

# Feminist and Women Empowerment in *Nyad* (2023): A Feminist Analysis of Diana Nyad's Struggle

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## Abstract

*This study discusses feminist values and the representation of women's empowerment in the film Nyad (2023). The film is based on the true story of Diana Nyad, a woman who attempts to fulfill her lifelong dream of swimming from Cuba to Florida at the age of 60. This research aims to find out how feminist values are represented in the film and how women's empowerment is shown through the main character. The theory used in this research is Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, especially the idea that women are often seen as "the Other." This study applies a descriptive qualitative method, with the main data taken from dialogues in the film. The data were collected by watching, identifying, classifying, and analyzing scenes related to feminist values and acts of empowerment. The results show six feminist values in the film, namely equality, resistance, agency, solidarity, empowerment, and self-determination. The film also shows how Diana fights against age limitations, public doubt, and social pressure. With strong determination and support from her friend Bonnie and her team, Diana proves that women can keep fighting and reach their dreams. The film delivers a message that women deserve to be heard, respected, and given equal opportunities in life.*

**Keywords:** *Nyad, Feminism, Simone De Beauvoir's Theory*

## Introduction

Literature is often viewed as a reflection of life, capturing emotions, struggles, and ideas that connect with audiences. It can draw from real-life experiences or arise from imagination, serving as a powerful medium for expressing social realities (Paramita, 2021). As a part of literary expression, film can explore complex issues such as gender inequality, making it a relevant object for literary and feminist analysis.

*Nyad* (2023), a film directed by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin, tells the story of Diana Nyad, a long-distance swimmer who, at the age of 64, tried to complete a swim from Cuba to Florida. Her journey highlights physical strength and the challenges of age and gender discrimination, delivering a powerful message about resilience and equality.

In the world of sports, strength and determination are often praised, but women still face unequal treatment and recognition. Sports usually present hidden challenges for women, shaped by long-standing stereotypes and cultural expectations that limit their participation and achievements (Chiguddu, 2020). The film brings forward feminist values, emphasizing that determination and strength are not limited by gender.

## **Literary Review**

### **Feminism and Literature**

Feminism is the belief that all genders should have equal rights in social, economic, and political life. Although it began in Western countries, it has now spread across the world, with many groups supporting women's rights. Historically, women in the West were limited to household roles. In medieval Europe, they were not allowed to own property, go to school, or take part in public life. Until the early 20th century, most women in the United States and Europe could not vote or make legal decisions without a male guardian. Even now, some of these problems still exist in parts of the world (Brunell & Burkett, 2024).

Feminism is a belief and a movement that reflects the basic human right to be treated with dignity. When seen through the lens of literature, feminism becomes a strong tool to show the struggles and achievements of women throughout history. Literature often talks about real life, and feminist ideas help explain how society decides the roles of men and women and why these roles continue over time.

### **Simone de Beauvoir Feminist Theory**

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, explains that women are often treated as "the Other," meaning they are not seen as complete individuals but are defined based on how they relate to men. According to Beauvoir, men are considered the main standard, while women are seen as secondary or inessential. Men represent the subject and the absolute, while women are viewed only through their biological roles, such as being "the sex," without being valued for their full

identity. This unequal view places men as the center and women as the ones who are different, lacking independence and identity on their own (Beauvoir, 1949).

This means that women are often viewed mainly through their biological roles, such as giving birth, rather than being recognized as complete individuals. They are defined by how they differ from men, not by their abilities, values, or personalities. As a result, women are seen as less important simply because they are not men, instead of being treated as equal human beings with the same rights and potential.

### **The Feminist Values in the Field of Sport**

Feminist values, as described by thinkers like bell hooks in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, support fairness, equality, and respect for women. These include equal opportunities for all genders, freedom from discrimination, and the right to safety and dignity (hooks, 2000). In sports, feminist values mean that girls and women should have the same chances as boys and men to join, compete, and grow. Every athlete deserves respect, no matter their gender. These values help change unfair thinking, open more space for all genders, and show that courage and perseverance matter for women who want to succeed.

Early feminist studies in sports showed that men had control over who could join and have power, while women's participation was often ignored or seen as less important (Scruton & Flintoff, 2013). Sports function not only as physical contests but also as social arenas where men have established rules and traditions. As a result, women face challenges in accessing equal opportunities both to participate in sports and to have power within sports organizations.

Leadership ideals in sports often focus on traits such as being unemotional, competitive, and strong, which reflect masculine stereotypes (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008). Since leadership is commonly associated with these manly traits, women often face challenges in obtaining leadership roles, not because of their ability but due to continued gender biases. Making sports fair requires changes in formal rules and how people perceive and talk about gender roles.

In sports and other areas of life, this empowerment reflects feminist values like equality, agency, and resistance to patriarchal limitations. When a woman breaks through those limits, her success represents more than personal victory—it

becomes a transformative symbol of change toward gender equality (Reshi & Sudha, 2022). When a woman breaks the old rules set by a man's world, her success is more than just a personal win. It becomes a sign of change for all women. It shows that women can have equal chances, the power of self-determination to make their own choices, and the power to challenge unfair limits. So, when women succeed in sports, it is not only about the game but also about making the world fairer for everyone, regardless of their gender.

A clear example of feminist values in action is found in long-distance open-water swimming. Studies show that women can perform as well as or sometimes better than men in this sport (Knechtle et al., 2020). The results challenge common beliefs about women's physical limitations and highlight that success in sports relies more on preparation and mental strength than on gender.

### **Women's Struggle**

Since the beginning of history, women have often been seen as weaker and given fewer rights in politics, the economy, and society. They were expected to stay at home, raise children, and support men while having little or no power themselves. These roles created a system where women's contributions were often overlooked. But over time, women began to fight back in ways that were silent, subtle, and through open defiance. Like many female characters in literature who defy gender injustice, real women reject being silenced and continue to fight for recognition and equality in their lives and communities (Fitria & Asri, 2020).

The feminist movement, which gained momentum in the late 19th century, began to challenge these limitations. Feminism tried to discuss women's rights and equality, leading to a re-evaluation of traditional historical narratives that ignored or undervalued women's contributions. Feminists fight for women's rights to education, vote, work, and participate in politics. Feminist theory also criticizes how gender roles have been used to limit women's opportunities and freedoms.

Feminist thinkers helped explain how women are treated unfairly and pushed others to demand change. One of them was Mary Wollstonecraft. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she argued that women should get the same education and rights as men. Her ideas helped start the early feminist

movement and inspired many people to keep fighting for gender equality (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

Another important writer was Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote in her book *The Second Sex* that women often live in a world controlled by men, treated more as “the Other” than as individuals with rights and dreams (Beauvoir, 1956). This idea became significant in feminist thought, prompting women to reevaluate the roles society assigned to them.

Although women have made significant progress, the struggle is not yet over. Many women today still face unfair treatment and expectations. Women’s struggle is not only about rights but also about negotiating power, building resistance, and empowering themselves collectively against patriarchy. This highlights that the fight for women’s rights involves recognizing and challenging the deep-rooted power structures that maintain inequality, as well as fostering solidarity and collective empowerment among women. However, the long history of women’s struggles shows their strength and determination to stand up, speak out, and continue to push for a more equal world (Jenkins et al., 2019).

## **Research Method**

This study takes a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to describe a topic without using numerical data or statistical analysis. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research aims to understand how people or groups give meaning to a problem in society or in human life. It involves collecting data from real-life settings, analyzing it inductively, and interpreting the data’s meaning. The object of this research is the film *Nyad* (2023), directed by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin. The primary data consists of dialogues from the film with English subtitles. Supporting data include books and journal articles on feminist theory, especially Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the Other.” The data collection techniques include watching the film, reading the subtitles, identifying relevant dialogues, classifying them based on themes, and selecting the most appropriate examples related to feminist values and women’s empowerment.

The analysis involves three steps: displaying the data, explaining the meaning of each selected quote using feminist theory, and interpreting how these examples support the research objectives.

## **Finding and Discussion**

This chapter analyzes how *Nyad* (2023) reflects feminist values and women's empowerment through Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "the Other." It focuses on how Diana Nyad challenges limitations based on gender and age, using selected scenes and dialogues for analysis.

### **1. The Feminist Values Represented in *Nyad* (2023)**

#### **Equality**

Equality means everyone should have the same chance to try and be respected for what they can do, regardless of gender or age. The dialogue below shows how Diana Nyad fights to be treated fairly, no matter her age or gender:

Bonnie : I talked to Steve Munatones, you know, the open water swimming guy—

Diana Nyad : Yes. I know who he is, Bonnie!

Bonnie : Okay. All right. Well, he doesn't think you can do it, and he put me in touch with a doctor, uh, you know, big sports medicine guy, and he doesn't think you can do it either.

Diana Nyad : What exactly did they say?

Bonnie : Well, they've been studying athletes, you know, for a long time, and they don't believe that Cuba to Florida is humanly possible. I mean, especially not for a woman, especially not for someone your age.

Diana Nyad : Yeah, well fuck that. Let me try again tomorrow.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 00:20:09 – 00:21:05)

This conversation happened during Diana Nyad's test swim in the Mexican open ocean in preparation for her mission from Cuba to Florida. At this moment, Bonnie shared that Steve Munatones, an open-ocean swimming expert, was not sure Diana could do it. She even connected with a well-known sports doctor who also doubted Diana's ability, especially since she was a woman and no longer young. The words made Diana feel doubtful. However, instead of giving up, she showed her determination by answering firmly, "*Let me try again tomorrow.*"

This moment shows that there are still people who believe women, especially older women, are not capable of doing difficult things. Diana challenges that belief. She wants to be recognized for her strength and ability, not judged by her

age or gender. That is what equality means: having the same chance to try and being respected for what one can do.

### **Resistance**

Resistance means saying no to unfair limits. Diana Nyad fights against the idea that she is too old to try. The scene below shows how Diana refuses to accept the limits others try to place on her:

Bonnie : You tried that when you were 28, and you did not make it when you were 28. You're 60.

Diana Nyad : Yeah, I don't believe in imposed limitations. I don't believe in any limitations. And that's the reason to do it, not the other way around.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 00:15:50 – 00:16:01)

This conversation took place at Bonnie's house. At that time, Diana Nyad said that she wanted to try again her mission of swimming from Cuba to Florida, a mission she had failed to achieve when she was younger. This statement surprised Bonnie. She reminded her that Diana had failed when she was 28 years old, and now she is 60 years old. However, Diana replied firmly that she did not believe in any limits. She believes that age is no reason to stop trying.

Diana's attitude shows resistance to the idea that age should limit women. Society often treats older women as if they can no longer dream big. But Diana refuses to accept that. She keeps swimming even when others doubt her. Her actions are a form of feminist resistance, proving that believing in herself gives her strength.

### **Agency**

Agency means having the power to make personal choices and take action. Diana Nyad chooses to follow her dream without waiting for approval. This shows that she takes control of her own life. The dialogue below shows how Diana stays firm in her decision and takes her path:

Diana Nyad : There's something I wanna say to all of you. As we await the signal from Mother Nature, I signed a contract with my soul to never, ever give up.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 00:39:54 – 00:40:08)

These words were spoken by Diana Nyad while she was on the beach with her team. They were gathered together, waiting for the weather to calm down so that Diana could begin her journey from Cuba to Florida. In front of the entire team

who had supported her, Diana firmly stated that she had signed a contract with her soul to never give up.

These words show that Diana's decision came entirely from within herself. She was not forced by anyone, but consciously chose the path she believed in. This reflects the feminist value of agency, which is the ability of a woman to take charge of the direction of her own life. Her strong belief in her choice shows that she is in control of her purpose and meaning in life.

### **Solidarity**

Solidarity means supporting each other, especially when women help other women. At this moment, Bonnie chooses to stay by Diana Nyad's side and encourage her instead of giving up. Her presence and support help Diana keep going when she is at her lowest point.

Bonnie : We're in this together. Right? We do everything together. All right? But you don't have to think about what's going on. All you gotta do is just take a couple of good strokes. All right? You think you can do that? How about five good strokes? Come on. I know you can. See, I know you can because I know what a beast you are. I'm not gonna let you give up. See if you can do it. I bet you can.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 01:43:39 – 01:45:05)

This conversation happens when Bonnie and Diana Nyad are at sea. At that time, Bonnie noticed that Diana's body movements were starting to weaken due to exhaustion. Without hesitation, Bonnie jumped into the sea. She did not go down to physically rescue, but to provide emotional support. Bonnie swam beside Diana and encouraged her with gentle and confident words. She kept reminding Diana that she was not alone, even in the hardest moments of her journey.

This moment shows a strong form of solidarity between women. In feminism, solidarity means giving emotional, physical, and mental support. Bonnie's words, "*We do this together*," show deep trust and care. She does not push Diana, but gently supports her. In a world that often teaches women to compete or stay silent, this moment shows the strength of true friendship. Bonnie becomes a source of strength when Diana no longer finds it in herself.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment means finding the strength to never give up and to keep chasing dreams, no matter the age. In *Nyad* (2023), it is shown that dreams do not stop,

and success often comes with the support of a team. The scene below shows how Diana Nyad finds strength within herself and inspires others through her words:

Diana Nyad : I just want to say three things. One, never, ever give up. Two, you're never too old to chase your dreams. And three, it looks like a solitary sport, but it takes a team.

(Nyad, 2023, 01:50:33 – 01:51:04)

This was said by Diana Nyad on the coast of Florida, after finally completing her mission to swim from Cuba to Florida. This was her fifth attempt, after four failed attempts. Exhausted but energized, she spoke to her waiting supporters and shared three important lessons she had learned from the long journey.

This moment shows the feminist value of empowerment. Diana's message was not just about swimming success, but about the power to keep dreaming and fighting. The first sentence, "*Never, ever give up,*" serves as a reminder to never give up, no matter what, even if the world is pushing to give up. The second sentence, "*You're never too old to chase your dreams,*" rejects the notion that age is a barrier to success. And the third sentence, "*It looks like a solitary sport, but it takes a team,*" shows that strength can also grow from supportive relationships. Empowerment here does not only come from oneself but also from the presence of people who believe in and accompany the struggle.

### **Self-determination**

Self-determination means choosing life, even when it feels hard or frightening. Diana Nyad decides to keep moving forward, showing that women have the right to choose their direction. The following dialogue shows how Diana stays on her path, even when it brings danger and difficulty:

Diana Nyad : This is what I was missing when I was younger. I've got it now.

(Nyad, 2023, 00:16:17 - 00:16:22)

This short dialogue is spoken by Diana Nyad when she talks to Bonnie about her plan to swim back from Cuba to Florida. She says, "*This is what I was missing when I was younger. I've got it now.*" She realized that her youthful failures were not the end, and now she felt more prepared to complete the mission.

This sentence shows that Diana is more mature and believes in herself. She no longer needs the opinions of others to convince her. Now, she knows that it is time to try again. This shows the value of self-determination, which is when

someone decides because of their impulse, not because of pressure from others. Diana feels that she is ready and able to determine her own path in life.

## **2. The Representation of Women’s Empowerment through the Lens of Feminism in *Nyad* (2023)**

### **Challenging Any Limitations and Social Judgment**

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains that women are usually seen as “the Other,” meaning they are defined by men and not seen as complete individuals. This makes women follow rules made by others. Empowerment starts when a woman rejects those limits and chooses her own way.

Diana Nyad : I wanna do it.  
Bonnie : Do what?  
Diana Nyad : Cuba to Florida. My Swim.  
Bonnie : You’re hilarious. Serve.  
Diana Nyad : No, I’m not kidding, Bonnie. I’m going to do it.  
(*Nyad*, 2023, 00:15:36 – 00:15:44)

This conversation happened when Diana Nyad was at Bonnie’s house. She expressed her desire to swim again from Cuba to Florida. Bonnie thought she was joking at first, but Diana emphasized that she meant it. Bonnie’s unbelieving reaction shows that Diana Nyad’s dream is considered absurd by the people around her.

This dialogue shows that Diana is taking back control of her dream. She no longer cares whether her idea is considered hilarious or unrealistic. She does not let other people’s opinions determine what she can or cannot do. This shows how women bravely stand up against social rules that often hold them back. Diana dares to dream big, even when others may not believe her.

### **Keep Trying After Failing**

Simone de Beauvoir believed that women live with many limits—from society, age, or failure. Feminism supports their right to choose for themselves and keep going. Standing up after falling is a strong form of empowerment.

Diana Nyad : Why am I not allowed to say that it pisses me off to be felled by sea creatures, to be rendered powerless by stupid jellyfish? It’s just so beneath me.  
Bonnie : When you say it’s beneath you, that is just demeaning to us. To all of us. To me, to Barlett, Jon Rose, to Luke, to Dee. We

worked hard, Diana. And we were scared shitless. You've any idea what it was like for me?

Diana Nyad : I know.

Bonnie : No, you don't know. I watched you die, Diana. For 15 seconds, I thought you were dead. All because I said okay to you again. I can't do that again.

Diana Nyad : Yeah, but I wasn't. I didn't. I'm here. I'm okay, and I'm not quitting.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 01:02:18 – 01:03:09)

This conversation took place in the hospital after Diana Nyad lost consciousness after being stung by a jellyfish and hit by a tentacle on her third attempt. Bonnie expressed how scared and shocked she was to see Diana almost die. But Diana remained calm and said that she was fine and would not stop.

This moment shows that failure does not make Diana quit. Even when her body was almost giving up, and her own team was feeling worried and hopeless, she still held on to her dream. Empowerment in this context means being brave enough to keep going even when the world tells to stop.

### **The Power of Supportive Relationships**

In a world that often limits women, true empowerment can grow through trust and support. In feminism, support and solidarity between women help build strength and courage to fight against social rules.

Bonnie : Hey. You are force. Swim or no swim, you are force. Know that.

Diana Nyad : I know. And I'm not gonna stop. I'm free to keep trying.

(*Nyad*, 2023, 01:23:34 – 01:23:53)

This conversation took place at Bonnie's house. Diana Nyad told Bonnie that she was actually under a lot of pressure after failing several times. Bonnie assured her that she was still great, no matter if she completed the swim or not.

Bonnie's words are a form of emotional support between women who strengthen each other. Empowerment does not only come from within, but also from a supportive environment. When women trust and support each other, their power becomes stronger.

### **Staying Loyal to Life Purpose**

Empowerment also means staying loyal to a life goal, even when it feels impossible. Feminist theory says women have the right to follow meaningful dreams, even if others doubt them. Beauvoir believes women should choose their own identity, not follow what others expect.

Diana Nyad : I just want to say three things. One, never, ever give up. Two, you're never too old to chase your dreams. And three, it looks like a solitary sport, but it takes a team.  
(Nyad, 2023, 01:50:33 – 01:51:04)

These words were spoken by Diana Nyad on a Florida beach, shortly after she completed her mission to swim from Cuba to Florida. This was her fifth attempt, after four failed attempts. She said these words in front of her supporters, who had been excitedly and emotionally awaiting her arrival on the Florida coast.

In her speech, Diana shared three important lessons she learned during her struggle. The first and most powerful was about not giving up. It is an affirmation that this whole journey has been one of loyalty to her dream. She has shown that while many things may change, her dream lives on, and she has never truly walked away from it. This shows that empowerment can be born from the determination to continue pursuing what one believes in.

### **No Age Limit to Chase Dreams**

Feminism believes that women can reach their dreams at any age. Society may tell older women to stop or stay silent, but empowerment says that dreams have no age limit.

Diana Nyad : I just want to say three things. One, never, ever give up. Two, you're never too old to chase your dreams. And three, it looks like a solitary sport, but it takes a team.  
(Nyad, 2023, 01:50:33 – 01:51:04)

These words were spoken by Diana Nyad on a Florida beach after she completed her mission of swimming from Cuba to Florida at the age of 64. She spoke these words in front of her supporters, who had been waiting for her arrival on the Florida coast.

Diana's words, "*You're never too old to chase your dreams*", are an affirmation that age is not a barrier to achieving dreams. Diana is a real example that a woman can still dream big and make it happen, even if many people think it is too late. Empowerment here means believing in oneself, even when the world says time is up.

## Conclusion

The film *Nyad* (2023) clearly shows feminist values and women's empowerment through the story of Diana Nyad. She is portrayed as a strong and determined woman who does not give up, even when people doubt her because of her age or gender. Feminist values such as equality, resistance, agency, and solidarity appear throughout her journey. Her close relationship with Bonnie shows how women's support can give strength and courage. This shows Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are often seen as "the Other," but Diana decides to take control of her life and become the main actor in her own story. Empowerment in the film is not just about winning, but also about trying, failing, and rising again. It shows that women have the right to dream, to try, and to shape their own future with belief, courage, and support.

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