

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Let's Tell This Story Properly*: Nudity as a Form of Liberation

“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” is an unequivocal statement exposing the entrenched social binaries existent in interpersonal relations (RuPaul). But more fundamentally, RuPaul, an influential drag queen with an illustrious career, is encouraging us to see the prevalence of performativity and codes of expected behavior within society. These codes and performances are most evident through people’s use of clothing. Consequently, RuPaul suggests there is a certain authenticity in one’s identity when it has been stripped of its performative garments, a theme others have sought to explore as well. In Ugandan author Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s Commonwealth Short Story Award-winning “Let’s Tell This Story Properly,” the tension between authenticity and performance is called into question through the multifaceted potential of clothing.

Makumbi’s “Let’s Tell This Story Properly” is set during the late 1990s. Nnam, the recently widowed protagonist, is thoroughly cleaning her apartment to rid any presence of her late husband, Kayita. As she does this, she is completely nude while thinking of her husband’s death and the subsequent burial. After discovering his body on the bathroom floor, briefly around his ankles, she rushes him to the hospital where he is pronounced dead on arrival. Nnam and her children return to Uganda from Manchester for the funeral rites with Kayita’s family. However, upon reaching his hometown, she discovers he has been cheating on her with his ex-wife for the entirety of their relationship. He had even gone so far as to convince Nnam to purchase a building so his ex-wife and their children may have a place to live. Throughout the funeral, Nnam is dismissed by Kayita’s family for being both “foreign” and the second wife, and it is not until a group of wealthy, widowed women come to her defense during the wake that she regains

social power. Ultimately, the short story ends with Nnam realizing the rebirth she has undergone and relishing in the freedom it has granted her. Makumbi, a Ugandan novelist, utilizes Nnam's character and the short story as a whole as tools to portray the shifts in the growing wave of modern-day African feminism within literature.

Throughout the short story, Nnam's transformation thoughtfully reflects the many tensions present in contemporary debates around African feminisms. In particular, "Let's Tell This Story Properly," seeks to critique binary essentialisms evident in earlier iterations of feminisms from within the "African scene" (Salo and Mama). Dobrota Pucherova's article "What Is African Woman?: Transgressive Sexuality in 21st-Century African Anglophone Lesbian Fiction as a Redefinition of African Feminism," presents a new wave of African feminism, also called "womanism"¹ or "motherism, arguing it originated from various African lesbian authors banding together to solidify their form of femininity and reclaim their own bodies (Pucherova, 106). The ideas presented, stand in stark contrast to the heteronormative, binary constructs of traditional gender and sexual roles within feminist representations. For example, the shift in ideals between traditional and modern African feminism is what Makumbi bases a majority of her writings are, since they portray the transformation of the representation of African society and culture. Additionally, in Sylvia Tamale's recent 2020 publication *Decolonization and Afro-feminism*, she argues that due to gender and race being so intrinsically linked in African feminism, one must acknowledge "the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism and imperialism [that] continue to slip through" (Tamale, 41). Therefore, a more intersectional approach to feminism is called for, an approach in which binary thinking is

¹ "Womanism" in this sense is referring to the recent intersectional movements to reclaim one's femininity through their own body, unlike Alice Walker's use of the term in *Coming Apart* in 1979, which conflates race and gender theory since the Black feminist movement in America is so closely tied to the racial equality movements.

rendered obsolete, no longer being conducive to the analyses of feminist representations.²

Tamale and Pucherova's contemporary work on African feminism help contextualize Makumbi's critique of traditional feminism in "Let's Tell this Story Properly." Pucherova lists a multitude of ways Africa's own version of second-wave feminism forced women into more traditional roles, roles that Nnam was expected to play when she was with her husband, Kayita. Tamale highlights the assumed disparities African women face due to being considered a "subjugated race" when viewed by the superiority complex of Western nations, something Nnam endures in both Manchester and Uganda (Tamale, 41). Moreover, Pucherova explains the emphasis African feminism places on traditional roles and sexuality defining one's femininity: "proper" feminist should strive to be on equal terms with their male counterparts, not attempt to surpass them. A more traditional African feminism believes it is only through submission to and acceptance of gendered social roles, that women are humanized in the eyes of man. Nevertheless, African feminism is now undergoing a sort of renaissance in which "... radical feminism[,] wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children" (Pucherova 107).

Makumbi uses this new wave of African feminism to highlight how more traditional expectations are being challenged. Kayita finds himself feeling emasculated when Nnam pays for the majority of their city house in Kampala and he cheats on her with his more traditional ex-wife. Nnam, on the other hand, embraces the traits that prevail in Western feminism, effortlessly blending them with her own morals and culture, while Kayita rejects them. Kayita

² Kimberle Crenshaw's article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", furthers Tamale's claims of the intrinsic intersectionality African feminists face through the white woman's perspective; stating, "Even today, the difficulty that white women have traditionally experienced in sacrificing racial privilege to strengthen feminism renders them susceptible to Truth's critical question. When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women's experience and women's aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask: 'Ain't We Women?'" (Crenshaw, 154).

comes to represent the older schools of feminist thought that have now slowly, as Pucherova claims, been ushered out by influential African lesbian authors. She claims they bring an “entirely new perspective on African womanhood that has been essentialized by first-generation African academic feminists” (Pucherova 107).

Performative identity politics perpetually challenge gender norms, something Pucherova sees as connected to sexual politics as a whole, and there is no better candidate in defying said notions than lesbians. There are masculine, feminine, and androgynous presenting lesbians who are all still valid in their form of “womanness.” Despite being looked down on by some of the other characters in the short story, Nnam is still just as much of a woman if she makes more money than Kayita, blends Western and African traditions together, and is completely independent from men. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the privilege this theory comes from; whether in an African or Western setting, the ability to even have the opportunity to speak up is reserved for those with the education and the background for it. In the West it was initially affluent, white, cisgendered, straight women paving the way for women’s basic rights, which consequently led to the important interventions of intersectionality, a view of feminism encouraged by Makumbi’s representation of Nnam.

Through her portrayal of Nnam, a diasporic African woman, Makumbi highlights the new wave of African feminism sweeping the continent. African womanists do not necessarily want to forgo men, as is depicted in some forms of radical Western feminism; they, nevertheless, want to shift towards a more welcoming feminine society. Women should not fear reaching out to others, since they too have the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

The moment in which Nnam’s journey of reclamation truly commences is when a group of middle-aged African-English women appear to support her during Kayita’s wake. Were it not

for this moment of female solidarity with women not tied to Nnam by familial bonds,³ she most likely would not have shown the drastic changes revealed in the story's occasional flashforwards; she would likely remain shackled to the "drag" the world expected her to don. In Nnam's time of need these women come to her aid to raise her up, showing the power of shared experience, since they, too, understand the struggles of acclimating to a rigid society. This scene would not have the same emotional sway if Makumbi did not reinforce the sameness between Nnam and the women, even going so far as to say "Nnam's story was common" (Makumbi). Together they understand the respect they command readily "tell[ing] this story properly" for their sister, when in one quick speech they defame Kayita and empower Nnam (Makumbi). Moreover, as a result of their age, they know exactly when to step in to aid her, which alludes to their own potential struggle to be seen as worthy enough for their partner's respect and loyalty, a view Makumbi uses to defy the somewhat prominent cultural practice of polygamy. Though the use of a more Western interpretation of marriage and the presumptive monogamy that accompanies it enables the women to support one another, it, in turn, is yet another form of alienating them from their own culture. Nevertheless, it is through their shared understanding of both cultures, the women can band together to embolden one another. Similar to the steps taken by the African lesbians Pucherova writes about, both Nnam and modern African feminists stand on the shoulders of these giants.

Makumbi, throughout her text, highlights modern African feminist ideals through the significance of clothing. Coupled with the societal impacts clothing has, in showing status, culture, and self-expression, Nnam's wardrobe choices show her own narrative growth. Moreover, the gaggle of women that support her are dressed for battle when they arrive at

³ Additionally, the tradition of polygamy within many African communities further adds meaning between the bonds women can have with one another.

Kayita's funeral to shout their support of Nnam. Their blend of African and Western clothing illustrates a hybridization of cultures, suggesting that an imagined 'singular culture' is confining, whereas a confluence of cultural codes could be empowering. Nnam describes their make up as "defiant as if someone had dared to tell them off" (Makumbi). When the society these diasporic women have been thrust into in their attempts to seek better lives all deem them as inferior to their own feminine standards, it engenders a certain kind of strength that will indubitably lead to the progression of future women in their position.

Conversely, where clothing can empower, it can also restrict. Makumbi uses several "time skips" within her short story, which presumably shows Nnam having her own flashbacks as she deep cleans her home, a practice that shows how restricted Nnam felt within her own clothes. Consequently, the externalized view of Nnam not only cleaning, but cleansing her house of Kayita while completely in the nude helps to underscore her transformation. With arguments like "being naked, alone with silence in the house, is therapy", "[c]lothes are constricting but you don't realize until you have walked naked in your house... every day for a week", and "the sensation of wind on her skin, of being naked... is so overwhelming" it shows that not even Nnam was aware how shackled she felt by her clothing (Makumbi). Makumbi captures the essence of, "We're all born naked and the rest is drag" through Nnam's purge of Kayita, shining a light on Nnam's lifelong performance of her own identity through the clothing she wore.

The rigid nature of clothing is something Pucherova also mentions as she describes how African women are forced into "prescriptive categories of 'Africanness' and 'femaleness'" that emphasize "compulsory heterosexuality" and "feminine physical attributes" when talking about how older womanists feel lesbians are not feminine enough to argue for women's rights in the correct manner (Pucherova, 108). This, in turn, describes an ideology many older feminists are attempting to push forth of excluding certain women solely based on their alleged lack of femininity: that those who defy the gender binary, such as transgender and agender people, are

essentially unwelcome in feminine spaces. This does a massive disservice to the feminist movement, since these practices are essentially reinforcing oppressive binaries and valuations of Humanity.

In reality, it is those who understand the true implications of the social limits of clothing, and the way society has gendered certain articles that are able to push the binary until change ultimately happens; in turn, leading to the reclamation of one's body that no one can take away. As stated earlier, clothing is just the drag society expects everyone to wear, something to show who someone is without pushing the fold too much. Makumbi essentially questions the gender binary through clothing's power over people's perception. When Nnam paints the walls, throws away Kayita's "World's Best Husband" mug, and removes any pictures before his death, she is experiencing a rebirth; only she now has a say in how she wants the world to see her.

The nuance behind the way Makumbi portrays nudity in this story also allows her to show the heavy shackles clothing can place upon a person. One of Nnam's first thoughts when seeing Kayita's body was whether her son would see his naked body. His innocence would not be tainted by death, but by the naked body. Why? How could something so primal lead to the possible destruction of childhood? The answer is the vulnerability of both death and nudity. In the same way it can usher in a form of rebirth, it too can show decay. Once dead, most bodies slowly decay, leaving only the remnants of clothing and bones behind, which shows how even in death the persona clothing affords still lingers. Moreover, the typical fashion surrounding death is in itself performative. Widows in the West are expected to wear dark veils and clothing and must hide their grief in order to be "strong". Even Makumbi contrasts the silent suffering in Manchester, to the wails of misery in Uganda.

In her short story, Makumbi shows the evolution of a widowed mother through the reclamation of her own body and the discarding of the societal expectations behind clothes.

Despite everything, clothing is not something we can simply ignore since it is so deeply entrenched with every modern-day culture and space. However, we can at least acknowledge the power clothing holds over us as human beings, and how it easily pushes us apart. At the end of the day, we can always change the drag we wear, but we can never take off our own selves.

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