

ODE TO FEMALE BEAUTY: THE MALE GAZE PARADIGM

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Abstract

Beauty is a common concept and widely discussed across cultures of the world, although cultures have variations with respect to what is considered beautiful. A common factor that cuts across world cultures is that beauty is gendered and generally seen as a female attribute. However, the concept of beauty is problematized since, in patriarchal societies, the female is viewed as a sex object. Although much has been written by Igbo scholars about beauty, inadequate attention has been paid to the reflection of beauty in Igbo literature. Consequently, this study examines a literature, written in the Igbo medium by a male writer, with a view to estimating the perspective from which the author considers the subject of his inquiry. Ihebuikwe Madubuike's poem Ugomma was purposively selected from Utara Nti, an anthology of Igbo poems. Mulvey's (1975) theory of the Male Gaze was used to guide analysis. The result shows that the poet perceived his subject Ugomma as an object designed to satisfy men's erotic passion. The poet employed several graphic imageries to describe various parts of the subject's body such as her neck, skin colour, body, gait, etc. passion for the maiden led the poet into a flight in an imaginative fairy land where everything was beautiful, and the poet longed to consummate his love with the maiden in a certain river in his mother's village. Although, the poet was concerned with the inner beauty of the maiden, his chief focus was on her physical attributes that completely fascinated him. The study posits that women should not be seen as objects, but there should be a balance in how men see them. While noting the physical attributes of women, male writers and men in the society should also feature the values and worth of women. In the same way, while women endeavour to enhance their looks, which is an outcome of the male gaze, they should pay more attention to enhancing their characters so that society will be presented with a holistic and complete woman.

Keywords: Igbo poem, Beauty, Utara Nti, Ihechukwu Madubuike, Male Gaze Theory

Introduction

Beauty is a common idea expressed in cultures globally. Although different cultures have different ways they perceive beauty, there are common grounds shared by all. In most African societies if not the world over, beauty is an aesthetic quality mainly about the female sex and not the male sex; it is the woman who is described as either beautiful or not. Additionally, beauty is mainly concerned with the physical composition of the individual with respect to features of the head, hair, facial structure, neck, the size of the breast, the stomach, the bum, the legs and feet. It also comprises height of the person, whether tall, average or short, as well as complexion, in terms of being light or dark skinned. Beyond racist inclinations, skin colour is one of the major indexes of beauty; the Caucasian race has continually the light skin as not only beautiful but superior to the coloured or black skin, while black Africans has resisted that notion by mooted and promoting the idea of black power or black is beautiful mantra. Based on this conflict, while some dark-skinned people have tended to lighten their skin through the application of certain bleaching products to look more radiant, some light skinned people have also submitted to the tendency to darken their skin through the application of toning products and exposure to the sun, for the purpose of appearing more radiant. Features of beauty is also inclusive of size of the body, in terms of being big or slim. In contemporary times, slim women are portrayed as elegant and beautiful, and used by advertisement companies to promote brands of products such as cars, cosmetics, beverages, etc. The advert companies use these ladies for two reasons, first, to attract the attention of consumers since beauty is attractive and second, to indicate that the product is as good as the lady in the picture. Slim as beautiful is particularly promoted in beauty shows such as Most Beautiful Girl or Miss World contexts staged as a global event and

in different countries, including Nigeria, and also in fashion shows across the world, where slim and tall ladies cat-walk on aisles to the admiration of fashionistas. In these shows, these slim and tall ladies, used to promote fashion brands are portrayed as the ideal beauty, subtly implying that ladies who do not possess these sterling physical attributes are not beautiful. The result is that, many people are convinced that slim is beautiful and they make efforts to shed weight to reflect that ideal.

However, this concept of beauty is an outcome of cultural evolution; in earlier epochs, this ideal is not the norm. In traditional Africa, the beautiful woman is one who is buxom and curvy, irrespective of height. From South Africa to East, Central and West Africa, the beautiful African woman is typified as big and voluptuous. Among the Igbo, slim women are scorned as unattractive and malnourished, and it is common to hear folks wonder if she is starving or sick. In order to show the premium placed by the Igbo on being buxom, one of the customs used to prepare a lady for marriage is *iru mgbede* “fattening room”. It is a custom whereby ladies that have attained age of marriage are sequestered in a room, groomed and pampered with food and care until they are fat. Thereafter, they are paraded in the market on the designated market day where male suitors come to make their choice of spouse from among them. The custom of *iru mgbede* may have gone extinct, but it is one of the vestiges of traditional Igbo world that underline their notion of beauty. In addition to size, Igbo also estimate skin colour as a mark of beauty. There seems to be evidence that Igbo prefer the light skin to the dark skin; while there are positive figurative expressions used to valorize the light skin such as *o na-enwu ka ugbana* “she glows like a robin” and *o na-acha ka udara* “she is as light as udara”, there seems to be only negative metaphors used to delineate the dark skin such as *o na-eji ka unyi* “she is as black as charcoal”. Both *ugbana* and *udara* are valued birds and fruits in Igbo culture respectively, the charcoal is not so esteemed, despite its importance in the kitchen. It is derogatory to use the charcoal to describe someone; it suggests that the person is ugly. It is due to the way Igbo value the light skin as a mark of beauty that necessitates the use of certain epithets to describe ladies such as *apunaanwu* “not worthy of the sun”, *udara ugo* “golden udara”. In the former, it is reasoned that the lady is so light skinned that it is deemed unfitting for the sun to touch her radiant skin to avoid tampering with the quality. In the later, the lady is deemed to be royal due to her light skin colour. Aside skin colour and size, or inclusive of both, Igbo culture has an ideology of beauty based on physical attributes. This belief system is replete in Igbo folklore, where major female characters are depicted as beautiful. One of the epithets used to describe beauty in Igbo tales is *enenebe eje oru* “admiring so much one fails to go to market”, used to suggest that it is possible for one to admire a beautiful lady to the point that the admirer sacrifices going to market. The implication of that belief is that beauty is satisfying to the human sensibilities.

Beyond physical beauty, Igbo also believe in spiritual or inner/moral beauty. That is, the beauty that is not seen in the physique but in character of the person. In contrast to physical beauty, Igbo believe strongly that *mma nwaanyi bu agwa* “a woman’s beauty is character”, meaning that, the ideal beauty is seen in behaviour, irrespective of physical beauty. This is a suggestion that, a woman may be physically beautiful, but if that is not accompanied with moral beauty, her physical beauty will not be appreciated.

As has been stated, the Igbo concept of beauty is reflected in Igbo folklore, but in contemporary times, it has also been depicted in Igbo written literature. Therefore, based on the construct of beauty expressed above, this study examines the idea of beauty in poetry written by Ihechukwu Madubuike for the purpose of identifying the indexes of beauty outlined in the poem and to show their alignment or otherwise with traditional Igbo ideology on beauty.

Conceptualising beauty

Beauty is one of the central concepts in many human sciences such as art, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and others. Premised on utilitarian values, Figueroa, (2013), defines beauty as embodied affective process that grants benefits such as fame, opportunities, and status to an individual while Hakim (2010) conceives of beauty as a kind of capital or value, as a result of its roots in the universal beauty

industry. Traditionally, however, beauty is adjudged as a primary concept in an aesthetic experience. The concept is defined by Zangwill (2001) as the degree to which a person's physical features are considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. Similarly, Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) defined beauty as “that which represents one's conception of the ideal in appearance; that which gives the greatest degree of pleasure to the senses.” In a more elaborate view other scholars conceive of beauty as a combination of qualities that give pleasure to the senses, such as the eye or ear, or to the mind; a pleasing or attractive feature (Reis et al, 2011; Juli, 2019). According to Tadinac, (2010) The conception of beauty often involves the evaluation of some object as being in balance and harmony, meaning that objects or entities that are out of balance or harmony cannot be considered beautiful. While Aristotle and Plato, from a philosophical lens viewed beauty in objective terms, several scholars (Holmqvist & Frisé, 2012; Tadinac, 2010; Harth, 2017) hold the view that beauty is a subjective experience, given the fact that what someone views as beautiful may not align with the views of every other person, hence the aphorism that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

In several studies, beauty has been established as a socially constructed phenomenon (Steinberg, 2015; Blood, 2004; Wolf, 2013). Different cultures hold different conceptions. There is a consensus among several scholars (Hakim, 2010; Hamermesh, 2013; Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021) that beauty is encapsulated in social inequality as well as a component of social identity where people are stratified along lines of age, race, physical appearance, ethnicity, class, amongst other social identities. In terms of the social dimension of beauty, Matiza (2013: 65) opines that in African context “beauty is not for the sake of being beautiful”, implying that beauty has a purpose that it fulfils in the society; that is, beauty is not an end in itself but a means to an end. According to him, rather than being individualistic, beauty is communal and aimed at communicating values, norms, morals, and purpose. In other words, beauty must be deployed to serve the community due to its values and benefits. In contrast, the kind of beauty that fails to take into cognizance the sensitivities of others in the community is seen as strange and un-African. This position is corroborated by Ikuenobe (2016: 134) who stressed that “a person or a thing is considered good, and thus, beautiful, if directed toward achieving or enhancing harmony and order in reality of which the community, people, and things are a part”.

The amalgam of qualities of beauty identified by Reis et al, (2011) and Juli, (2019) suggests that the idea of beauty is multi-dimensional, comprising not only the physical but the emotional and psychological aspect of humans. In support, Matiza (2013: 63) notes that “in the African contexts there are two ways about it, there is the internal beauty which is usually seen through someone’s deeds and the external beauty of which is seen by physical eyes”. Thus, inner beauty is moral and spiritual reflected in character, while outer beauty is physical, manifested in the human body and purely seen with the eyes. According to Abid et al, (2021), this polar dimension to beauty consists of the external/physical and the internal/moral aspects symbolic of the African conceptualization. In his examination of the Sudanese concept of beauty, Muhammad (1993) found that beauty goes beyond physical appearance of the body, for it has features that can be found in good behaviour, strength, skills, knowledge, and even in fatness (suggestive of fertility in women), and so forth. Stressing the dual nature of beauty, Bamikole (2021) states that whereas external beauty is perceived by human’s sense organs, such as the senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, hearing, and feeling, humans are also in possession of intellectual, moral and spiritual senses that are related to cognitive abilities, that enable the evaluation of experiences related to character.

Further to their estimation of duality in beauty, Matiza (2013) is of the view that there is a presumed relationship between physical feminine bodily beauty and character, implying that both are linked in interpretation and perception, and do not possess same weight. Several scholars (Nwala, 1985; Osaghae, 2019; Njiofor, 2018; Matiza, 2013; Ette, 2016; Abid et al, 2021; Haselmann, 2014) are in agreement that inner beauty evidenced in moral virtue or good social behaviour confirm good physical appearance, and that moral virtue, and good manners are more important than physical attractiveness. Thus, external beauty is seen as mundane while inner beauty symbolized in good character and individual behaviour is seen as

spiritual and given more premium. In Abid et al's (2021) research on beauty in Pakistan, it was found that inner beauty is the real beauty of a person while outer or physical beauty is under-estimated. The research revealed that what constitutes inner beauty are certain personality traits such as good manners, intelligence, innocence and a pure soul, and it was stressed that women who are internally beautiful are the ideal women, implying that only women who possess these sterling qualities are real, irrespective of physical appearance. A major finding resulting from Abid's research is that physical beauty without corresponding moral qualities is useless.

Following from the above, it is a matter of course that beauty is a gendered construct (Black & Sharma, 2001; Wolf, 1991; Steinberg, 2015; Abid et al, 2021); although the concept is socially mediated, in almost all societies, beauty is associated with women. Ibanga (2017) opines that beauty is generally associated with women in Africa, as Africans perceive beauty in feminine terms and every usage of the word "beauty" or "beautiful" is usually designed to celebrate womanhood or the feminine spirit. In support, Matiza (2013) states that beauty in Africa and Nigeria in particular is viewed as feminine and used to celebrate feminine bodily ideals (Ubelejit-Nte, (2023). Thus, varied attributes of feminine beauty are constructed by societies and cultures within a given period. Several Europe-based studies have found various physical body features as the cornerstones of physical attractiveness, such as facial appearance, skin colour, hairiness, musculature, flat abdomen, height, weight, posture, body mass index, waist-to-chest ratio, waist-hip ratio, the leg-to-body ratio, etc. (Buggio et al., 2012; Fink et al., 2012; Frederick et al., 2010; Kiire, 2016; Sorokowski et al., 2012). In some of these studies, it is stressed that, certain aspects of the body are more instrumental to physical attraction than others, including facial features such as the eyes, nose, ears cheekbones, or jaw-line (Buggio et al., 2012; Shamban, 2019; Shridharani, 2019)). Studies in Africa indicate a preference for voluptuous size reflected in large breasts and butts and a higher Body Mass Index as tokens of beauty, well-being and marital happiness (Mchiza, 2020; Ubelejit-Nte, (2023). However, while Franklin (2015) stressed that despite the fact that there are many physical qualities that influence physical attractiveness, no single attribute seems to be a necessary or sufficient condition for high attractiveness, Ubelejit-Nte, (2023) is of the view that beauty standards and preferences are dynamic and will continue to evolve with time.

From the feminist perspective, social issues such as conformity to unrealistic ideals, costs, discrimination, and inequality constitute some of the concerns of the proponents of beauty as domination instituted and perpetrated by patriarchy (Wolf, 1991; Rhode, 2010; Hilman, 2013). According to Wolf (2013), the "beauty myth" was deliberately created by the patriarchal society for the purpose of keeping women constantly preoccupied with their physical outlook as against other values. Consequently, the woman's external attributes becomes the center of her self-conception throughout the life time which makes them vulnerable to control by men (Tseelon, 1993). In Abid et al' (2021) study, patriarchy is the major force that shapes and drives beauty standards; the standards for women's beauty are set, endorsed, reiterated primarily by men. While Abidet al (2021) found that men look for external beauty than internal beauty, Ubelejit-Nte, (2023) reasoned that perspectives of inner beauty represent the patriarchal gender norms and expectations of society on females that are internalized from childhood and reinforced through adulthood. As gender norms entrench inner beauty standards, Abid et al (2021) is of the view that media is a strong factor influencing change in conceptions of beauty from the inner to the physical, and thus, men are driven into searching for that which is ephemeral.

Concept of beauty among the Igbo

In the perspective of the Igbo, beauty is construed as *mma*, and used to designate the twin concepts of 'good' and 'beauty' (Njiofo, 2018). According to Njiofo, the physical attractive aspects are validated by the inner morality seen in good behaviour, implying an interlink between the physical and the moral. It is for this reason that Nwala (1985) submits that a common Igbo expression *oma n'anya* "beautiful only in the eye" is used to make a difference between moral worth and aesthetic value in objects or humans. With respect to humans *oma n'anya* is ascribed to someone who is only physically attractive but bereft of moral virtues. However, in the gendered conception of beauty, the Igbo elevate inner beauty over material or

physical beauty. This is why it is traditionally believed that *agwa bu mma nwaanyi* “Character is the beauty of a woman. With respect to the physical, Ubelejit-Nte, (2023) states that *mma* in this context depicts that which is chubby or fleshy in outlook. This is an indication that, in the Igbo culture voluptuousness is a prime indices of beauty. In sum, although the Igbo place a premium on physical beauty, more premium is attached to inner beauty.

The approach

The Male Gaze Theory was propounded by British film psychologist Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* which she used to conceptualise the spectacle of women in film. The “male gaze” is a term commonly used among feminists, such as Mulvey contesting the portrayal and projection of a female for the sexual gratification of a male spectator. The theory of the male gaze refers to objectifying woman as a passive erotic representation, created for the satisfaction of the heterosexual male. With this term, Mulvey identified the cinematic tendency to treat female figures as something that existed to satisfy the scopophilic and narcissistic desire of male viewers. It implies heterosexual masculine stance, but in a way that is structured and normative. Displaying a woman’s body as a tool, and not just merely as a simple tool but an erotic one, reinforces this asymmetric structure. Feminists conceive of sexual objectification as a significant part of the patriarchal order that sees women as unequal partners with men. In Freudian Psychoanalysis, sexual objectification relates to the “male gaze” as it is viewed as a complex where a person is seen as a mere sexual object for fetishistic fantasies, and disregarding the person’s personality (Miller, 2000)

According to Laura Mulvey, (1975) this eroticization of women on the screen is realised through the way the cinema is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes: the look of the camera in the situation being filmed, while technically neutral, this look, is inherently voyeuristic and usually “male” in the sense that a man is the one doing the filming; the look of the men within the narrative, which is arranged in a way that makes women objects of their gaze; and finally the look of the male spectator or observer which imitates the first two looks, or is necessarily in the same position as them (Kaplan, 1983). According to Mulvey (1975: 19)

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

Mulvey’s reasoning is that the positioning and portrayal of women in film, and also in various literary accounts gives the impression that women are only good for purposes of admiration, mainly by men. Their projection in film is so strong (with all the costume and make-up) and cinematic that they have to be appealing, glamorous and sexy. However, while ensuring the woman’s sexual attractiveness, she is actually subordinated and accorded a symbolic character as a passive icon. In this way, the representation of woman in traditional films presupposes a male viewer; the woman’s body is displayed as beautiful, sexy, perfect, but passive, and available for male possession. Viewers are given the right to happily play the voyeur with her body for their enjoyment while also narcissistically identifying oneself with the heroic, active, and glamorous male protagonist (Ishikawa, 2016).

Although the Male Gaze Theory was propounded in the context of cinematography, it has been applied in other fields such as sociology, visual art and literature. In the case of literature, this theory allows writers to criticise negative or passive representations of women in literature written mainly by men and also efforts aimed at changing the traditional patriarchal perspective where women are seen as beautiful objects for the heterosexual man viewer.

Methodology

Data for the study was purposively selected from *Utara Nti*, an Anthology of Igbo poems edited by Nolue Emenanjo. The anthology consists of contributions from seven Igbo poets as follows: Chukwudile, Chukwuezi, Emenanjo, Madubuike, Maduekwe, Obienyem and Obodo. Out of the seven poets, who provided unequal contributions to the anthology, Madubuike was selected due to his inclusive thematic concerns. Out of the eleven (11) poems contributed by Madubuike, one poem titled *Ugomma* was selected for analysis. The reason for the choice of this poem is the subject matter of beauty and aesthetics in Igbo culture.

Data and analysis

The data (poem) written by Ihechukwu Madubuike will be presented here and analysed in the sequence of their ordering. A discussion will follow from the analyses.

“Ugomma” by Ihechukwu Madubuike

This is a poem centered on the beauty of a certain woman named *Ugomma* as conceived by the poet. The poem consists of five stanzas of unequal length and varying ideas on the subject matter. In the opening stanza, the poet extols the subject of his passion in several endearing terms and descriptions as follows:

Ahuru m gi n'etiti ahia obodo anyi
Onye oma na-enwu ka Ugo
Emeturu m gi aka n'obi m
Opamma mere olu ka Ele
Ugomma! Ahu gi na-eji ka eboni
Omamma! Eze gi na-enwu ka mkpuru mmiri
Osisi Iroko! A sara ahuru gi n'onu Imo
Ahu Eboni! I na-enwu ka onwa n'ime ochichi
Kpakpando nke m, ime abali na-anwuru gi

I saw you in the middle of our village market
 The beautiful one that glows like the Eagle
 I touched you in my heart
 The beauty holder with neck like the deer
 Beautiful Eagle! Your body is dark like ebony
 Beauty Maker! Your teeth glows like water drop
 Iroko tree! Your body was washed at the mouth of Imo
 Ebony Body! You glow like the moon in the middle of darkness
 My Star, the midnight is longing for you

In this stanza, the poet wastes no time in introducing the object of his fancy, *Ugomma*. He situates her in the middle of the village market where she came to either buy or sell. He describes her looks in seven different imageries as follows: *opamma* “beauty holder”, *Ugomma* “beautiful eagle”, *Omamma!* “beautiful one”, *Osisi Iroko* “Iroko tree”, *Ahu Eboni* “Ebony body” and *Kpakpando* “star”. The implication of *opamma* in line four, is that she is in possession of beauty in great measure. In Igbo syntax, both *bu* and *pa* are verb roots/morphemes that mean to carry, but semantically, *pa* connotes a bigger size or quantity of that which is carried, more than *bu*. Thus, the poet carefully chose the appropriate morphemes to describe the object of his fancy. She is a carrier of inestimable, immeasurable and unquantifiable beauty. While engaging in this exaggerated qualification, the poet metaphorically compares her to *ele* “deer”, a slender, long-necked, medium-sized animal with short antlers and no tail, with respect to the neck, *mere olu ka Ele*. The suggestion here is that the damsel is blessed with a long sensuous neck portraying her as elegant. It is arguable that, in Igbo culture, long neck is appraised as an element of beauty; it is mainly associated with Eurocentric models of beauty as depicted in art works and paintings. However, this reference to the neck is excusable on subjective grounds preference (beauty is in the eyes of the beholder) as well as cultural

evolution. In line five, the poet describes her as *Ugomma* “beautiful eagle” meaning that she is as beautiful as the eagle. In Igbo culture, the eagle is seen as the king of the birds and particularly associated with prestige and, royalty and dominion. The fact that the eagle is not as common as other birds further lends credence to this perception of its value. In this sense, the poet crafts her beauty in uncommon terms, with a subtle suggestion that she is the beauty queen or the most beautiful lady among all women. While paying homage to her as the queen of beauty, the poet describes her skin colour *Ahu gi na-eji ka eboni* “Your body is dark like ebony”, meaning that she has a dark and lustrous skin like the ebony wood. In this guise, the poet celebrates her rich, black African colour, implying that black is beautiful.

In line six, the damsel is described as *Omamma* “beauty maker” signifying that she is beautiful to the point of (re)creating her own beauty. The implication of this metaphor is that she has the power to create beauty, an epithet usually ascribed to the Supreme Being by Igbo as the creator of all things. While eulogizing her beauty, the poet identifies another element of beauty in her body *Eze gi na-enwu ka mkpuru mmiri* “Your teeth glow like water drop”. This metaphorical comparison indicates that her teeth is as pure and transparent as a water drop, hence the glow or sparkle. Having a glowing and sparkling set of teeth shows the damsel as hygienically clean and well disposed. In line seven, the poet describes the damsel in male terms *Osisi Iroko!* “Iroko tree”. The name Iroko (borrowed from) is Oji in Igbo, and it is a strong and tall tree whose wood is known for durability. The poet uses this imagery to depict *Ugomma* as tall in height. Notably, *oji* “Iroko” is usually used to qualify males; in Igbo, tall women are usually described using unisexual terms such as *achara ugo nwaanyi* “golden bamboo woman”. The poet may have chosen the appellation for hyperbolic reasons. While referencing her height, the poet extolled her body thus *A sara ahụ gi n’onu Imo* “Your body was washed at the mouth of Imo”. Imo is the name of one of the biggest rivers in Igbo land. The Imo River is so loved and revered by the Igbo that it has been immortalized by adopting it as the name of one of the political States in the Igbo area in Nigeria, known as Imo State, as well as being preserved in a popular traditional song titled “Mmiri Imo” by a traditional musical group in Imo State. The suggestion that the maiden’s body was washed (probably at birth) at the mouth (source) of River Imo indicates purity of body and soul. Evidently, the source of any river is the point where it is the cleanest; being cleansed at the source of the great River Imo that is worshipped as a goddess obviously indicates physical and spiritual wholeness.

In line eight, the poet again lauds the maiden as *Ahu Eboni!* “Ebony body”; the repetition is an apparent emphasis on the beauty of her colour, a deliberate attempt to orchestrate the richness of the the black colour as well as being black and African. At this point, it is instructive to clarify a term earlier used by the poet while referencing her colour. In line two, the maiden is described as *Onye oma na-enwu ka Ugo* “The beautiful one that glows like the Eagle”; on the surface, the poet seems to be saying that the maiden is light in colour given the connection of *enwu* “glow” with the white colour commonly associated with the eagle, and therefore antithetical to the idea of blackness. The seeming contradiction is resolved with the understanding that *enwu* “glow” is not exclusively reserved for white coupled with the fact that, there are black eagles and not just white. The poet is amplifying the fact that the colour black glows and radiates in beauty, thus attractive in a pleasant way. In the same line, the poet describes the extent of the radiance of her colour *I na-enwu ka onwa n’ime oghichi* “You glow like the moon in the middle of darkness”. The idea of the black colour exuding moonlight amidst darkness may seem paradoxical; the poet used it to demonstrate the unusual radiating power of the maiden’s black skin. In other words, her black colour is so rich that it radiates light. In the last line, the poet continues with the imagery of the celestial bodies *Kpakpando nke m, ime abali na-anwuru gi* “My Star, the midnight is longing for you”. In the last line of this stanza, the poet shows that, the maiden is his light (Star) in the dark, implying that she is her guide directing his ways in the dark.

In this first stanza, the poet situates himself in the position of the first look in the three-phased gaze structure by Murvey (1975) as a voyeur. This position is reminiscent of a curious boy peeping through a keyhole to catch a glimpse of his mother naked or undressing, as instanced in Freud’s Psychoanalysis. The poet (male)

is like the man behind the camera doing the filming and viewing the maiden from different camera angles. The poet highlights several aspects of the maiden's body and physical features, and in this way depicts her as a model or an icon of beauty, just for the eyes which is passive. In the manner of the camera man that determines what the viewer watches, the poet provides only aspects of the maiden that he wants the reader to note, and used appropriate picturesque imageries that make it easy for readers to conjure in their minds.

In the second stanza, the poet shows the reaction of young men to the beauty of Ugomma. The data is presented below

*Umụ okorobia na-ama jijiji mgbe i tiwara ochi
Ije ukwụ gi na-eme ka ndi iro gi nwe iwe obi
Ije ukwụ gi na-emekwa ka oku na-ere n'obi ndi ikom
Ahụ ha dum ana-achọ inwụ n'ime gi
Mgbe ahụ ahịara ukwụ gi ana-echetara m ha
Egwu okorobia a na-agba n'obodo ụzọ
(Udu, ekwe na Oyo ka a ga-eji gụa ebe a)*

Young men shiver when you break into laughter
Your gait provoke bitterness in your enemies
Your gait also provoke fire in the hearts of men
All their bodies desire to die inside you
Then the footprints will be reminding them
The young men's music danced on the village road
(Pot, drum and calabash will be used to play this part)

In this stanza, the poet describes the effect of the maiden's beauty on young men, all men, and her enemies, in regards to various elements of her beauty such as her laughter, gait and her foot prints on the sand. In the first line, it is shown that her laughter makes young men to shiver feverishly *Umụ okorobia na-ama jijiji mgbe i tiwara ochi* "Young men shiver when you break into laughter" indicating that her laughter makes young men to be emotionally unstable, all due to their desire for her. The second line is a description of her gait and its effect on admirers; first, it is shown that her gait embitters her enemies *Ije ukwụ gi na-eme ka ndi iro gi nwe iwe obi* "Your gait provoke bitterness in your enemies", and ignites the fire of passion in men *Ije ukwụ gi na-emekwa ka oku na-ere n'obi ndi ikom* "Your gait also provoke fire in the hearts of men" resulting in a fervid desire to make love to her *Ahụ ha dum ana-achọ inwụ n'ime gi* "All their bodies desire to die inside you". The imagery of *oku* "fire" used in the description shows the burning and uncontrolled desire that ravages the emotions of her admirers. In the last two lines, the poet states that her footprints on the sand brings back memories of young men's dance on the village road. Her footprints elicits a feeling of nostalgia on the admirers, reminding them of the time they were young and dancing with mirth and gusto on the village road. The implication of this nostalgic disposition is sadness and regret that, they can only wish but cannot realize their desire for reasons of age. It is instructive that the author provides an instruction to use some traditional Igbo musical instruments in this part of the poem, such as *udu* "pot", *ekwe* "drum" and *oyo* "calabash". The implication is that, this poem is actually meant to be orally performed. The use of this Igbo percussion musical instruments is designed to reflect the frenzy of the youthful music and align with the passionate mood of the admirers.

In this second stanza, the poet situates the young men and older men in the narrative in the position of the second look in the three-phased gaze structure by Murvey (1975). The men in the narrative are fellow voyeurs' like the poet and are enraptured with the sight of the maiden to the point of experiencing a *déjà vu* of sorts. The third look that completes the phase is that of the male audience or reader. It is doubtful if the description of this maiden can arouse any erotic feelings in the mind of female readers, except lesbians. Definitely, most heterosexual adult male readers will share the same emotions expressed by the poet.

In the next stanza, the poet makes a passionate appeal to the maiden, Ugomma as shown in the data below

UGOMMA

Achọrọ m ọchị si n'ime obi aputa
Ọchị na-egbu iwe, na-agwọ nsogbu
Ọchị na-egbu amụma, na-egbo mkpa
Gwam okwu na-eweta ndụ ọhụrụ kwa ụbọchị
Nke na-eme ka ndụ dị garagara
Nke na-ewetara m ọmụmụ ohuru

I want laughter from inside the heart
Laughter that kills anger, and cures problems
Laughter that flashes, and solves problems
Tell me words that bring new life every day
That which make life to be easy flowing
That which brings me a rebirth

In this stanza, the poet shifts attention from the maiden's physical appearance and focuses on the spiritual. The poet's prayer is anchored on two attributes, laughter and words, both of which are common in human relationship. In the first line, *Achọrọ m ọchị si n'ime obi aputa* "I want laughter from inside the heart", the poet appeals to the maiden to be real. Contrasted with the laughter in the second stanza that had disastrous consequences on her admirers, the poet prays for a genuine laughter. The phrase *ọchị si n'ime obi aputa* "laughter from the heart" means the type that is genuine and not from the lips, or artificial. This request is extended to the second and third lines *Ọchị na-egbu iwe, na-agwọ nsogbu* "Laughter that kills anger, and cures problems" to demonstrate that the poet is seeking for a healing laughter. This stress on laughter is premised on the fact that, it is one of the principal indices of inter-personal relationship, and one of the most sensitive and unpredictable. It is the sensitive nature of laughter in human relations that Igbo that created such aphorisms as *ọchị a bu uto* "laughter is not love" indicating the precarious nature of laughter. In other words, laughter is not an indicator of love. A second and more descriptive aphorism is *maramara n'ihu, gwompiti n'azu* "gaity in front, menacing at back". In essence, the poet wants the maiden's laughter to be a reflection of a good personality, thus ensuring a correspondence between her beautiful appearance (extrinsic) and her heart (intrinsic) evidenced in character. In the next three lines, the poet changes attention to words; human interaction is mainly facilitated by utterances during verbal exchanges between people and is also very sensitive as the wrong use of words can break a relationship. The poet appeals to the maiden to tell her living words that bring about new life and rebirth *Gwam okwu na-eweta ndụ ọhụrụ kwa ụbọchị* "Tell me words that bring new life every day", *Nke na-ewetara m ọmụmụ ohuru* "That which brings me a rebirth". This prayer by the poet is based on understanding of the consequences of using wrong words in a relationship and that wrong choice of words destroys relationships. The Igbo believe that *onu bu ogu* "mouth/utterances is war". Put differently, it is what people say with their mouth that brings about conflict in society. The poet wants the maiden to use words that are as beautiful as her looks, words that uplift, encourage, edify, heal, inspire, against those that demean, annoy and ultimately result in a strained relationship. The sum of this stanza is that the poet is desirous of a match or symmetry between physical beauty seen in the maiden's looks and spiritual beauty symptomatic of behaviour.

In the fourth stanza, the poet is lost in euphoria as he begins to yearn and fantasize for an utopia where he and the maiden will dwell to actualize their love. The data is presented below

Agụ mangoro na-agụ m
Mangoro na-eju afo
Mangoro anaghị agbakị n'eze

Mangoro nke udu mmiri
Nke na-amị n'agbata okochi na uguru
Kporo m gaa ibe nne m
Ebe ala na-eme nri bara uba
Ebe ndi mmadu anaghi adogbu onwe ha n'oru
Ebe nkwu na ngwo na-eto ka okwuru
Ube na oka ana-amị n'akughi aku
Ji na jiakpu ana-eto n'agbaghi ume
Ebe onyinye Chineke di omimi
Umụ nnunụ na anumanu juputa
Nye m ugiri nke okochi
Ujiri nke na-akwusi akpiri ikpo nku
Ujiri odo na-atọ ka mmanu anu
Ugiri na-eto ka ajo ohia n'ezi nenne m

I have a hunger for Mango
 Mango that satisfies
 Mango that does not wedge in the teeth
 Rainy season Mango
 That springs at the boundary of dry season and harmattan
 Take me to my mother's village
 Where the land produces much food
 Where people do not struggle at work
 Where palm tree and rafia tree grow like okro
 Pear and Corn without planting
 Yam and cassava grow without support
 Where the gift of God is mysterious
 Birds and animals are plenty
 Give me dry season Ugiri
 Ujiri that quenches thirst
 Ujiri odo that thirsts like honey
 Ujiri that grows like evil forest in my mother's village

This stanza is reflective of the poet's fantasy over the maiden; he is lost in a reverie and begins to imagine himself in a certain paradise where everything is beautiful. He longs for a certain strange mango fruit that grows in the boundary of dry season and Harmattan *Nke na-amị n'agbata okochi na uguru* as well as one that grows in rainy season *Mangoro nke udu mmiri*. The fact is that this fruit can only be found in the imagination of the poet. Thereafter, the poet longs to be taken to his mother's home *Kporo m gaa ibe nne m*, where there is peace and prosperity, a veritable land of milk and honey. In that paradise, people don't struggle, *Ebe ndi mmadu anaghi adogbu onwe ha n'oru*, plants and crops grow on their own without being planted *Ube na oka ana-amị n'akughi aku*, it is in reality a mysterious land replete with gifts from God *Ebe onyinye Chineke di omimi*. In addition, the poet longs for another fruit similar to mango fruit known as Ujiri, a bitter-sweet fruit, and actually desirous of one as sweet as honey *Ujiri odo na-atọ ka mmanu anu*. It is apparent that the admiration of the maiden catapulted the poet to a fantasy land, indicating that living with her is akin to living in paradise.

In the last stanza, the poet concludes the poem by stating his real intentions, as shown in the data below

Bia ka anyi gaa n'iyi
Iyi obodo anyi di n'ugwu Anyim
Anyim, Ada Imo, nwanne Omeladike

Nke na-egbu onye mgbe ndu ya na-atọ ka nnu
Bia ka anyi gaa n'iyi obodo anyi
Ebe anyi ga-agba egwu ochi n'anwu
Kuru mmiri ihunaanya n'oboaka anyi
Ebe udu mmiri na-aku nkwa
Mmiri na-agbanye n'ite anyi
O na-agu agu
Ebe ahụ ka anyi ga-agba egwu ihunaanya
Egwu Agboghobia na Okorobia
Anyi na Azu mmiri ana-achikwa ochi ndi oma

Come let us go to the river
 Our village river at the hills of Anyim
 Anyim, the daughter of Imo, sibling to Omeladike
 That kills one when their life is sweet like salt
 Come let us to go our village river
 Where we will dance the music of laughter under the sun
 Scoop the water of love in our palms
 Where rainy season beats drum
 Water is dripping into our pot
 We long for it
 In that place we shall dance the music of love
 Dance of young men and young women
 We and fishes will be laughing the laughter of good people

In this stanza, the poet throws an open invitation to the maiden; he invites her to a rendezvous in his village river *Iyi obodo anyi di n'ugwu Anyim* "Our village river in the hills of Anyim". The repetition of this invitation in line five signals the intensity and desperation of the poet for the meeting with the maiden. In line six, the poet explains the reason for the meeting *Ebe anyi ga-agba egwu ochi n'anwu* "Where we will dance to the music of laughter under the sun". This idiomatic expression is emblematic of the love game. This fact is confirmed in the next line *Kuru mmiri ihunaanya n'oboaka anyi* "Scoop the water of love in our hands". This idiomatic expression *mmiri ihunaanya* "water of love" is used to connote mutual romantic exchange between the two lovers. In line eleven and twelve, the poet states the climax of the meeting and what seems to be the ultimate reason for the imaginative gaze. *Ebe ahụ ka anyi ga-agba egwu ihunaanya* "There we shall dance the music of love" and *Egwu Agboghobia na Okorobia* "The music of young men and young women". The idiom *egwu ihunaanya* "music of love" is the sex act but terming it as dance goes beyond the usual act of copulation between a man and woman. It is rather used to denote the intense and fervid nature of the union between the two lovers. In normal parlance in Igbo, the act of love is couched in musical terms such as *iku nkwa* "drum beating" or *egwu añuri* "dance of happiness" both of which are used to capture the acrobatic nature of a heated coitus. In the last line, the poet paints a picture of the aftermath of the union *Anyi na Azu mmiri ana-achikwa ochi ndi oma* "We and fishes in the river laugh the laughter of good people", implying a joyous outcome where the lovers become one with the elements. The implication is that conjugal experience with the maiden will culminate in alignment and conformity with nature, leading to universal oneness and happiness.

Discussion of findings

There are two basic findings in this study; first is the objectification of the female and second is the cultural concept of beauty by the Igbo as expressed by the poet. Apparently, the maiden in this poem named Ugomma is objectified by the poet; she is portrayed as a sex object for the satisfaction of the male admirers. From the beginning to the end of the poem, no other aspect of the maiden is shown, aside her pleasing physique, as if she has no utilitarian values. That objectification is like a stigma that reduces women to mere

tools purposely designed for male pleasure. Miller (2000) clarified that Freud associated scopophilia with taking the female as object and subjecting them to a curious gaze in a manner that rids them of their personality. The poet completely obscures her personality; precisely, it was mentioned that she was seen in the market meaning that she was there for one transaction or the other, but that is not the concern of the poet. The poet presents only her physical part and hides her values and worth to the community of which the poet is a part. The market setting where the poet encounters the maiden is in tandem with the opinion of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) that the public place is one of the places men encounter ladies and that coloured women are more prone to gaze than white women. Additionally, the choice of words and imageries used by the poet to describe the maiden is quite revealing with respect to the gaze; highlighting her colour, skin tone and a picture of the river where her body was washed is near to unclothing her, thus leaving the male reader or observer to imagine the hidden areas of her body the poet did not expose. In Bica and Martin's (2019) study on the male gaze in literature, they found that, the depersonalized, fetishistic, detailed description of the female in a novel motivates readers to imagine her body, and the selection of words helps them to create a disgusting image in their minds. It is note-worthy that in the poet's description, the lady's clothing was discounted; the poet concentrated on the visible parts of her body as if she was naked.

An essential feature of the male gaze is that women are presented as passive in relation to the male observer. In the poet's fantasy about *Ugomma*, the poet takes the maiden for granted, as he dreams of the fairy land to which he will escape with her and the river where she will take her to consummate the love affair in sex. Nowhere in this poem did the poet imagine that the maiden could object to his erotic cravings or even be the one that takes initiation in the affair. She is depicted as a naïve object that could easily be manipulated to satisfy the lust of the poet. Incidentally, this passivity is reflected in the idea of sex in Patriarchal societies, including the Igbo where the woman plays a subservient role. In terms of positioning, the woman's traditional placement under the man has implications for domination of the woman in society. Further to this, the Igbo word for coitus *irá otu* 'to lick vagina' as conceptualized by Nwagbo (2021) asserts that, since the syntax is not *iráamu* "to lick penis", the man is designated as the actor or the main actor engaging the motions, while the woman is passive. According to him "The Igbo see sex as mainly man's activity; the man is expected to be dominant and take the initiative, while the woman is expected to be compliant...the stronger sex (male) plays an active role and the weaker sex (female) plays a passive role" (Nwagbo, 2021: 7). Based on Psychoanalysis, Kaplan (1983) asserts that the usual tendency is to assign the woman the place of object, a dominated role, where she is the recipient of male desire, and passively appearing rather than acting. In this repressed position, her sexual pleasure can only be constructed around her own objectification.

An important finding in the study is the Igbo conception of beauty; beauty is seen as both external and internal, or physical and moral as seen in character. In the poem, despite the poet's preoccupation with the physical part of the maiden, he shows concern for her character. The appeal made by the poet for good character is based on the understanding that inner and outer beauty is not bidirectional; there may be a correspondence and there may not be a correspondence between the two extreme conditions. As a matter of fact, the poet did not laud the character of the maiden, meaning that he either found none or, since it was a chance meeting in the market, he had not known her enough as to form an opinion about her character. Consequently, he offered a passionate appeal for her to exhibit good nature, especially in terms of verbal utterances. This is a confirmation of the view of several authors Several scholars (Osaghae, 2019; Nwala, 1985; Njiofor, 2018; Matiza, 2013; Ette, 2016; Abid et al, 2021; Haselmann, 2014) about the dual nature of beauty in African thought. A majority of these studies posit that Africans see inner beauty as superior to material or physical beauty. In the present study, it there is no clarity as to the position of the poet in the value ratio between inner and outer beauty. Given that more attention was devoted to the physical aspect of the maiden, it seems more proper to conclude that the poet was less concerned with inner beauty as he was overwhelmed with the attractiveness of the maiden. This is not in line with Igbo culture; irrespective of the beauty of a woman, if she fails in character, her beauty amounts to nothing.

Conclusion

The male gaze can be seen in many facets of society, from the film to advertisement and other media, in fashion industry, and as has been seen in this study, in literary works. This study argues that, beyond presenting women as attractive, there is need to present women as people with personality; human beings with value and worth and not just as objects for the satisfaction of male sexual desire. A woman's body does not define her but her personality, and a woman's worth should not be judged on the basis of her looks but on what she can offer society. This study does not lose sight of the fact that women also objectify themselves, termed self-objectification. However, it is also disputed that female self-objectification is the outcome of the male gaze; since the male placed much capita on the female body, the female therefore tends to capitalize on that to make herself a pleasant and attractive object just to suit the social standard. One of the major consequences of female objectification conditioned by the male gaze is the tendency among women affected to raise their female children in the same way to support and perpetuate the patriarchal order. A dangerous aspect is for women who find themselves not measuring up to society's standards of beauty to submit to shame and anxiety which are precursors to other psychological problems. This study submits that every woman is physically beautiful in one way or another and there is no individual who can be said to possess all the elements of beauty. It is also important that, as women devote attention to maintaining and enhancing their physical bodies, they pay equal or more attention to advancing their character in order to attain a quality that is holistic.

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