

**THE NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND  
ANTHROPOLOGY**

<http://www.nasajournal.com.ng>

ISSN: 0331-4111

Volume 18, No. 1 (June, 2020)

**DOI: 10.36108/NJSA/0202/81(0190)**

**"She was neither unduly Fat nor Lanky": Representation of Body Size  
and Beauty in the novels of Daniel O. Fágúnwà**

<sup>1,2</sup>**Fausat Motunrayo Ibrahim & <sup>1</sup>Ayodele S. Jegede**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria;

<sup>2</sup>Federal College of Forestry, Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria, Ibadan,  
Nigeria

**Abstract**

*The climate of thought regarding beauty characterization among Africans and other people of colour portrays the large body as beautiful. This reflects that body size and beauty is racially and culturally expressive, making it apposite to be disparate in advancing related discourses. This is particularly important because such discourses can influence Africans' evaluation of their self-worth. The concerns generated by the global rise in obesity further create interest in these issues. African literature offers a fine and disparate platform to understand social realities. Consequently, relevant contents of the five precedent Yorùbá novels of Daniel Fágúnwà including Igbó Olódùmarè, Ìrèké Oníbùdó, Ògbójú oḍe nínú Igbó Irúnmọ̀lè, Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje and Àdìtù Olódùmarè were extracted and analyzed to examine association of beauty with body sizes. Findings reflect more of bipolarity in the definition of beauty, such that the none-fat/none-thin structure is conveyed as beautiful. Concurrently, the fat and the thin is also portrayed as beautiful, making 'body size' definition of beauty to be elusive, and strongly suggesting neutrality to body size among the Yorùbá. This is strongly borne out of Fágúnwà's and indeed, Yorùbá construction of beauty from a 'character' perspective. Character (ìwà) is staunchly expounded as constituting beauty. The beautiful body size is indeterminate in Fágúnwà's narratives and indeed, in Yorùbá thought.*

**Keywords:** Africa, body size, beauty, Fágúnwà, literature, Yorùbá

**Introduction**

Although African culture is traditionally and largely entombed in oral forms, the import of literature as repository of culture must not be underemphasized. Literature projects elements of culture in textual forms making them less vulnerable to being lost in a world dominated by imperialist culture and texts. This is only a token of the vast importance of literature. The central thesis of

Adebanwi (2014: 406) exerts the import of “imaginative literature in the articulation of, and as vehicle for, social thought in Africa”. Adebanwi (2014) concurred that apart from reflecting societal history and culture, literature provides parameters of thinking for the people. Smith (2001) also espoused that African writers draw inspiration from traditions which have been impacted by common socio-historical and political circumstances. Irele (2001) concurred to this position when he affirmed that texts cannot be discharged from the context from which they are apprehended. In fact, Irele (2001) expounded that there is a dualistic nature of life and living in Africa, occasioned by the continent’s experience of colonialism and cultural imperialism and which have resulted in a situation where tradition becomes a primary source of orientation for creative, fictional or African discourses in general. Obiechina (1992: 199) even suggests that novelists’ reproduce their lived experiences in their materials: “reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature, the novelists introduce oral stories—myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, and so on—within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes, and in the formulation of their artistic and formal principles”. The theme of tradition in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for instance underscored experiences of a colonizing culture which creates the crisis of identity that individuals pass through in a dualized culture.

But even in these sorts of colossal efforts lies a concession of the irreplaceability of African languages. Questions of ontology are naturally raised in a situation where African’s culture and experiences are captured using European languages. This has been the concern of scholars including Okara (1963); Wa Thiong’o (1986); Kunene (1992) and Owomoyela (1992), in support of the movement promoting literature in indigenous languages. African ethos and aura are vulnerable to being lost without the use of indigenous languages, in addition to the tendency to lose pride in African culture. For instance, Fasan (2015: 8) stated that the prominence accorded English language “has led to a bifurcation of cultural behaviour into ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture where English represents high culture and the indigenous languages low culture”, causing “a loss of psychic prestige for users of the indigenous languages”. Moreover, literature conveyed in European languages is inherently capable of dividing its audiences along those educated in European languages and otherwise. The latter category, the vast majority of African population whose culture and experiences are projected are impeded from cultural expressions owing to the limitedness of their linguistic capacity (Irele, 2001; Wali, 1963). The novels of Daniel O. Fágúnwà are written in Yorùbá language. Fágúnwà’s “love and mastery of the language... (are) his distinctive claim to literary genius” (Smith, 2001: 744, bracket ours). This makes Fágúnwà’s novels appealing literary resources for Yorùbá cultural reconstruction. The content analysis of body size and beauty representations in Fágúnwà’s novels to unearth Yorùbá attitudes to body size is therefore warranted and presented in this article. In this light, an overview of Fágúnwà’s biography and exertion in

forging Yorùbá sociology of knowledge through his literary enterprise is worth recounting.

***The Unnamed Humanistic Sociologist: Daniel Olorunfemi Fágúnwà***

Daniel Olorunfemi Fágúnwà (1903-1963) was born in *Òkè-Igbó*, southwestern Nigeria- the ancestral homeland of the Yorùbá people. His grandfather and parents were staunch adherents of traditional Yorùbá religion before his parents accepted Christianity and changed their Yorùbá names to Christian ones (Adeyemi, 2011). Fágúnwà's parents later became frontrunners at St. Luke's church, *Òkè-Igbó*. Like his parents, Fágúnwà changed his native name from Orowole to Olorunfemi (George, 1997). Fágúnwà grew up at *Òkè-Igbó* where he began his formal education at St. Luke's school before proceeding to St. Andrew's College, at *Oyo*, also in southwestern Nigeria. This brief account of Fágúnwà's early life showcase the roots of his motivators. Fágúnwà is traditionalist, a distinct cultural enthusiast who was equally motivated by Christianity and modernity. He was indeed an encapsulate of the social climate of era of his birth.

Fágúnwà passionately pioneered the humanistic sociology enterprise. The humanistic sociologist draws inspirations from socio-cultural context in his or her bid to uphold interpretivism and *verstehen*. The novels of Daniel O. Fágúnwà are strong depictions of the culture of Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria which is supernaturalistic and 'mythological' in disposition (Soyinka, 2010: preface). Bamgbose (2007: 8) listed Yorùbá folktales as a primary source in the novels of D.O. Fágúnwà. He further asserted that "the basic beliefs underlying the actions and attitudes of people in the novels are traditional Yoruba ones". "The novels of D.O. Fagunwa, as pieces of arts, encapsulate other contents of Yorùbá culture and philosophy. These cultural and philosophical elements explored by Fagunwa emanated from a spring of ideas that are closely representative of the Yorùbá worldview" (Bifatife, 2018: 2). Even in the current decade Olutayo (2014) was still clamouring for "verstehen(ing)" sociology in a bid to making sociological theorizing relevant to, and rooted in context. Fágúnwà's novels are precedent Yorùbá literature and the first of all, *Igbó Olódùmarè*, was published in 1949. In many significant respect, Fágúnwà's narratives stands at par with the pioneering Akiwowo's (1986) exposition of *asuwada*— an elucidatory principle derived from Yorùbá oral poetry, as well as Fadipe's (1970) seminal thesis bordering on the Sociology of the Yorùbá. Fágúnwà's novels constitute part of an "emerging literary canon" (Nnodim, 2006: 156) which portray both traditional and modern elements of Yorùbá culture (Lindfors, 1979). Indeed, this makes Fágúnwà a "purveyor of Yoruba culture" (Smith, 2001: 744). Fágúnwà's writings are "audience-conscious, audience-driven and language-driven" (Smith, 2001: 745).

Fágúnwà's works are central and revered in the literary sphere of Yorùbá life, a situation that George (1997) viewed as tending to limit constructive

criticism against the works. Studies have been designed to examine the attitude of Fágúnwà's novels to several issues. One of such attempts made Yai (qtd. in Adeosun, 2007) to accede the notion that Fágúnwà upholds a mirage expressing the hope of the masses becoming wealthy, making him (Fágúnwà) to enjoin them to tolerate the social order. In addition, Adeosun (2007: 13) concluded that Fágúnwà's writings tend to preserve the colonial order, making it plausible to liken Fágúnwà to a capitalist. Hence, Fágúnwà's writing can hardly be resourceful to masses engaged in a class struggle. Adeyemi's (2011) examination of gender in Fágúnwà's narratives led to the conclusion that Fágúnwà upholds a symbiotic relationship between both genders and rejects gender-based marginalization. Ibrahim and Jegede (2015) also questioned health-related themes in Fágúnwà's novels and reported that Fágúnwà was more naturalistic rather than supernaturalistic in his depiction of health and health promotion. A more contextually relevant study of Onayemi discussed beauty in African/Yorùbá art using Fágúnwà's narratives as a source and impressed African's preference of 'full-fleshed' (2004: 17) women as opposed to the lean. However, a lot more can be discerned from Fágúnwà's narratives including the concept of body size.

#### ***Body size in Contemporary Society***

Body size is a subject of considerable importance in modern times because of its monumental implications for health. Large body size can be regarded as arbitrary obesity which is currently pandemic and affects both developing and developed societies. As at 2017, up to four million people die annually as a result of being overweight or obese (World Health Organization, 2020). Yet, concerns are raised over the notion that the culture of people of African descent and other people of colour validate the large body as beautiful (Juarbe, 1998; Becker *et al.*, 1999; Gremillion, 2005; Bailey, 2006; Bennett and Wolin, 2006; Candib, 2007; Davidson and Knafl, 2006 and Harris, Walters and Waschull, 1991). Obviously, interest in African culture's disposition to body sizes is engendered. Cultural standards of beauty tend to become a basis of evaluating self-worth which is consequential for individual's sense of well-being and everyday functioning. Such standards delineate the body as physical capital and contribute significantly to complex dynamics of belief and expectations about human body, many of which can be contradictory or indeterminate. Standards of beauty from a size perspective have not been devoid of racial and cultural dynamics. Consequently, discourses on beauty must be disparate enough to capture these dynamics. Body size is essentially race-expressive and culturally exclusive. To all intents and purposes, body size and beauty discourses must reflect underlying culture. Yet, such discourses are racially coloured, muddled with political dynamics even in contemporary times. Meanwhile, African culture features an array of aesthetic ethos of body size. Hence, this piece is an attempt to explore Fágúnwà's narratives with a view to assessing his association of beauty with body sizes including the small or thin, the average and the large or fat.

### Methods

The novels of D. O. Fágúnwà namely *Igbó Olódùmarè* (2005), *Ìrèké Oníbùdó* (2005) *Ògbójú oḍe nínú Igbó Irúnmòlè* (2005), *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje* (2005) and *Àdìtù Olódùmarè* (2005)<sup>1</sup> are the sources of data. These novels are hereafter referred to as *Igbó*, *Ìrèké*, *Ògbójú*, *Ìrìnkèrindò*, and *Àdìtù* respectively. They were read thoroughly while excerpts associating body size with beauty were identified and extracted verbatim. These were examined for their contents and interpreted. Narrative analytical procedure influenced the process of data analysis. Considering that “Fagunwa is not an easy writer to translate” (Soyinka, 2010: preface), scholarly attempts at translating Fágúnwà’s works were consulted. Hence, excerpts from *Ìrìnkèrindò*, *Igbó*, *Ògbójú* and *Àdìtù* were translated using these works respectively: *Expedition to the mount of thought* (1994), *In the forest of Olodumare* (2010), *The forest of a thousand daemons* (1982) and *The mysteries of God* (2012). *Ìrèké* seems not have been translated literarily<sup>2</sup>. However, supplementary translations to provide additional information or to provide alternative translations where translations of these scholars were assumed to be less perfect were bracketed.

### Findings

Indeed, Fágúnwà’s narratives constitute a wealth of knowledge relating to beauty and body sizes. These are recounted under the following headings:

#### ***Bipolarity in body size and beauty***

Fágúnwà’s narratives uphold a bipolar attitude to body size while portraying beauty in different circumstances: In *Àdìtù*, Fágúnwà described a group of women in the following manner:

Awon obinrin wonyi wa tun pin si orisi meji gege bi ewa ara won, awon kan wa ti nwon dara lewa gidigidi, bi nwon ba ... terẹ a dabi eni ki gbogbo enia terẹ bi nwon sanra a dabi eni ki gbogbo araiye sanra... (*Fágúnwà, Àdìtù, 2005: 15*)

These women were ranged in two categories according to their beauty; one group comprised women that were extremely beautiful. If they were . . . slim, it would make being slim the best shape to possess; if they were fat, it was as if everybody should be fat . . . (*Obafemi, 2012: 23*)

The excerpt above indicates that Fágúnwà associated beauty with both the slim and the fat. Further, Fágúnwà espoused a bipolar attitude towards body size and beauty in *Igbó*. On his way to *Igbó Olódùmarè*, Olówó-aiyé, as narrated by his son, Akàrà-oògùn, met two women. Fágúnwà described these women as follows:



(rosy) than the day old baby's, her flesh even more succulent giving the impression that she had no bones in it (both her hands and legs were robust as if they had no bone in them); . . . you could not in short describe the woman's attributes with words. (Adeniyi, 1994: 141—42, brackets ours)

In the passage above, Fágúnwà described the woman in question as extremely beautiful and also described this beauty in terms of large size of some body parts. Full arms and legs, which also looked as if they had no bone is portrayed as very beautiful. This gives the impression that the woman so described is robust or fat. This is an indication of the appreciation for large body size in beauty definition. However, this excerpt is about a rich woman, making it apt to suggest that Fágúnwà described this woman's beauty in terms of larger body size because of her wealth.

#### **Average body size and beauty**

In *Ìrìnkèrindò*, Ìrìnkèrindò and his team met Adeforiti, a demon (*ẹ̀bọ̀ra*) who lives at heaven (*àjùlé ọ̀run*). Adeforiti took these journeyers to meet his mother. When they did, Ìrìnkèrindò commented about the mother:

. . . iya rẹ̀ nǎ *sanra diẹ*, gbogbo ara rẹ̀ si ndan, ó mọ̀ tonitoni . . .  
(Fágúnwà, *Ìrìnkèrindò*, 2005: 62, emphasis ours)

She was a rotund figure (she was a little fat<sup>3</sup>) with a glistening skin. Her skin was clear and spotless. (Adeniyi, 1994: 91)

In describing Adeforiti's mother, Fágúnwà created a picture of an enviable character. 'Sanra diẹ', a little fatness, was one of these enviable physical features. This suggests Fágúnwà's favourable disposition towards average body size. However, the mother was also said to look terrifying.

Perhaps, Yorùbá's expectation of a beautiful maiden is average body size. This assertion is predicated on Fágúnwà's description of beautiful maidens in his work. In *Ìrèké* for instance, he described the king's daughter from this perspective: When Ìrèké-Oníbùdó got to Alupayida, everywhere was chaotic because the king's daughter was about to be sacrificed to a deadly and mysterious snake that had always killed people. Fágúnwà, through the character of Ìrèké-Oníbùdó commented about and described the king's daughter as follows:

. . . nko iti iri ọ̀mọ̀binrin ti o dara bi ọ̀mọ̀binrin yi lati ọ̀jọ̀ ti mo ti de aiye. Ko dudu pupọ̀, ko si pupa pupọ̀, o pupa fẹ̀rẹ̀ bayi ni, ko sanra pupọ̀ ko si tẹ̀rẹ̀ pupọ̀, ara rẹ̀ tutu o ndan o si fa ni mọ̀ra, ẹ̀yinloju rẹ̀ mọ̀lẹ̀ kedere bi ẹ̀yinloju ọ̀mọ̀de, irun diẹ̀ ti osi hù si ipenpeju rẹ̀ bayi dudu, o ri tẹ̀rẹ̀, o si dabi igbati oşupa ba şeşẹ̀ le si oju ọ̀run... (Fágúnwà, *Ìrèké*, 2005: 73)

I have not seen a woman as beautiful as this woman since I was born. She was not too dark and not too light, she was slightly fair in complexion, and she was not too fat and was not too thin. Her body was cool, shiny and attractive. Her eye balls were bright like that of a child, her eye brows were black and slim and looked like a new moon in the sky.

In another instance (in *Àdìtù*), Fágúnwà described Iyùnadé, Àdìtù's fiancée as follows:

*Iyùnadé dara l'omobinrin, egàn l'o ku. O pupa ròbòtò, gbogbo ara rí mìnìjò, ko sanra bàkìtì lasan, bẹni kò rù han-gogo, o ri şoşorò o si ga diẹ, gbogbo nkan ti obinrin fi iwu ni ni ó ní gbogbo... eşe re ko ri terẹ bi eşe oğà, bẹni ko ri jàkìtì bi ti ajanaku, orí ko ri gidigbi, ko ri palaba, ko ri gbọrọ, Eleda se e ni iwontunwonsi, o ba orun mu.*(Fágúnwà, *Àdìtù*, 2005: 57)

Derision apart, this lady was a beautiful woman. She was light skinned and fresh. *She was not unduly fat and not lanky.* She was slim and fairly tall. All that makes a lady attractive could be found in this lady . . . her legs were not thin like a grasshopper's legs yet they were not thick as the elephant's. The head was neither shapeless nor flat nor oblong. The Creator made it moderate (proportionate) and fitting. (*Obafemi, 2012: 85, bracket and emphasis ours*)

Indeed, Fágúnwà portrayed Iyùnadé as an average sized, very beautiful lady as she was said not to be very fat or thin. However, Fágúnwà's description shows that Iyùnadé is more on the slim rather than the fat side. This is because Fágúnwà also referred to her as 'şoşorò'(slim).

Further, Ìfepàtàkì was also portrayed as beautiful and proportionately sized: while Ìrìnkèrindò and his entourage were in *Igbó Irúmọlẹ*, they encountered *Elegbára*, a deadly demon (*iwin*). Ìrìnkèrindò managed to escape death from the hand of this demon. Fágúnwà described how Ìrìnkèrindò met Ìfepàtàkì shortly afterwards as follows:

*Ibiti mo ti nsimi yi nimo ti dede ri obinrin arewa kan ti ó yò si mi. o lewa gān ni, o wọ aşọ dada, ara re tutu nini, o mo tonitoni, ara re ndan bi ara omọ kekere, ehin re funfun bi aşọ àlà, oju re gún bi oju oşupa, eyinloju re mọlẹ kedere, eya ara re wa ni iwontunwonsi, nwon ba ara se dogbadogba . . .* (Fágúnwà, *Ìrìnkèrindò*, 2005: 34)



I had not been resting for long when a remarkably beautiful lady rose up from an angle and came up towards me. I tell you, mere words can hardly describe the beauty of this woman. She was garbed in a smart dress and was shining with tidiness and freshness; her teeth were plastic white and the clarity of her eyes was the very suggestion of moonlight. Moderately shaped she was (her body parts were proportionate, they fit well with the body). (Adeniyi, 1994: 50, *bracket ours*).

Eventually, Ìrìnkèrindò fell in love and later got married to Ìfèpàtàkì. As part of their honey moon, the couple went to the household of Òpitànparapò where story telling is their occupation. They met Ìtándìran who told them stories. Among these stories is the story of Èwadapò, an adopted daughter of a king whose three sons were interested in her hand in marriage. Fágúnwà described Èwadapò as follows:

*Èwadapò dara ni ọmọ, ẹgàn l'ọ kù. Gbogbo ará rẹ ba ara wọn mu: orí kò tobi ju ibiti o yẹ, ọrun kò kere kọja iwọn, bẹni tapatẹsẹ ba ara wọn jọ, ọmọ dara tan, ẹwa tun şubu lu u, Èwadapò ko ri bẹ, iwontunwonsi l'obinrin.*(Fágúnwà, Ìrìnkèrindò, 2005: 93-94)

Let the truth be spoken, Èwadapò was an uncommonly beautiful thing. Her body was glazing smooth, so were her hands and her feet, her head and neck were all of moderate building (all the parts of her body were proportionate: the head is not bigger than necessary, the neck is not smaller than normal, the legs and hands fit together). Exceedingly attractive was this lady (the proportionate woman). (Adeniyi, 1994: 138, *bracket ours*)

The above excerpt associated body size with beauty. Importantly, the significance of the size of body parts manifested. Furthermore, Fágúnwà explicitly expressed the average body size as beautiful. Moreover, it seems that the definition of beautiful body size as average is not entirely a feminine affair. Fágúnwà, through the fictional author of Àdìitú Olódùmarè described the circumstances under which he met Àdìitú, the physical characteristics of Àdìitú, an handsome man in the following manner:

*...a ri arẹwa ọkunrin kan, mo fere má iti iri eniti o lẹwa to bẹ ri lati ọjọ ti mo ti de inu aiye...ọkunrin nā l'ẹwa gidigidi. Riri ti mo ti ri ni ọkan mi ti fa mọ ọ. Ó pupa o si ga, kò sanra ju bẹ lọ, bi mo si ti wipe ko sanra yi nkọ, o to ọkunrin dada . . . gbogbo awọn ẹya ara ọkunrin nā ba ara wọn mu.*(Fágúnwà, Àdìitú, 2005: 1-2)

We were faced with a handsome man. Such beauty I had hardly beheld in all my life... the man was extremely handsome. I became drawn to him as soon as I saw him. He was tall and light-complexioned. He was not unduly fat he had the built of an average man... all the parts of his body ... fit well into each other. (*Obafemi, 2012: 2-3*)

. . . *ko si ibikan ni ara Àdìtù ti o kere koja tabi ti o tobi ju bi o ti ye, arewa gbã ni . . .* (*Fágúnwà, Àdìtù, 2005: 61*)

. . . no part of Adiiu's physique was either too small or too big beyond the ordinary as he was simply a sight to behold . . . (*Obafemi, 2012: 90*)

The excerpts above are indications of a preference for the average body size. In other words, tremendous fatness or thinness is undesirable. Hence, average body size was well regarded as beautiful.

### ***Small body size and beauty***

There was no isolated instance where Fágúnwà described the small body size as beautiful but he did so when he maintained a bipolar attitude to body sizes in beauty definitions. This was when he described a group of women in *Àdìtù*, as earlier cited. Furthermore, Fágúnwà described Iyúnadé as averagely sized in another instance and also described her as 'şoşořo' (slim). These are indications that Fágúnwà reckoned with small body size as beautiful.

However, Fágúnwà denoted the small body size as ugly, apparently implying that the big size is beautiful in *Àdìtù*. According to the tale, Omo-owú, an older wife of a powerful king, plotted the death of Eşan-mbo, a younger and much cherished wife of the same king. What was most painful to the king was that this older wife, Omo-owú, was not beautiful at all. According to the story:

*Nkan ti o tilẹ tun nilati mã bi o ba ninu ti ko so jade fun enikeni ni pe Omo-owú ti o je iyale ti o le Eşan-mbo lo yi ko ni ewa olokan lara, o ba jogun re ni, ařin ni o ba ba a, eniti o ko gun ori oye l'o fe e wale. Obinrin na ko ni jogbo obinrin lara rara, kĩa bi okunrin l'o ri, o si ga o wa ni ara die, gbagidi bayi l'o ri, ti imu ri kondù kondù, erere ri kangiri kangiri, ehin ri kannagun, oju yo sode o ri gbọ-oro gbọoro ori wa kere ori ri şugudu, şugbon iwaju gboro iwaju ri ferereje, ipako ri ko-ndu, ese tobi ese ri bakiti.* (*Fágúnwà, Àdìtù, 2005: 103, emphasis ours*)

What really annoyed the king, which he could not share with anybody was that Omo-owu who chased Eşan-mbo out had no

element of physical beauty in her body. She was an inheritance from the former king whom he had met in the palace. The woman had no feminine attributes of any sort; she was as brusque as a man, tall and a little fat (had a small body<sup>4</sup>), rough-hued, with a bent nose and crude cheek bones; her back was rough. She had bulged eyes, flappy ears, long neck and a disproportionately small head with a flat forehead and an awkward and thick face. Her legs were thick and studded. (Obafemi, 2012: 149)

The excerpt above indicates that the small body was portrayed as ugly. It is notable however, that the character portrayed here (Ọmọ-owú) is wicked, making it very easy to portray her in negative light using parameters such as ugliness. Indeed, Fágúnwà was really out to criticize Ọmọ-owú. He further commented about her as follows:

*Eniti o je pe ko le soro jeje bi obinrin a soro hamu lasan, bi o ba njeun a jeun bi eni pe aja njeun, bi o ba nhanrun a hanrun bi eni pe ojo nkù, bi o ba si rerin ohun re a gba gbogbo afin nitori ariwo— iru eni bayi l'o wa le iyawo ti o dara l'ewa ti o tun dara niwa lo. (Fágúnwà, Àdìtú, 2005: 103-104)*

She did not have the mellifluous voice of a woman. She ate shabbily in the manner of dogs. When she slept, her snoring was like a burst of cloud-traps and when she laughed the whole palace would be overtaken by her bellowing laugh. That was the kind of woman that drove away a wife that was both physically beautiful and of good character. (Obafemi, 2012: 149-150)

The excerpt above shows clearly that Fágúnwà portrayed the king as very angry towards Ọmọ-owú, especially for plotting against Èsan-mbọ, who was beautiful and of good character.

#### **Scrutinizing attitude to beauty in Fágúnwà's novels**

In Fágúnwà's works, much evidence were found to support the claim body or physical beauty is not something that Yorùbá people prize so much, despite Fágúnwà's descriptions and appreciation of beauty. For instance, in *Ògbójú*, Fágúnwà stated through the character of Àkàrà-ògùn, the hero in *Ògbójú* that:

*Loto o ye ki iyawo re lewa ki e ma ba tete su ara yin, sugbon sibe, iba ni eyini mo. Ko si dara ki iyawo re ma ni ogbon ori, nitori ki e ba le ba ara yin jo, sugbon eleyi papa ko to nkan. Ohun ti o se pataki ju ni peiwa iyawo re ko gbodo sai dara. (Fágúnwà, Ògbójú, 2005: 3, emphasis ours)*

True, your wife ought to be beautiful lest you tire of each other quickly; and a lack of brains in not to be recommended since you must need to hold converse with each other, but this is not the heart of the matter. The important requisite is that your wife should not be prone to evil (her character must be good). (*Soyinka, Thousand Deamons, 1982: 9, bracket ours*)

In a more solemn instance, Fágúnwà created a weird scenario to drive home this point. In *Ògbójú*, a strange being appeared to Àkàrà-òògùn's father, Olówó-aiyé, in the forest. According to this being, his mission was to kill Olówó-aiyé for his complicity in the murder of eleven members of his (Olówó-aiyé) immediate family. Olówó-aiyé was shocked, wondered and questioned why he was falsely accused. The strange being replied:

*Lōto, iwọ ki ifi ọwọ ara rẹ pa ẹnikeṅi şugbọn iwọ a mā ko iya rẹ jẹ ọmọ-ọlọmọ: iwọ fi oju silẹ o lọ fẹ ogbologbo aje, nitori ẹwa ara lasan, ohun rere lo şebi o nşe? . . . sibesibe iwọ tun la ẹnu rẹ o şọ pe iwọ kò şe ibi ri!*(Fágúnwà, *Ògbójú*, 2005: 4, *emphasis ours*)

True, you have not with your own hand killed anyone, but you have been responsible for the suffering of poor innocents. With your eyes wide . . . you married a deep-dyed witch for the mere beauty of her body – is that an act of goodness? . . . and despite all of this, do you have the gall to tell me that you have never been guilty of evil. (*Soyinka, Thousand Deamons, 1982: 12*)

The situation described above indicates that a man might be guilty of murder simply because he married out of beauty alone. In fact, the passage portrayed it as evil to do such a thing. This makes it clear that beauty is not solemnly prized among Yorùbá people. In yet another instance, Fágúnwà reiterated this philosophy: in *Igbó*, Bàbá-onírùngbọn yẹúké recounted, with a critical tone, the story of a rich man who took up several wives. According to the story:

*Ko wo iwà wọn ti o fi nfe wọn, ẹwa ara ati titobi idílẹ ni on wo ti o fi nfe wọn.* (Fágúnwà, *Igbó*, 2005: 116)

He was indifferent to their habits (character) when he courted them, all that counted were beauty and a prestigious family. (*Soyinka, In the Forest, 2010: 158, bracket ours*)

Similarly, in *Ògbójú*, the experiences of Àkàrà-òògùn and his team members with regard to their journey to *Òkè Langbodo* included the meeting of Ìrágbẹje. In addition to many encounters they had together, Ìrágbẹje told these men a story about a king. Fágúnwà, through the character of Ìrágbẹje, described this king as follows:

. . . o tobi pupọ, o lowo, o bimọ, o ni igberiko ju gbogbo awọn oba yoku lọ, o si lẹwa gidigidi sugbon iwà rẹ kò dara... Oba yi ti gbagbe pe iwà lẹwa ẹwa kan ò si nibikan... (Fágúnwà, Ògbójú, 2005: 95, emphasis ours)

(He was) very powerful . . . ; he was rich, was blessed with children, he had more territory than all the other kings and was gifted with uncommon beauty, but his character was evil . . . this king had forgotten that character is beauty and beauty is nowhere else to be found. (Soyinka, *Thousand Deamons*, 1982: 131, bracket ours)

## Discussion

Defined from a 'size' perspective, beauty is an elusive variable in Fágúnwà's novels, and indeed, among Yorùbá people. Fágúnwà's depiction of beauty from a size perspective makes it difficult to assert that a specific body size is regarded as more beautiful. Data supporting virtually all size dimensions in beauty definition were encountered. However, a small sized female character in Àdìtú, Omo-owú, was identified as ugly, although it was easier for Fágúnwà to portray her as such because she took up a wicked role. Therefore, Fágúnwà is non-aligning to any body size in beauty definition. Despite Fágúnwà's non-aligning attitude, it is striking that where maidens were concerned, he described beauty in terms of average sizes: the characters of Iyúnadé in Àdìtú and Ifẹpàtàkì as well as Ẹwadapọ in Ìrìnkèrindò were portrayed as extremely beautiful. This portrayal usually included the notion of congruency of body sizes, what Fágúnwà called 'iwọntunwọnsi'.

It is also remarkable that though Fágúnwà's description of beauty centered more about female characters, male characters including Àdìtú and Kàkó were described in terms of their handsomeness. In both academic quarters and otherwise, issues of beauty are ordinarily thought to concern women. However, Fágúnwà espoused gender fairness, supporting Adeyemi's (2011) conclusion that Fágúnwà rejects gender-based marginalization.

Fágúnwà's non-alignment to any body size in beauty definition challenges the taken for granted assumption that black people generally and Yorùbá people in particular do mainly consider the largely sized as beautiful. For instance, the positions of Davidson and Knafl (2006) as well as Harris, Walters and Washull (1991), earlier cited and among others, is somewhat attenuated by this finding. For another instance, Onayemi asserted while specifically discussing beauty in African/Yorùbá art that 'for the Yorùbá, and indeed Africans generally, the full-fleshed woman is preferable to the thin almost male-like figures of young Classical women' (2004: 17). While it is true that Yorùbá people appreciate plumpness, such appreciation exists side by side with the neutral, middling and meager assumptions of the size of the beautiful.

This argument is further buttressed by the fact that when one considers the subject of beauty among the Yorùbá on a more solemn note, it is apparent that physical beauty is not something that they prize so much. Fágúnwà's novels illustrate this notion almost with thorough perfection: as beauty is portrayed as being a prerogative of the fat and thin, so are the beautiful also portrayed as averagely sized. So is it also explicated that one's beauty is essentially one's character. For instance, in *Ògbójú*, Fágúnwà created a weird scenario, one that accused a lead character, Olówó-aiyé, of complicity in the murder of eleven, same family members (Olówó-aiyé's family), by virtue of marrying a woman for the sake of physical beauty. This implies that it is considered as evil to emphasize on physical beauty. It then means that even where people are motivated by beauty it would be more socially acceptable to conceal such motivation. In yet another instance, Fágúnwà sounded a note of warning against placing emphasis on beauty when he stated through the character of *Ìràgbèje* that character is beauty.

Moreover, this notion of character denoting beauty among the Yorùbá is widely acknowledged in the literature. For instance, Onayemi asserted that 'the Yorùbá prefers the internal beauty. Hence, the Yorùbá saying, *ìwà l'èwa*, meaning 'character is beauty', and sometimes they say '*ìwà rere l'èso eniyan*, 'good behaviour is the adornment of a person' (2004: 7, italics in original). This makes it crystal clear that beauty is not solemnly prized among Yorùbá people. This attests the elusiveness of body size in beauty designation among Yorùbá people.

### Conclusion

Fágúnwà's narratives are non-aligning to any specific body size in beauty definition but the average body size which is neither too thin nor too fat is more favourably placed as beautiful. This strongly suggests neutrality to body size in beauty definition among the Yorùbá because more essentially, beauty is explicated as one's character. Good character, *ìwà*, strongly overshadows physical beauty such that the relevance of people's sizes, colour, shape, etc. is neutralized when their character is questionable. Contrary to common knowledge which largely associates beauty with large body among Yorùbá people and other people of colour, body size and beauty is strongly elusive. Therefore, strategies designed to manage various body sizes will be very well acceptable among the Yorùbá.

### Notes

1. The first editions of these novels were published as follows: *Igbó Olódumarè* (1949), *Ìrèké Oníbùdó* (1949), *Ògbójú ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlè* (1950), *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje* (1954) and *Àdìitú Olódumarè* (1961).
2. *The fabulous adventures of the sugarcane man* is a theatrical translation of *Ìrèké* by Femi Osofisan.

3. A little fatness is more appropriate in translating 'sanra diẹ'. To 'sanra' is to be fat and 'diẹ' means little.
4. 'ni ara diẹ' can literally mean to have a small body. However, it could also mean being a little fat, just as Obafemi translated it. However, considering the tone of Fágúnwà's expression regarding Omo-owu, it is more appropriate to translate 'ni ara diẹ' as having a small body. For instance, Fágúnwà also used 'kàngìrì' and 'kannagun' as adjectives to qualify Omo-owu. These are ordinarily words that depict something undersized. Further, 'gbagidi' is word reflecting something not chubby, which will be unlikely if Omo-owu was a little fat. Moreover, the characters of Omo-owu and the king were illustrated in the novel and Omo-owu ordinarily appeared like a small sized person.

### References

- Adebanwi, W. (2014) The writer as social thinker. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 32(4): 405-420.
- Adeniyi, D. (1994) Expedition to the Mount of Thought. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo UP Ltd.
- Adeosun, H.O. (2007) Features of Capitalism in the Novels of Fagunwa: A Marxist Approach. Retrieved on 15th December, 2013 from: <https://unilorin.edu.ng/publications/adeosun/Features%20of%20Cap.doc>.
- Adeyemi, L. (2011) Representation of gender in fiction: A reading of the novels of Fagunwa. *Lumina*, 22(2): 97-106.
- Akiwowo, A.A. (1986) Contributions to the sociology of knowledge from an oral poetry. *International Sociology*, 1(4): 343-358.
- Bailey, E.J. (2006) Food Choice and Obesity in Black America: Creating a New Cultural Diet. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Bamgbose, A. (2007) The Novels of D. O. Fágúnwà. Benin-City: Ethiope, Second edition.
- Becker, D.M., Yanek, L.R., Koffman, D.M, and Bronner, Y.C. (1999) Body Image Preferences among Urban African-Americans and Whites from Low Income Communities. *Ethnicity and Disease*, 9(3): 377-386.
- Bennett, G.G. and Wolin, K.Y. (2006) Satisfied or Unaware? Racial Differences in Perceived Weight Status. *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 3(40): 1-15.
- Bifatife, O.A. (2019) Fagunwa and the Regeneration of the Òrúnmìlà Muse. *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 2(1): 1-19.
- Candib, L.M. (2007) Obesity and Diabetes in Vulnerable Populations: Reflection on Proximal and Distal Causes. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 5(6): 547-556.
- Davidson, M. and Knafl, K.A. (2006) Dimensional Analysis of the Concept of Obesity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 54(3): 342-50.
- Fágúnwà, D.O. (2005) Igbó Olódùmarè. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd. in Association with Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.

- Fágúnwà, D.O. (2005) *Ìrèké Oníbùdó*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd. in Association with Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.
- Fágúnwà, D.O. (2005) *Ògbójú ọḍẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọ̀lè*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd. in Association with Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.
- Fágúnwà, D.O. (2005) *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd. in Association with Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.
- Fágúnwà, D.O. (2005) *Àdìtú Olódùmarè*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd. in Association with Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.
- Fasan, R. (2015) 'Wetin Dey Happen?': Wazobia, Popular Arts, and Nationhood. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27(1): 7-19.
- George, O. (1997) Compound of Spells: The Predicament of D.O. Fágúnwà (1903-63). *Research in African Literatures*, 28(1): 78-97.
- Gremillion, H. (2005) The Cultural Politics of Body Size. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34: 13-32.
- Fadipe, N.A. (1970) *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Ibadan University press.
- Harris, M.B., Walters, L.C. and Waschull, S. (1991) Gender and Ethnic Differences in Obesity-Related Behaviours and Attitudes in a College Sample. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 21(19): 1545-1566.
- Ibrahim, F.M. and Jegede, A.S. (2015) Naturalism and Health in Fágúnwà's novels. *Matafu: Journal for African Culture & Society*, 47(1): 175-203.
- Irele, A.F. (2001) *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa & the Black Diaspora*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Juarbe, T.C. (1998) Cardiovascular disease-related diet and exercise experiences of immigrant Mexican women. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 20(6): 765-782.
- Kunene, M. (1992) Problems in African literature. *Research in African Literature*, 23(1): 27-44.
- Lindfors, B. (1979) Form, Theme, and Style in the Narratives of D.O. Fagunwa. *The International Fiction Review*, 6(1): 11-16.
- Wa Thiong'o, N. (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Nnodim, R. (2006) Configuring Audiences in Yorùbá Novels, Print and Media Poetry. *Research in African Literatures*, 37(3): 154-175.
- Obafemi, O. (2012) *The Mysteries of God*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd.
- Obiechina, E. (1992) Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel. *Oral Tradition*, 7(2): 197-230.
- Okara, G. (1963) African speech ... English words. *Transition*, 10: 15-16.
- Olutayo, A.O. (2014) 'Verstehen', Everyday Sociology and Development: Incorporating African Indigenous Knowledge. *Critical Sociology*, 40(2): 229-238.



- Onayemi, F. (2004) *Ethnic Identity, the Concept of Female Beauty and Conflict in Classical and African Cultures*. PEFS Monograph New Series No 12. Ibadan: Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies (PEFS).
- Owomoyela, O. (1992) Language, Identity and Social Construction in African Literature. *Research in African Literature*, 23(1): 83-94.
- Smith, P.J.O. (2001) Making Words Sing and Dance: Sense, Style and Sound in Yoruba Prose Translation. *Meta: Translators' Journal*. 46(4): 744-751.
- Soyinka, W. (1982) *The Forest of a Thousand Deamons*. Hong Kong: Thomas Nelson.
- Soyinka, W. (2010) *In the Forest of Olodumare*. Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Ltd.
- Wali, O. (1963) The Dead End of African Literature. *Transition*, 11: 13–15.
- World Health Organization (2020) Obesity. Retrieved on 21st July 2020 from: [https://www.who.int/health-topics/obesity#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/obesity#tab=tab_1).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License