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'GOING UNDER THE KNIFE': BODY SHAMING AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE IN
DAMILARE KUKU'S *ONLY BIG BUM BUM MATTERS TOMORROW*

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Abstract

In recent times, Nigerians, particularly women, have turned to aesthetic surgery as a means to enhance their physical appearance. The growing demand for such procedures can be attributed to various factors. For some, the motivation stems from a desire to counteract the negative impact of hurtful comments about their body. Others are driven by the belief that surgically enhancing their features, such as enlarging their buttocks or breasts, can improve their socio-economic prospects and provide greater access to opportunities in society. To many women, a big backside or large breasts are better than a good university degree or good conduct in the quest for social and economic mobility in Nigeria. To advance this discussion, this paper examines body shaming, aesthetic surgery and self-acceptance in Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow* (2024). This study draws from Barbara L. Fredrickson's and Tomi-Ann Roberts' objectification theory, which deals with how repeated negative comments about a woman's body undermine her self-esteem and self-worth. By examining the characters' experiences, this paper reveals the harmful impact of body shaming. The paper concludes that every individual, regardless of their physical appearance, deserves love and acceptance.

Keywords: Body shaming, aesthetic surgery, buttocks enlargement, self-acceptance, objectification theory.

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Introduction

There is no universally accepted standard of beauty. The idea of beauty in one society may differ from that in another. The Western perception of beauty differs from that of Africa. Even in Africa, there is no generally agreed-upon notion of beauty on account of cultural differences. Beauty is culturally defined, as Diana-Abasi Ibanga argues: “[D]espite universal pursuit of the beautiful, the concept of beauty is not universal, and is embedded in the cultural milieu of various communities” (250). Adaku Agnes Ubelejit-Nte aligns with Ibanga in saying that beauty is a social construct (19). Moreover, the concept of beauty is dynamic and can vary across time as well as culture. In contrast to Western beauty standards, which often emphasise a slender, white skinned ideal, many African societies have traditionally celebrated a more voluptuous figure with a fuller backside and firm breasts as the epitome of beauty. Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju asserts that “while facial attractiveness is a general desideration of beauty, plumpness or roundness as well as a jutting backside is also a pervasive image in traditional Nigerian African construction of female beauty” (8).

In Nigeria, in recent times, there is an increasing desire by young women to conform to the culturally acceptable notion of beauty by going under the knife to have their breasts and buttocks enlarged. Social media is not helping the situation, as it constantly projects an ideal feminine body to be that of a woman with large firm breasts and a big backside. The news of celebrities, especially young women undergoing facial, breast or butt surgery to enhance their physical appearance, is constantly given prominence in social media. This has exerted undue pressure on many young Nigerian women to contemplate going for aesthetic surgery. Emmanuel Nwakanma notes that “body modifications, especially liposuction and BBL [Brazilian Butt Lift], have become aesthetic today and more persons are increasingly requesting them” (30). It is now a thing of high fashion in many places in Nigeria to come across women with artificial breasts or buttocks.

There are many reasons why Nigerian women are resorting to surgery to enhance the way they look. Aside from social media pressure, some people who turn to aesthetic surgery do so because they have been subjected to body shaming. Fitrio Deviantony et al. define body shaming as the act of criticising the physical appearance of someone (1). In Nigeria, it is common for individuals to be judged or belittled based on their appearance. The negative impact of body shaming can lead to the person having low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Many women go through surgery to boost their self-esteem.

For many women, feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness about a specific part of their body can be a significant source of distress. The pressure to conform to societal beauty standards can be overwhelming, particularly for those who believe that their physical appearance may limit their socio-economic opportunities. Some women are intensely concerned with how others see them, leading them to dwell on their physical appearance. This anxiety about external validation is what is driving many Nigerian women, especially the young ones, to embrace aesthetic surgery as a means of improving their physical appearance. Nwakanma notes that a survey reveals that “most men agree that liposuction and BBL done to beautify the body only make the recipient appear artificial or unnatural, and they would prefer their partner without

cosmetic surgery" (38). Men may find women who have undergone breast or buttock surgery attractive, but not as long-term partners.

The issue of women doing aesthetic surgery to improve their physical appearance is not only captured in the social media space in Nigeria, but also literature. According to Akachi Theodora Ezeigbo, modern African writers are active participants in their societies who use their literary works to reflect and address prevalent social issues (16). Ogaga Okuyade avers that "every writer derives his/her thematic preoccupation from the society. Invariably, the novel becomes the shadow of the society that produces it" (139). Also, Okuyade's assertion that literature mirrors the society (139) resonates with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's view that "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (xvi). Ezeigbo asserts that writers employ characters and situations in their work not just to entertain but equally to enlighten their readers and audiences (13). This paper demonstrates how literature engages with society by showing how writers educate and inform readers and also, spark discussion on contemporary socio-cultural issues.

Literature Review

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between body shaming, aesthetic surgeries and self-acceptance in Nigeria and around the world, highlighting how widespread these issues are.

Angelo Cuzalina and Armndo Retana examine the growing popularity of aesthetic surgery such as buttocks enlargement in recent times, and attribute this trend, particularly among women, to the influence of social media and celebrity culture. Their work highlights the significance of buttocks in physical and sexual attraction while equally providing the various procedures employed in buttock augmentation.

The concern of the essay of Fenti Hikmawati et al. is the examination of the complex relationship between body shaming and self-acceptance, particularly among young adult women who have experienced body shaming. Their study highlights the profound psychological effects of body shaming and emphasises the importance of self-acceptance as a crucial step towards healing. The paper concludes that self-acceptance enables victims of body shaming to overcome the negative psychological impacts.

Sakshi Kalal's paper examines the impact of body shaming on self-esteem and impulsive buying behaviour. Kalal's paper concludes that individuals who experience body shaming are more likely to develop low self-esteem which in turn triggers impulsive buying tendencies.

Although numerous studies have examined body shaming, aesthetic surgery and self-acceptance in various societies, few studies have explored these issues through the lens of literary fiction. This paper, therefore, explores how repeated negative remarks can undermine an individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth, leading to potentially regrettable decisions.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Barbara L. Fredrickson's and Tomi-Ann Roberts' objectification theory as its theoretical framework. Objectification theory emerged in 1997, when psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts sought to explain how objectifying women affects them psychologically. The theory suggests that girls and women often internalize others' opinions about their physical appearances. Central to the theory is what Fredrickson and Roberts describe as self-objectification, a process through which an individual gradually comes to "internalize an observer's perspective of self" (180). This situation makes the girl or woman suffer appearance anxiety, which is when she is acutely and constantly concerned about her physical appearance. The resultant negative effects of objectification, according to Fredrickson and Roberts, are "habitual body monitoring, leaving women with surpluses of shame and anxiety, a shortage of peak motivational states, and scant awareness of bodily states" (185-186). Another negative effect of objectification is that when girls and women begin to view their bodies based on the opinion of others, they will fail to acknowledge their inner physical appearance.

The theory further states that the reason why some women suffer from appearance anxiety may be traced to repeated negative comments about their bodies from their childhood. Fredrickson and Roberts argue that any culture that objectifies the female body creates a situation in which women are not just obsessively conscious of their physical appearance but also of their physical safety (183). They further argue that any culture that indulges in the objectification of the female body may prevent women from attaining their potential, which will limit women's quality of life as they are more concerned about their physical appearance than about projecting their ability. Objectification can lead women to restrict their diets in an effort to conform to societal beauty standards. Objectification theory is suitable for the analysis of the effects of body shaming and the protagonist's quest to enlarge her backside in Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*.

Body Shaming and the Female Experience in Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*

Damilare Kuku's novel, *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*, tells the story of Temi, a young Nigerian woman who, after years of enduring body shaming, announces to her family that she intends to undergo surgery to enhance her backside in response to societal pressure. Kuku's novel explores the negative effects of body shaming, beauty standards and how a woman's appearance can shape how she perceives herself. Body shaming is a pervasive issue in Nigerian daily life which affects many individuals. Kuku's novel is a literary exploration of this societal issue which has brought untold discomfort to many Nigerians. According to Adjah Ekwang Adjah, body shaming is a "negative appraisal of one's biological make-up" (62). Though it is quite prevalent in Nigeria, Joy O. Odewumi and Adenle Adepeju believe it is not considered a serious issue in Nigerian society (51). The experience of the protagonist in Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow* shows that body shaming is indeed a serious issue and Nigerians must begin to condemn it. Mmathato Calphurnia Rammutla argues that body shaming is hugely damaging to the emotional, physical, and financial well-being

of women (222), as reflected in the experiences of Temi and the other characters in the novel.

The novel shows how body shamers can target any part of a woman's body. In the case of Jummai, Temi's aunt, her body shaming is because she is seen as fat or 'plenty' (111). She says, "I knew they called people like me orobo - excess everything, everywhere" (111). Jummai's response to someone subtly referring to her as fat almost leads to the person's death. She confesses, "Of course, I paid Risi back for daring to call me fat by selling her expired provisions from Mama's shop. I sold them at a discount, so she thought she was getting a good deal. She nearly died, and my mother beat me when she found out what I had done (111). Unlike her niece, Jummai later overcomes the anxiety about her physical appearance by accepting who she is.

Hassana, Temi's mum, is a beautiful woman who becomes the target of cruel body shaming due to her breasts, highlighting the hurtful nature of such criticisms. Despite her attractive appearance, Temi's mum shows that everyone has their own physical imperfections. No human being is created perfect. By highlighting the futility of chasing an unattainable beauty ideal, Kuku's work sends a powerful message of self-acceptance and embracing individual uniqueness. Hassana's face and skin are magic, as people say of her, but like many human beings, she is insatiable as she says:

Growing up, I believed it was my duty to be beautiful, if only as the fulfillment of my name. From a young age, I saw that my breasts were different from Jummai's. While hers stood like they were ready to fight, mine were sleepy and non-confrontational. Yes, we both had backsides that made other young girls envious, but I was intimidated by Jummai. (117)

At first, Hassana appears unaffected by others' scrutiny of her appearance. However, a cutting remark from her sister-in-law, Big Mummy, that her breasts are on the ground and that she is too young to be "carrying slippers" on her chest, profoundly affects her self-esteem (46). The incident highlights the damaging impact of body shaming and also highlights the significance of kind words when talking about an individual's physical appearance.

Big Mummy, Temi's paternal aunt, grapples with her own body insecurity, stemming from societal beauty standards that favour lighter skin, leading her to believe that her dark complexion limits her ability to find a partner. She is told that the reason she is unmarried is that she is "too dark. Good men want light in their homes. Become a light" (60). She bleaches her skin in an attempt to appear lighter, but the man she eventually marries still abandons her despite all her efforts to keep him. Big Mummy's experience highlights the idea that fair skin is not a guarantee that a man will stick to a woman, thereby challenging societal beauty standards. Big Mummy exhibits what Fredrickson and Roberts refer to as appearance anxiety, which manifests when an individual adjusts his or her appearance to fit certain beauty standards as a result of social pressure. Despite her change in skin colour, she remains unable to secure her husband's loyalty, which clearly demonstrates that physical appearance is not a guarantee of love or commitment in relationships.

Through Ladun, Temi's older sibling, the author illustrates the importance of self-acceptance, encouraging both women and men to find confidence in their unique physical appearance. Ladun expresses a "love-hate relationship" with her body (91). While she loves her body, her reservation is the unwanted attention that her body, which developed too early, attracts from the prying eyes of lustful men. Ladun's body is not flawless, but she gladly embraces all of herself, nonetheless. She illustrates Zhihan Lyu's assertion that women should embrace "their imperfections, and cease unnecessary self-deprecation for elusive aesthetic standards" (3). Ladun's self-acceptance makes her resistant to body-shaming comments and frees her from the pressure to undergo aesthetic surgery, a stark contrast to her younger sister, Temi.

Temi is the character most affected by the negative consequences of body shaming. Her predicament is at the heart of Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*. Temi's discomfort with her backside reinforces the argument of Fredrickson and Roberts that "women's appearance anxiety may have roots in negative early life social experience, including histories of receiving negative appearance-related comments" (183). Family members, classmates, friends, co-workers, just about everyone in Nigeria, are guilty of body shaming as depicted in the novel. Right from her primary school days, Temi was body shamed by relatives and classmates. In school, she is referred to as "mopstick" (70) because of her shape. She is verbally assaulted because she is slim. Aside from "mopstick," she is also called *lepa shandy*, an expression Olorunfoba-Oju argues is "usually deployed with a negative connotation of undesirability" in Yoruba-speaking areas in Nigeria (21). The repeated references to Temi as *lepa shandy* stick in her consciousness. In the view of Pumla Dineo Gqola, "one of how something becomes true is through repetition" (5). Temi begins to see herself as *lepa shandy*. This gradual acceptance of others' opinions about oneself is what Fredrickson and Roberts refer to as self-objectification. They assert further that the internalisation of an observer's view of a female's body creates a kind of self-consciousness (184). Kuku's use of the second-person point of view in the novel provides an intimate insight into Temi's emotional state, giving the reader a glimpse of the damaging effects of body shaming. By drawing the reader into Temi's experience, the novel throws light on the need for individuals to chew their words carefully when discussing the physical appearance of others:

You started padding your pants with singlets at the age of ten, but it wasn't because your bumbum was flat. The flatness wasn't your problem; it was the fact that it was also inverted, as though it was afraid to grow. For a long time, you thought your middle name was Lepa Shandy. You really didn't think anything was wrong with your body until Big Mummy pointed out how thin you were on your eighth birthday. (69).

From commenting on how slim Temi is, the body shamers move on to making derogatory comments about her backside. In primary five, Temi tells a boy she likes that they may end up getting married, but the boy, who does not envisage that happening, says to her:

"That can never happen. Your shape is similar to a mopstick. Lepa Shandy like you. Me that I like big bumbum. Have you not seen my mother?"

The pain in your chest stopped you from asking why he felt so comfortable looking at his mother's ass. Big Mummy's words came rushing back, and you realized something was indeed wrong with your body. You started looking at other girls' buttocks. Was there something they used that you didn't know about? You had to wear all of Ladun's old clothes once you started secondary school, and that didn't help. (70)

Temi experiences appearance anxiety due to the constant negative comments about her shape and buttocks. The padding of her clothes and her obsessive concern about her physical appearance reveal Temi's internalisation of the views of those who keep body-shaming her. Fredrickson and Roberts argue that when negative words are used to objectify the female body in society, the girl or woman is likely to experience eating disorders, as seen in Temi drinking malt and milk and stuffing herself with food that she thinks can help increase her buttocks to conform to the societal beauty standards. This supports objectification theory which suggests that the pressure to attain a certain body size may lead girls and women to develop a "trouble attitude toward eating" due to the societal objectification of their bodies (19). The body shaming and Temi's desire to conform to cultural beauty standards weigh heavily on her. Olorunoba-Oju notes that some women may need to pad their buttocks to "conform with the cultural image of body beauty" (10). As a result, young women like the protagonist of Kuku's novel feel compelled to undergo surgery to enlarge their backside.

Going Under the Knife and Self-Acceptance

In *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*, Kuku delves into the contemporary obsession with surgical buttocks augmentation among Nigerian women, critiquing the beauty ideals that fuel this desire for physical transformation. Ubelejit-Nte notes that "the female body has become an entity that can be shaped and perfected" (22). In the view of Raghav Aggarwal et al, the craving for cosmetic surgery by women is "influenced by several things, including personal experiences, cultural values, individual traits, and societal standards of beauty" (6088). Another reason why there is an increasing demand for cosmetic surgery, according to Lyu, is the "numerous internet celebrities on social media platforms" who "present seemingly 'perfect' appearances, causing significant anxiety among ordinary women" (2). Lyu's assertion applies in Nigeria, where social media influencers and celebrities are driving women into considering or going for cosmetic surgery, as captured in the novel:

The bumbum enlargement advert continued playing. The presenter, Sylvia Osuji, an alumna of your university, was now an influencer. She spoke glowingly of the ongoing Easter offer, sharing with great enthusiasm how she saved up for her surgery, how her decision to go under the knife was the best she had ever made. (13)

For the protagonist of *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*, her desire to enlarge her buttocks is because she is unhappy with it and wants positive recognition, as she tells

her father: "I just want to be seen, Daddy. I want to matter, and for the most part, it seems like the world will only see me if I have a backside" (199). Temi's decision to "take the big step to redeem" her backside by going for the Brazilian Butt Lift shows her inability to transcend her insecurity about her physical appearance (12). The backside enlargement, or Brazilian Butt Lift according to Nwakanma, is a surgery common among women in Nigeria (30). Anatole Kibadi-Kapay explains that the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) is a cosmetic surgery done to "increase the volume of the buttocks" (37). Temi's experience vividly illustrates what happens to an individual who ceaselessly craves societal validation.

Temi believes going under the knife to enlarge her backside will boost her self-esteem and grant her public acceptance, but for characters like Sylvia and Boboola, Temi's close friend, the aim is to open a pathway for socio-economic mobility. Many young women believe that their alluring outer beauty will offer them access to socio-economic opportunities and equally get them a partner. Sylvia Osuji tells her listeners "how her ass now attracted the high and mighty," and goes further to advise them to "use what you have to get what you want." (13). Temi notes that Sylvia was relatively unknown in their university days but now "[s]he had been winning in every circle, all because of that new ass" (13). Boboola, Temi's secondary school friend, takes a loan to do BBL because she thinks it offers her a pathway to prosperity. Another young university student says to Temi, "My bumbum has paid my bills and I already have a job waiting for me" (191). This confirms Fredrickson and Roberts' assertion that a woman's physical appearance can determine her social and economic fortunes (78). To Sylvia and Boboola, only big 'bumbum' matters in Nigeria, not good grades, personal integrity, or hard work. While it may be true, it is nonetheless an unfortunate commentary on the situation of things in the country. It shows the depth of moral decadence in present-day Nigeria.

The novel challenges societal norms by suggesting that a woman's worth extends far beyond her physical appearance, emphasising the importance of inner beauty, intelligence and character. Ibanga asserts that in Africa, "beauty is linked with the development of moral awareness, there is no beauty for beauty's sake, it must serve some good" (259). Kuku's central message is that a woman's self-worth should not be contingent on her physical appearance, such as enhanced breasts and buttocks, but rather it should be rooted in her inner qualities since enhanced breasts and buttocks can only sustain a relationship for a while.

Kuku's novel further illustrates the damaging effects of body shaming, showing how it can erode an individual's self-esteem and confidence, as depicted in Temi's experience. But rather than internalise the hurtful words uttered about one's body, the novel's message is that, as Hassana puts it, "we must all be stronger than the words people throw at us, otherwise, we will never move forward" (46). Temi's inability to transcend the hurtful comments about her buttocks forces her to resort to buttocks enlargement surgery. She is a beautiful and brilliant person, but she is unable to move past the unkind remarks about her body. Temi's story shows that our worth should not be defined by the opinions of others. Her father, Tito, offers wise words: "People's opinion of you matters when it comes to character and how you present yourself. But their appraisal of your physical attributes is not your problem" (199). The thematic

thrust of Kuku's novel is the idea that self-acceptance, rather than societal validation, should matter to an individual. Characters such as Hassana and Ladun show how people can learn to accept who they are and not let the words of others or societal expectations dictate their lives.

Tito's love for Hassana is unwavering, transcending her physical attributes. Hassana's breasts may not conform to societal beauty standards but Tito's affection for her runs deep. Ladun, on the other hand, embodies self-acceptance, embracing her body and finding comfort in her skin. She learns to accept what she has. The experiences of Jummai and Big Mummy serve as a poignant reminder that having a curvy figure or fair skin offers no immunity to heartbreak, abandonment or relational woes. Jummai's big backside does not stop her husband from abandoning her, just as Big Mummy's attempt to bleach her skin does not secure her partner's loyalty. Kuku beams her literary lens on the importance of individuals cultivating a strong sense of self amid criticisms about their physical appearance. Temi is unable to embrace her body like her mother and sister. Her inability to accept the seemingly genuine love overtures of Chuka, Ikenna's handsome brother, stems from her low self-esteem regarding her physical appearance. Temi, a beautiful, intelligent and decent woman, struggles to believe that a man can love her for who she is - just as her father loves her mother despite her own physical insecurities. Temi buttresses the assertion of Fredrickson and Roberts that by "internalizing an observer's perspective as a primary view of physical self, women may lose access to their own inner physical experiences" (185). Temi finds Chuka very attractive, but her low sense of her physical appearance prevents her from accepting him because she feels he only likes "fine, hot babes" (195). Chuka is many women's dream of a man. Temi draws the reader's attention to Chuka's physical appearance, inviting them to appraise him, "You pretended not to stare. Where IK was handsome, Chuka was perfection. His coily hair reached down almost to his eyebrows, and his sideburns connected to his beard. His fair skin was shiny as if it had been polished" (172). But she thinks Chuka cannot fall in love with someone like her. The novel maintains that every individual, regardless of physical appearance, deserves love and acceptance. Jummai's impassioned argument against Temi's desire for surgical enhancement of her buttocks drives home this point, as she says, "Prophet Tunde's wife looked like a man, but he loved her. His daughter looked like his wife, but he was sure someone would love her too. So why did Temi think she would not find love with a flat backside?" (222). By citing the case of Prophet Tunde, Jummai questions Temi's belief that her worth is tied to her physical appearance, particularly her backside. Through the experiences of Temi, Kuku advocates for self-acceptance and warns against the damaging effects of internalising disparaging comments which can undermine women's self-worth.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the adverse effects of body shaming on an individual, the growing trend of butt enlargement surgery among Nigerian women, and the need for self-acceptance in Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bum Bum Matters Tomorrow*. The paper reveals the different reasons motivating individuals, especially women, to go under the knife in a bid to enhance their physical appearance. By highlighting the varied motivations, this paper unmasks socio-cultural and economic factors influencing the

demand for aesthetic surgeries in Nigeria. While some opt for surgery because of body shaming, some go for surgery to correct a part of their body they are not comfortable with, while others attempt it for socio-economic reasons.

Through the experiences of the characters in Kuku's text, the paper shows that women should not be pressured into aesthetic surgery just to conform to societal notions of beauty. The paper also reveals that while good physical appearance can determine women's socio-economic prospects, a woman's social and economic mobility is not essentially hinged on having big breasts and buttocks.

Again, the novel analysis highlights the importance of accepting one's own body and the need for individuals to avoid internalising hurtful comments about their appearance. The experiences of certain characters in the novel illustrate that true affection is possible regardless of a person's physical appearance. Kuku's novel serves as a powerful reminder that individuals should not let others' opinions dictate their self-worth or life choices, but should prioritise their aspirations and forge their own paths.

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