis of these phases has further depicts how patriarchal society treats women and women have two selves, the one struggling to survive and the second one trying to resist simultaneously. This study can be a contribution to the gender and cultural studies.

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