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

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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 ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlè, Ìrìnkèrín dò nínú Igbó Elégbèje and Àdììtú 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 irreplacebility 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, Igbo Olodumare, 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 supernatualistic 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 Oníbúdó (2005) Ògbójú ọdè nínú Igbó Irínmọlè (2005), Ìrinkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje (2005) and Àdììtú Olódùmarè (2005)¹ are the sources of data. These novels are hereafter referred to as Igbó, Ìrèké, Ògbójú, Ìrinkèrindò, and Àdììtú 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 Ìrinkèrindò, Igbó, Ògbójú and Àdììtú 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 literarily². 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 Àdììtú, Fágúnwà described a group of women in the following manner:

Awọn obinrin wọnyi wa tun pin ọríṣi mejè bi ẹwà ara wọn, awọn kan wa ti nwon dara ọṣọwa gidigidi, bi nwon ba ... tẹrẹ a dabi ẹni ki gbogbo enia tẹrẹ bi nwon sanra a dabi ẹni ki gbogbo araie sanra… (Fágúnwà, Àdììtú, 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, Ìkàrà-oògùn, met two women. Fágúnwà described these women as follows:
One of them was light-complexioned, buxom (big, huge) and tall, struck one as a woman who had already entered the marital home, while the other was not that generously endowed (tantamount to being averagely sized), was only of moderate height, with dark skin, her teeth white as the grains off new harvested corn. Both were beautiful. The tone of their voices sounded like that of socialites . . . (Soyinka, In the Forest, 2010: 32, brackets ours)

The passage shows that Fágúnwà recognized that beautiful women or people could be either big or not so big. This neutral attitude notwithstanding, data concomitantly suggest that large body is beautiful.

**Large body size and beauty**

In addition to advancing bipolar attitude to body size and beauty, Fágúnwà demonstrated that large body size is beautiful. In Ògbójú, Àkàrà-oògùn constituted a seven-man team of powerful men (akoní méje) to undertake a journey to Òkè Langbodo, on an errand for the king. As these men (hunters) gathered for the journey, Fágúnwà described one of them, Kàkó, as follows:


Kako is a most handsome man, tall and lanky. (Soyinka, Thousand Deamons, 1982: 87).

Similarly in Ìrìnkèrindò, Fágúnwà related beauty with large body size in the story of a prince who wanted to marry Ewadapọ but, could not secure her hand in marriage. This prince went afar and found himself in another palace full of riches. He also saw a beautiful woman seated on a large chair. Fágúnwà described this woman and her chair as follows:

*Ijoko ọmọbinrin yi tobi ju ijoko ọba kọba ninu aiyẹ wa, ewa ara re pẹpẹ sì tayo ti ọmọ enia, ara re ndan bi ara ọmọ tuntun ọjọ, ati apa ati èsè re yó òbọbọrọ bi èni pe ko si egungun ninu wọn, . . . irohin ọmọbinrin nà rekoja ohun siso.* (Fágúnwà, Ìrìnkèrindò, 2005: 96)

The woman’s throne was taller (larger) than the throne of any king up on earth, and no woman living could match her beauty (her beauty itself transcends that of humans): her skin was clear
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 Ìrinkèrindò, Ìrinkèrindò and his team met Adeforiti, a demon (ebòra) who lives at heaven (àjúlé orun). Adeforiti took these journeyers to meet his mother. When they did, Ìrinkèrindò commented about the mother:

> . . . iya rẹ ná sanra diẹ, gbogbo ara rẹ si ndan, ó mọ tonitoni …

*(Fágúnwà, Ìrinkèrindò, 2005: 62, emphasis ours)*

She was a rotund figure (she was a little fat\(^3\)) 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-Onibudó 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-Onibudó commented about and described the king’s daughter as follows:

> . . . nko iti iri ọmọbinrin ti o dara bi ọmọbinrin yi lati ojo ti mo ti de aye. Ko dudu pupọ, ko si pupa pupo, o pupa fere bayi ni, ko sanra pupọ ko si terẹ pupọ, ara re tutu o ndan o si fa ni mọra, eyinloju re mọle kedere bi eyinloju ọmọde, irun diẹ ti osi hù si ipenpeju re bayi dudu, o ri terẹ, o si dabi igbati oṣupọ ba ṣeṣe le si oju orun… *(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 Àdììtú), Fágúnwà described Iyùnadé, Àdììtú’s fiancée as follows:

\[\text{Iyùnadé dara l’omobinrin, egàn l’o ku. O pupa ròbòtò, gbogbo ara rí minijo, ko sanra bàkìtì lasan, bèni kò rú han-gogo, o ri sọṣọro o si ga diè, gbogbo nkan ti obinrin fi iwu ni ní ó ní gbogbo... èsè rè ko ri téreè bi èsè ogà, bèni ko ri jàkìti bi ti ajanaku, ori ko ri gidigbi, ko ri palaba, ko ri gbüọ̀ọ̀, Èleda se e ní iwọntunwọnṣi, o ba ọrin mu. (Fágúnwà, Àdììtú, 2005: 57)}\]

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 ‘sọṣọro’ (slim).

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

\[\text{Ibiti mo ti nsimi yi nimo ti dede ri obinrin arèwa kan ti ó yọ si mi, o lèwa gàn ní, o wọ aṣọ dada, ara rè tutu nini, o mo tonítòni, ara rè ndan bi ara omo kekere, ehin rè funfun bi aṣọ alà, oju rè gàn bi oju oṣupà, eyinloju rè mołe kedere, eya ara rè wa ni iwọntunwọnṣi, nwon ba ara se dogbadogba . . . (Fágúnwà, Ìrinkèrindò, 2005: 34)}\]
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, Ìrinkèrindò fell in love and later got married to Ìfẹpàtàkì. As part of their honey moon, the couple went to the household of Òpitànparapò where story telling is their occupation. They met Ìtándiran who told them stories. Among these stories is the story of Êwadaṩ, an adopted daughter of a king whose three sons were interested in her hand in marriage. Fágúnwà described Êwadaṩ as follows:

Êwadaṩ dara ni òmọ, egàń l’ò kù. Gbogbo ará rẹ ba ara wọn mu: orí kò tobi ju ibiti o ye, ọrun kò kere koja wọn, ẹni tapaṣeṣe ba ara wọn jo, ọmọ dara tan, ẹwa tun ṣubu lú u, Êwadaṩ ko ri bẹ, iwọntunwọnsi l’obinrin.(Fágúnwà, Ìrinkèrindò, 2005: 93-94)

Let the truth be spoken, Êwadaṩ 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 Àdììtú Olódùmarè described the circumstances under which he met Àdììtú, the physical characteristics of Àdììtú, an handsome man in the following manner:

…a ri arewa ọkanrin kan, mo fẹre má iti iri eniti o ẹwọ to bè ri lati ojo ti mo ti de inu aiyé…Okunrin nà l’ewa gidigidi. Riri ti mo ti ri ni ọkan mi ti fa mọ ọ. Ọ pupa o si ga, kò sanra ju bè ọpọ, bi mo si ti wipe ko sanra yi nko, o to ọkanrin dara…gbogbo awọn eya ara ọkanrin nà ba ara wọn mu.(Fágúnwà, Àdììtú, 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 Àdììtú ti o kere koja tabi ti o tobi ju bi o ti ye, arewa gbá ni . . . (Fágúnwà, Àdììtú, 2005: 61)

... no part of Adiitu’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 Àdììtú, as earlier cited. Furthermore, Fágúnwà described Iyùnàdè as averagely sized in another instance and also described her as ‘ṣọṣọ’(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 Àdììtú. According to the tale, Òmọ-owú, an older wife of a powerful king, plotted the death of Èsan-mbò, a younger and much cherished wife of the same king. What was most painful to the king was that this older wife, Òmọ-owú, was not beautiful at all. According to the story:

_Nkan ti o tile tun nilati mǎ bi ọba ninu ti ko sọ jade fun ènikèni ni pe Òmọ-owú ti o je iyále ti ó lè Èsan-mbò lo yi ko ni ẹwa olókan lara, ọba jogun rè ni, ẹfin ni ọba ba a, ẹniti o ko gun ori oye l’o fe ẹ wale. Obinrin nǎ ko ni jogbo obinrin lara rara, kiàkia bi ọkunrin l’o ri, o si ga o wa ni ara die, gbagidi bayi l’o ri, ti imu ri kondù kondù, èrèkè ri kàngíri kángíri, èhin ri kànnagun, ajú yọ sode o ri gbọ-orọ gbọọrọ ori wa kere ori ri ṣugudu, ṣugbon ìwaju gbóro ìwaju ri feregejè, ipako ri ọ kọ-ndu, èṣẹ tobi èṣẹ ri bakiti._(Fágúnwà, Àdììtú, 2005: 103, emphasis ours)

What really annoyed the king, which he could not share with anybody was that Òmọ-owù who chased Èsan-mbò 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\(^4\)), 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-owù) 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-owù. He further commented about her as follows:

\[
\text{Ẹniti o je pe ko le soro jeje bi obinrin a soro hamù 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 gbgbo afin nitori arivo— iru eni bayi l'o wa le iyawo ti o dara l'èwà ti o tun dara nìwà lọ. (Fágúnwà, Ìdììtú, 2005: 103-104)}
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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-owù, 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-oògùn, the hero in Ògbójú that:

\[
\text{Lọto o yè ki iyawo re lewa ki e má ba tete su ara yin,ṣugbọn sibe, iba ni eyini mọ. Kò si dara ki iyawo re má ni ogbọn ori, nitori ki e ba lè ba ara yin jọ,ṣugbọn eleyi papa kò to nkan. Ohun ti o șe pataki ju ni peiwà iyawo re ko gbọdọ sài dara. (Fágúnwà, Ògbójú, 2005: 3, emphasis ours)}
\]
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-oògùn’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:

Lọto, iwo ki ifi owo ara rẹ pa ẹni ẹni ọgbọn iwo a mā ko iya rẹ je ọmọ-ọlomo: iwo fi oju sile o lo fẹ ọgbogbo ẹjẹ, nitori ewa ara lasan, ohun relo ọshẹ iwa nse? . . . sibesibẹ iwo tun la enu rẹ o sọ pe iwo kọ ọse ibi ri!(Fágúnwà, Ògbójú, 2005: 4, emphasis ours)

True, you haven’t 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-onirungan yẹùkẹ recounted, with a critical tone, the story of a rich man who took up several wives. According to the story:

Ko wo èwà wọn ti o fẹ nfe wọn, ẹwa ara ati titobi idilẹ ni on wọ ti o fẹ 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-oògùn and his team members with regard to their journey to Òkè Langbodo included the meeting of Ìrágbèje. In addition to many encounters they had together, Ìrágbèje told these men a story about a king. Fágúnwà, through the character of Ìrágbèje, described this king as follows:
. . . o tobi pupo, o lowo, o bimo, o ni igeriko ju gbogbo awon oba yoku lo, o si lewa gidigidi sugbon iwá rẹ kò dara...Oba yi ti gbagbe pe iwá lewa ewa kan o 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 Àdììtú, Ọmọ-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 Iyùnadé in Àdììtú and Ìfepàtákì as well as Ewapọ in Ìrìnkèrindò were portrayed as extremely beautiful. This portrayal usually included the notion of congruency of body sizes, what Fágúnwà called ‘ìwọntunwọnsì’.

It is also remarkable that though Fágúnwà’s description of beauty centered more about female characters, male characters including Àdììtú 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 Waschull (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 exposted 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 Ìrágbèje 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’èwà, meaning ‘character is beauty’, and sometimes they say ‘ìwà rere l’èwà 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 exposted 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 Olódùmarè* (1949), *Ìrèké Oníbódó* (1949), *Ògbójú ọdè nínú Igbó Irúnmọlẹ* (1950), *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elègbèje* (1954) and *Àdììtú Olódùmarè* (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 die’. To ‘sanra’ is to be fat and ‘die’ means little.

4. ‘ni ara die’ 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 die’ as having a small body. For instance, Fágúnwà also used ‘kàngiri’ 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


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