

Water and Woman: An Ecofeminist Approach to the Novel, *A Girl is a Body of Water* by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi

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Abstract

Human's life is intertwined and dependent on nature. Though it is vice versa, forgetting the dependency and the inter connectedness human exploit nature. This happens to women in all walks of life. The novel taken for the study, *A Girl is a Body of Water* by Makumbi paves way to examine gender equality and environmental degradation. This novel is a touchstone and a replica of the present society where women and environment are interconnected. The objectives of this paper are to excavate the symbolic and thematic connections between women and water, to explore how the eco feminist theories critique the dual oppression of women and the natural world and to highlight the protagonist's self-discovery and empowerment at the end of the novel. Water, the source of life, one of the powerful and vital natural resources, is so vulnerable these days because of the greed of men like wise women are marginalised and double marginalised in various communities, despite the development in the civilization. Analyzing through the lens of eco feminist theory, this novel showcases the ways patriarchal systems exploit both women and nature while highlighting the potential for resistance and empowerment. The novel's Ugandan setting is so rich with folklore, myths and cultural traditions that support the study to examine the dual oppression faced by women and the natural world within colonial and patriarchal society. Water has a multifaceted role as a life giver, supporter and a destroyer which parallels the female characters in the novel especially Kirabo who navigates personal and societal challenges to claim her identity and heritage.

Keywords: Inter connectedness, Eco feminism, Self - discovery, Patriarchal Systems, Resistance

The life of humans is connected with nature and the importance of nature is always underrated in various aspects such as technology, progress, and digital and so on. Likewise, the existence and the contribution of women in this society are not always in lime light including in the family locale. This leads to the exploitation of the environment

and the marginalization of those who are in tune with nature: women. In various socio-cultural and economic contexts both nature and women bear the harness of patriarchal systems. In Uganda, it is often found that women getting up before the sun, trekking miles to fetch water from rivers that are drying up fast. This is even the ancient custom in many parts of India as well. Women are the ones who take care of their families and the land. It is a burden they carry. Women's roles and contributions in families and communities are constantly being underrated. The damage, to the environment and the way they are pushed to the side-lines all while staying silent. The truth is, the lives of women and the natural world are deeply linked. The planet is trashed and the women are pushed to the side-lines.

Women and the environment often get the end of the stick in societies. They both bear the brunt of systems, where power is largely, in the hands of men. A great example of this is in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel, *A Girl is a Body of Water*. This book gives a look at how women and nature are connected and how both are affected by the selfish people's desires and unfair social systems. What comes across clearly in the story is that women and the environment are closely tied.

The novel *A Girl is a Body of Water* by Makumbi serves as an insightful exploration of these dynamics, offering a lens to critically examine the interconnectedness between gender inequality and environmental degradation. In its narrative, the novel underscores the profound connection between women and the environment, positioning both as vulnerable to the harmful effects of human greed and exploitation. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, a Ugandan novelist and short story writer who has won the Kwani Manuscript award for her first novel, *Kintu*. For her novel, *The First Woman*, she won the Jhalak Prize. Most of her writings are based on the oral tradition which keeps the story alive and brings a great reach.

The relationship between human beings and nature has always been a central concern in both ecological and feminist studies. Eco feminism, as a theoretical lens, emphasizes the interconnectedness between women and the environment, particularly in patriarchal societies that marginalize and criticize both. *A Girl is a Body of Water* is the novel where the above-mentioned inter-relationship is explored through the life of Kirabo, the protagonist. She is young and a little girl searching for her identity and eventually finding it at the end of the novel through her rebellion mode. This novel is set in Ugandan village, a rural area and it deals with variety of themes such as gender differences, gender oppression, environmental crisis, self-realization and thus providing the ground for the eco feminist study. This research paper helps the readers to explore the symbolic and theme-based connections between the protagonist, a woman and water, the elixir of life. It highlights the dual oppression of women and nature in the patriarchal society. The writer uses water as a symbol to reflect the struggles of women and to examine the protagonist's journey towards empowerment.

The hypothesis of this paper is the dual oppression of women and nature in Makumbi's novel that can be understood through an eco-feminist lens. It is evident that the treatment of women and the environment is deeply interconnected. The novel also

suggests that both women and nature are victims of exploitation in a patriarchal society. However, the novel also offers a path for resistance, resilience and empowerment. The portrayal of the potential self-liberation and the restoration of both women's rights and environmental health is explored in this paper.

Patriarchal structures in a society are challenged by the principles and the applications of eco feminism. This patriarchal society oppresses both women and the environment simultaneously. In *A Girl is a Body of Water*, the novel's portrayal of water as both a life-giver and a destroyer mirror the experiences of women, whose lives are shaped by societal expectations and gender norms that are created by and for men.

This paper employs a qualitative literary analysis method, using the eco feminist theoretical framework to analyse *A Girl is a Body of Water*. The analysis focuses on the symbolic representations of water, the social and cultural context of the Ugandan village setting, and the protagonist's development throughout the novel. Key moments: Where the character of Kirabo interacts with water or reflects on her identity in relation to water is closely examined. Additionally, the paper investigates how the novel critiques societal norms, particularly those that regulate the behaviour of women and the exploitation of the environment. The study also incorporates relevant eco feminist theories to interpret the dual oppression of women and nature.

In *A Girl is a Body of Water*, the ostensible concept of water represents much more than a physical substance. It is a powerful metaphor that mirrors the life of the protagonist, Kirabo. Water is both sustaining and destructive, much like the societal structures that both nurture and oppress women. The eco feminist perspective highlights the intersection between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of women. Kirabo's journey toward self-discovery is intertwined with her search for answers about her heritage, identity, and place in a world that both reverses and disregards women. The novel portrays how the patriarchal structures, embodied by Kirabo's male relatives and societal customs, marginalize both women and nature, exploiting their resources while denying them autonomy.

The other title of this book is *The First Women* and it is published in the year 2020. There are varieties of water theories that vividly explain the connection between water and human one such is, Blue Mind Theory that explains that being near a water body energizes the human mind. This can be applied to the life Kirabo as the whole story revolves around Kirabo and her relationships with the other characters in the novel. She makes the surroundings alive and she keeps the story moving forward. Like the water to the mankind Kirabo is for the other characters in this novel. The story takes place in the Ugandan Village of Nattetta. Kirabo has an abundant feeling though she is with her grandmother, friends and many other aunts. Having a thirst for a quest: Who is her mother? The twelve-year-old girl Kirabo moves forward in her life. In her search she finds another self that she feels travels out of her physical body; this shows the incompleteness she feels with herself because of the social norms she has.

The second self being just opposite to the real character of Kirabo, reflects her inner self that is hidden by the outer world and norms. She finds some help with Nsuuta, a local

witch who gives answers to her other self and also her search for her mother. Though she finds her mother later, she denies meeting her and Nsuuta helps her to understand that the streak of the first woman is an independent and original state of women which has been snatched out by the patriarchal society. Thus, she decides to pursue her higher studies and career on her will. Her mother, another woman in the novel, is completely a mystery in this novel. Her father lives and works in Kampala and makes a visit every weekend. He has another family in town and there is no social norm that binds him. His family finds it difficult to accept Kirabo as she stays with them for her higher studies.

Kirabo believes that an uneducated girl is an oppressed wife in the making. This ideology paves way for the higher education of Kirabo where she aligns to go to the father's place to stay and finds that he is married to another woman and has two other kids. The second mother behaves in such a way that Kirabo is unable to stay even though the house is being built in a sophisticated manner. It looks like an old, told tale of every girl child's story in Uganda. Thus, she represents the oppressed women community. The endurance of all women is expressed in the title. A girl is body of water: to be used and possessed. The personal will and wish of a girl is not a big deal in the society. The wellness of a woman is not considered as an important thing in a family.

In this novel some of the social norms that tie up women in a boundary are expressed. Women are being advised and instructed to maintain their virginity until they get married and until they are handed over to men. There are no such instructions for the men in the same society. Another custom explained in this novel is the heritage of the parent is transferred to the brother's kid as the kids were treated to be of women's descendant. What sort of society this is, that is so partial, vengeful against women is the question that derives Kirabo to have another self that breaks through all the social norms against women in her community.

The character of Kirabo is central to understanding how these dual oppressions manifest. Her relationship with her family, particularly her father and grandfather, and her eventual encounter with her mother, mirror the complex social structures that govern women's lives. The patriarchal expectation that women should remain virgins until marriage and the cultural norms that deny women the inheritance of family property are the key elements that demonstrate portrays the treatment of women in the novel. Water, in this context, symbolizes both the nurturing and the restrictive forces in Kirabo's life.

Makumbi's work aligns with previous literary explorations of gender and environmental justice. The mythological and cultural elements in the novel, such as the mysterious figure of the 'first woman', further tie into the discourse of reclaiming indigenous knowledge and challenging Western-imposed gender roles. Previous studies on the novel have focused on gender identity, colonialism, and the struggle for autonomy, but this paper offers a unique contribution by focusing on the intersection between eco feminism and the symbolic role of water.

Utilizing eco feminist theory, this study reveals the symbolic and thematic connections between women and water, emphasizing the novel's critique of the simultaneous oppression of both women and the natural world. Water, an essential and

life-sustaining resource, is becoming more at risk due to the rampant greed and exploitation of natural resources, mirroring the marginalization of women in numerous societies. Even with progress in society, women continue to face systemic oppression, with their value frequently linked to their responsibilities in the home and their relationship with nature. The environmental destruction illustrated in the novel reflects the societal side-lining of women, highlighting the harmful impacts of patriarchal dominance on both.

The eco feminist viewpoint in *A Girl is a Body of Water* highlights how patriarchal structures continue the exploitation of women and the environment, while also showcasing opportunities for resistance, resilience, and empowerment. The novel is set in Uganda, a place which is known for its folklore, myths and traditional customs. This setting is perfect, for exploring the problems that women and the environment face especially when it comes to dealing with the legacy of colonialism and patriarchal systems. Water plays an important role in the story. It is a symbol of life, destruction and transformation. Through the characters the story shows the roles that women play in society. They keep their culture alive and fight against disasters as they try to take control of their lives and make their decisions. It is a reminder of the challenges women face every day.

Kirabo is more, than a character. She is a symbol of the two big challenges women face today. As she starts to figure out who she is she runs up against the expectations of society and the seated systems that try to keep her quiet and erase her heritage. Her story is also about the environment. Like women, nature has a way of bouncing even when everything is stacked against it. There is a connection between these two. It is something that gives the society a hope, for the future. Women and nature: Both have been beaten down. Both have this strength that can lead to healing and empowerment. In the novel Kirabo's journey for the self-discovery shows that getting back in touch with your roots and finding your voice is crucial to breaking free from the things that hold you back whether it is because of your gender or the world around you. It is pretty clear that reclaiming the heritage and voice is a key, to overcome the oppression in all its forms.

Makumbi's writing is really interesting because it highlights how gender, power and the environment are all connected. This research also looks at how the human can create change and fight back against these injustices from a feminist Perspective. The main goal is to find a way for humans to live in harmony with nature. Kirabo's story gives us a perspective, on things. It makes you think about how bad things are getting for the planet and how unfairly women are treated. But it is not all doom and gloom. It also shows how women and the environment can be set free and reach their potential. Basically, it is a call to think about the picture. How human can make things better, for everyone.

From the eco feminist point of view, this study reveals how the novel critiques the way women are oppressed, using Kirabo's life as an example. What really powerful is, how Kirabo finally takes control of her life pursuing education and a career. It is like she is reclaiming her roots. This study also stresses how important it is for individuals to explore their identities and become empowered as this can be a way to challenge the

dominance of patriarchal societies. The novel also uses water in a way showing how it can be both life giving and destructive. This highlights how vulnerable women's positions are, in society. How fragile the environment is, when people exploit it.

A Girl is a Body of Water is a dive, into how women's lives are tied to the natural world. It is clear that the author is coming from a perspective that cares about the earth and she is calling out the way society treats women and the environment like they are not important. This mistreatment is a part of Kirabo's story. She is a woman who has been held back by the systems that are hurting the planet. As she starts to learn and break free you can see how her journey might inspire change, not just for her own life but for the world, around her too. Looking at what water represents it says a lot, about where the society stand on rights for men and women fairness to the environment and how people can fight back against a system that is stacked against them. This paper is basically, about how these things are connected.

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