

Woman in the Mirror: Redefining Female Body Image in Rimma Onoseta's *How You Grow Wings*

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ABSTRACT

Female body image has received limited engagement in Nigerian literary scholarship despite increasing concerns about global beauty pressures, body surveillance, body dissatisfaction and harmful body enhancement practices in contemporary Nigerian cultural life. This paper addresses this gap by reading Rimma Onoseta's novel, *How You Grow Wings*, as an apt literary representation of how contemporary Nigerian women and girls navigate body image. The paper adopts qualitative close reading and in-depth textual analysis, drawing on a feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework that combines feminist perspectives of the gaze, embodiment and self-surveillance with psychoanalytic insights on reflection, misrecognition and fragmented selfhood. The analysis reveals that Onoseta presents the "mirror" as both a material object and a metaphoric cultural instrument through which female characters in the novel experience their bodies. It identifies body dissatisfaction as a generational problem defined by colourism, maternal low self-worth and overvaluation of Eurocentric beauty ideals. In the novel, Mama's mirror rituals become events through which her daughters, Cheta and Zam, learn, internalise, question and resist the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her body. The paper concludes that the novel functions as a counter-mirror that exposes harmful beauty norms while imagining self-reinvention beyond inherited body anxieties.

Keywords: colourism, female body image, feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework, Nigerian literature, Rimma Onoseta

INTRODUCTION

Female body image is not merely an individual's feeling about her appearance; rather, it is a social and cultural experience through which women learn what kinds of bodies are admired, accepted or rejected. Body image scholarship defines the concept as a multidimensional phenomenon involving perception, affect, cognition and behaviour in relation to the body and physical appearance (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Grogan, 2016). It also describes the beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural practices through which people interpret their own bodies and imagine how others evaluate them (Slade, 1994; Thompson et al., 1999; Cash, 2004). In this sense, body image is not only about what the body looks like, but also about how the body is seen, compared, disciplined and judged within a given culture.

Feminist and body-image scholars argue that although body image concerns affect both men and women, they are more intensely gendered for women because female worth is more frequently tied to attractiveness, bodily features, desirability, youthfulness and conformity to dominant beauty ideals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Grogan, 2016; Tiggemann, 2011). This explains why female body image is often discussed not simply as a personal concern but as a cultural and feminist issue, since women are socialised to monitor, evaluate and regulate their bodies in response to external standards of acceptability.

In Africa, specifically in Nigerian contexts, female beauty has often had to respond to two overlapping histories: indigenous aesthetic systems and the violence of colonial or Eurocentric valuation. Oloruntoba-Oju (2007) opines that body image involves personal constructions and public projections of the body in relation to culturally

learned standards. He adds that because African bodies have historically been subjected to external denigration and cultural reclamation, female body image in Nigeria remains a field of cultural contest (pp. 2-4).

Furthermore, contemporary Nigerian beauty discourse is marked by the tension between older cultural values and contemporary global pressures. Ibrahim and Jegede's (2020) reading of Fagunwa's Yoruba novels reveals the vagueness of body size as a determiner of beauty in Yoruba culture and the association of beauty with character and moral value (pp. 131-132). Similarly, Oloruntoba-Oju (2007) argues that Nigerian African body aesthetics include complexion, body parts, body size, sexuality, language and morality, even though globalisation has unsettled these categories (pp. 2-3).

Moreover, recent body-image research warns against treating Black women as homogeneous or assuming that distorted body image is only experienced by White, middle-class women. Bordo (2012) challenges this idea that body image problems are simply "a white girl's thing" (pp. 265-267). Watson et al. (2019) argue that Black women's body image concerns must be situated within intersecting race and gender pressures, especially where light skin, hair texture, facial features and body type become measures of desirability (pp. 280-282). Balogun-Mwangi et al. (2023) extend this concern to Black African women by including skin tone, hair texture and racialised appearance (pp. 331-333).

However, much of the available work on female body image in African and Nigerian contexts remains located in psychology, public health, social work and media studies. These studies have usefully examined skin tone, racialised appearance, social media, body appreciation and Eurocentric beauty ideals among Black and Nigerian women (Balogun-Mwangi et al., 2023, pp. 331-333; Jemisenia et al., 2019, pp. 2-4; Watson et al., 2019, pp. 280-282; Winter et al., 2019, pp. 69-70). Literary scholarship has also engaged adjacent questions such as body size, beauty and character in Yoruba literature, and hair as a racialised and gendered motif in Adichie's *Americanah* (Green, 2020, pp. 1-3; Ibrahim & Jegede, 2020, pp. 131-132). Nonetheless, female body image has not received sufficient attention in Nigerian literary criticism, particularly in relation to colourism, bleaching, maternal body surveillance and the psychological implications of inherited distorted beauty ideals.

This paper addresses this gap by examining Rimma Onoseta's *How You Grow Wings* (2022) as a contemporary Nigerian novel that is apt for such critique because it portrays contemporary Nigerian women and young girls' lived experiences of the body, beauty, class aspiration, maternal low self-worth and inherited maternal body dissatisfaction. Methodologically, the paper adopts qualitative close reading and in-depth textual analysis of the novel, paying attention to narrative voice, repeated mirror scenes, embodied description, family relations and character development. The analysis is guided by a feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework, which makes it possible to read the mirror as a physical object, cultural gaze, maternal inheritance and literary counter-narrative through which Onoseta exposes and disapproves prevailing harmful female body norms.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist-Psychoanalytic Mirror Framework

This paper deploys a feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework to critique female body image in *How You Grow Wings*. The framework is built on the assumption that the "mirror" in literary analysis is both a literal reflective surface and a metaphorical cultural instrument through which women are trained to perceive, judge and correct their bodies. In feminist terms, the mirror is implicated in the gaze, social visibility and bodily discipline while in psychoanalytic terms, it is implicated in self-recognition, misrecognition and the subject's longing for a coherent image of the self. Bringing these two perspectives together is useful for a novel in which women do not merely look at physical mirrors, but are also made into mirrors of evaluation for one another.

Psychoanalytically, the mirror evokes Lacan's account of ego formation. In the mirror stage, the subject identifies with an external image that appears whole and unified, even though lived bodily experience is internally fragmented (2006, pp. 75-76). This means that identity begins through an image that is both enabling and deceptive. Hermes (2012) explains this process as the formation of an illusionary self through the external body image (pp. 1-2). When adapted to body image criticism, the Lacanian mirror helps to explain why a woman may misrecognise an external ideal as her true or desirable self. In this sense, the mirror does not simply show her body; it can produce alienation by making the subject measure herself against an image she cannot fully become.

Feminist criticism extends this psychoanalytic insight by showing that women's mirrors are never neutral. Berger's argument that a woman is often taught to survey herself continually, and to watch herself being looked at, clarifies how the female self becomes divided between the one who lives in the body and the one who inspects it from outside (2008, pp. 47-48). Hermes (2012) builds on this point by arguing that women's encounters with mirrors often function as repeated processes of self-identification and doubt rather than a single moment of self-recognition (p. 2). The mirror, therefore, becomes a social instrument that returns a verdict shaped by gender, colour, class and desirability.

Within feminist literary criticism, the mirror also intersects with the logic of the gaze. Mulvey's (1999) theorisation of the male gaze explains how visual culture positions women as objects to be looked at and evaluated within unequal structures of power (pp. 837-838). More recent feminist literary and cultural criticism continues this line of thought by reading the mirror, the gaze and other visual motifs as structures through which female subjectivity is produced, fractured and sometimes reclaimed (Hurley and Hojeij, 2023; Hadi and Asl, 2024; Bamidele-Nelly, 2026). Onoseta's novel aptly engages this logic of gendered scrutiny looking because the bodies of female characters are repeatedly observed, compared and corrected. Interestingly, the gaze(s) depicted in the novel is not only male, but also familial, maternal, communal, colourist and classed.

Bordo's body-image criticism is also important to this framework because it shows how cultural images teach women how to interpret their bodies. She describes this process as a form of "perceptual pedagogy" through which culture teaches subjects what counts as defect, normality and desirability (2012, p. 270). Bordo is equally useful for reading the intergenerational nature of body insecurity. Her reflection on her daughter's visual world suggests that children acquire body values not only from mass media but from the adults, domestic habits and everyday images around them (2012, p. 273). This is central to Onoseta's novel, where Mama's mirror and bleaching rituals become a repeated lesson in colour hierarchy for her two daughters, Zam and Cheta.

Furthermore, Hermes' (2012) argument that contemporary feminist literature can reclaim the mirror from its restrictive association with vanity is also instructive (pp. 4-6). In such texts, the mirror exposes fragmentation, contradiction and the difficulty of female selfhood under oppressive norms. Literature may therefore function as a counter-mirror reflecting harmful ideals but also makes them available for critique. In this paper, the feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework is relevant through four related meanings: the physical mirror in which Mama and her daughters look; the social mirror of colourism and class; the maternal mirror through which daughters internalise or resist bodily shame; and the novel as a counter-mirror, which exposes the dangers of these internalised perceptions and offers opportunity for redefinition.

Textual Analysis

Synopsis of *How You Grow Wings*

How You Grow Wings follows the difficult lives of two sisters, Zam and Cheta, growing up in a Nigerian household marked by emotional abuse, maternal cruelty, paternal withdrawal and classed dependence on wealthier relatives. Zam, quieter and lighter-skinned, is often treated as more acceptable by their mother, Mama, while Cheta, darker, outspoken and rebellious, bears much of Mama's hostility. Their lives change when Zam moves into Auntie Sophie's wealthy home, while Cheta is left to navigate a more unstable path that eventually leads her away from home through difficult and risky choices. Although the novel is strongly concerned with family dysfunction, sibling rivalry, poverty, class mobility and survival, it also richly portrays female body image concerns such as skin colour, beauty, feminine comportment and body surveillance through the integration of the mirror into the characters' everyday lives.

The resolution of the novel is embedded in the title. Onoseta's title metaphorises "wings" as growth, escape and the difficult acquisition of freedom. At the end of the story, the girls do not simply "grow wings" by becoming physically distant from their traumatising home, but by learning to recognise and heal from the experiences that have wounded them.

Influence of Colourist Mirrors on the Female Body in *How You Grow Wings*

Onoseta first introduces female body image through comparison. The novel's young female characters do not enter a neutral world, rather, they are introduced into a family and community where bodies are ranked by colour, class, gendered comportment and proximity to wealth. Aunt Sophie becomes one of the earliest idealised images of female beauty for Zam. Her arrival changes the atmosphere of the house because her beauty is attached to power and difference:

But it wasn't Uncle Emeke who came out of the car, it was his half-caste wife. Aunt Sophie was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She had magic eyes that were sometimes brown, sometimes green, sometimes both, and skin that reminded me of the champagne we kept exclusively for her and Uncle Emeke. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 12-13).

Here, Aunt Sophie's body is not admired in isolation. Her skin is compared to champagne, a luxurious wine kept especially for wealthy relatives. Her beauty is entangled with her status: wealth, foreignness and exclusivity. The point is strengthened when Zam confesses that she secretly enters her parents' room to stand before the full-length mirror, imitating Aunt Sophie's movements, smile and manner of speaking (Onoseta, 2022, p. 13). The mirror becomes a rehearsal space where Zam attempts to inhabit not just a beautiful body but the social privileges attached to that body. From a Lacanian perspective, this is misrecognition because Zam desires an image that promises coherence and worth, but the desired image is outside herself and tied to structures of colour and class.

Mama also secretly valorises Sophie, although this admiration is displaced into resentment. She prepares special trays and champagne for Sophie and Uncle Emeke, while complaining that Sophie wastes food because she thinks she is "too good" to drink in their house (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 35-36). Zam notices this contradiction and recognises that Aunt Sophie is also the person whose money sustains the household. Mama's hostility therefore conceals dependence, envy and admiration. Her complaint that Sophie acts anyhow because "her husband has money" does not cancel her desire for the classed and light-skinned femininity Sophie represents; rather, it reveals how deeply that image unsettles her.

The reader later discovers, through Cheta, that Mama's insecurity is linked to her childhood. Cheta remembers how her mother's sister calls her "Blackie" and how the family jokes that Mama must have been adopted because she is the darkest of the sisters:

'Blackie, you know Ebele just bought a store in town,' Aunt Chidera said. Mama hated it when her younger sister called her Blackie. Mama was the darkest in her family, and sometimes her sisters joked and said she must have been adopted. Whenever they did, Mama always tried to smile and act like it didn't hurt her, but I knew it did. I could see it in the way her face pinched like she was smelling rotten eggs. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 18-19).

This revelation provides a crucial psychological background to Mama's attitudes and relationship with people, especially her family. The label "Blackie" reduces her dark skin into a sign of exclusion, and the adoption joke symbolically excludes Mama from her own family. Her obsession with bleaching, preference for Zam's lightness and indirect valorization of Sophie are therefore not mere coincidences but manifestations of an unresolved childhood emotional wound. Scholarship on Black women's body image cautions that skin tone, hair texture, facial features and racialised appearance are central to how Black women experience body satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Balogun-Mwangi et al., 2023, pp. 331-333; Watson et al., 2019, pp. 280-282; Winter et al., 2019, pp. 69-70). Through Mama, Onoseta gives this insight literary expression by showing how colourism begins as family humour and later presents as adult insecurity and maternal cruelty.

Bleaching, Mirror Rituals and Maternal Transmission of Body Shame in *How You Grow Wings*

Part of the most engaging body image depictions in the novel are Mama's mirror rituals. They are important because they present Mama's mirror as a domestic classroom where Zam and Cheta watch their mother survey and attempt to correct her body. Mama's bleaching ritual is introduced as routine and urgent:

Mama was always looking for a product that could make her skin lighter faster and she wasted no time going to the market. Mama used to use just bleaching cream but a few months ago, she met a woman at the salon who told her hair developer helped the bleaching cream work faster . . . She had used the mixture that night and every night since. Cheta and I used to take turns rubbing the cream on her back, but Mama stopped asking Cheta to help the evening Cheta came into the room and started reading a newspaper article about the harmful effects of bleaching. Cheta's disapproving frown was too much for Mama to handle. (Onoseta, 2022, p. 31).

This passage already differentiates the daughters. Zam serves while Cheta questions. Zam's obedience does not mean approval, but it shows that she has learned how to cope with Mama by telling her what she wants to hear. On the other hand, Cheta's resistance is intellectual and embodied because she reads about the dangers inherent in bleaching and her frown expresses a disapproval. Mama cannot tolerate this because Cheta's frown serves as a counter-mirror that exposes and criticises the bodily violence that Mama sees as beauty routine:

Mama untied the wrapper that she had knotted over her breasts, stood naked in front of the mirror, and watched herself. She started from her hands, worked her way up to her shoulders, then worked down her body. Her heavy breasts lined with stretch marks swayed like the pendulum in physics class as she bent over to rub the concoction on her legs. As always her movements were slow and methodical. She took her time to rub the mixture into every angle and under every flap, paying special attention to her knuckles, elbows and knees. When she was done she turned around and handed me the bowl and I dutifully started rubbing it on her back. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 31-32).

This passage is an apt fictional illustration of self-surveillance. Mama observes and works on her body as if it were a faulty object. Her knuckles, elbows and knees are presented as problematic because they resist all her attempts at lightening them. Hermes' claim that contemporary feminist mirror scenes reveal psychological process rather than simple vanity is useful here (2012, pp. 4-6). Mama's mirror reveals fragmentation in the sense that she is unable to encounter her body wholly because it has already been divided into acceptable and unacceptable parts. Bordo's "perceptual pedagogy" also clarifies the scene because Zam and Cheta are not merely watching their mother; they are being taught how to see a dark body as a problem to be corrected (2012, p. 270). Another vivid example is illustrated by Zam:

'This developer is working, eh?' Mama asked after I was done. Her eyes were on her reflection as she twisted and turned, trying to get a good look from every angle. 'Yes Mama, it is working.' I told her what she wanted to hear. It would have made her angry if I had told her that the bleach didn't make her look light-skinned, it just made her look like an overripe banana. Her skin was a motley shade of yellow with patches of brown on the body parts the cream couldn't penetrate . . . She turned to me and wrapped her hand around my waist, lining up her forearm against mine, as she compared our skin tones. Yes. Yes. It's working. 'Very soon I'll be a yellow pawpaw like you,' she said with a satisfied smile on her face. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 32-33).

Here, Zam becomes Mama's second mirror as Mama no longer measures herself only against the glass mirror but against her daughter's lighter skin. Mama's maternal body therefore, does not simply pass down care; it also passes down comparison. Bordo's reflection on mothers, daughters and visual cultures is relevant because the child learns bodily values from the mother's habits of self-scrutiny just as it is with Cheta and Mama (2012, p. 273). The tragedy inherent in this dynamic is that Zam's preference is also an emotional wound. She admits that she knows Mama likes her more than Cheta, but she is not sure whether this likeness is because she is light-skinned or just simply favoured (Onoseta, 2022, p. 33). For this reason, this preference founded on complexion does not liberate Zam; rather, it makes her worth conditional and superficial.

The Unequal Burden of Colourist Mothering in *How You Grow Wings*

To fully engage body image in the novel, the reader must situate Cheta's experience alongside Zam's because the two daughters reveal different outcomes from the same maternal inheritance of body dissatisfaction. Zam is favoured because her skin approximates what Mama desires for herself while Cheta is punished for embodying the dark skin Mama possesses but has been taught to despise. As such, Mama's hostility towards Cheta is not

only disciplinary but it is more of displaced anger. The episode following Papa's affair with Aunt Ebele is especially revealing of this. Cheta innocently exposes Papa's secret visits and Mama's shame is expressed as violence towards Cheta rather than confrontation with the husband:

No one said anything. Aunt Nneka and Aunt Chidera looked at each other and then looked at Mama. Mama was frozen . . . 'In Papa and Mama's room,' I answered. They all inhaled, sucking the air from the room . . . Mama defrosted. She unfolded herself from the couch so quickly, the bottle of malt she held spilled on her hand and dripped onto her dress. 'Cheta, get up. We're going home.' (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 20-21)

What follows is one of the clearest instances of how Mama's distorted body image is transferred to Cheta. Mama commands Cheta to undress and throws the hot contents of a travelling mug on her naked body (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 21-23). Cheta later realises that 'it wasn't Papa's infidelity that broke Mama, it was the embarrassment' (Onoseta, 2022, p. 23). In addition, this incident weaves Papa directly into Mama's body-image ordeal. Papa's emotional withdrawal and infidelity intensify Mama's humiliation but Mama redirects the force of that humiliation onto a vulnerable Cheta, who may not be able to retaliate. We see Papa as a silent embodiment of the family's dysfunction, a 'shell' whom, as Cheta bitterly describes, Mama has already emptied (Onoseta, 2022, p. 46). His silence does not make him innocent but it creates the space in which Mama's unresolved distorted body image influences the atmosphere of family life.

This also explains Cheta's defiance as more than stubbornness but as a survival strategy against a household that reads her body, voice and anger as excessive. She protects Zam from predatory male attention at school, naming Mr. Henry publicly as a danger to girls (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 47-49). This intervention shows that Cheta's boldness, which Mama equates with trouble, is also an ethical disapproval of the silences that endanger young women. Her disapproval of Mama's bleaching and her protection of Zam are connected: both reject a social order that makes girls available for control, discipline and use.

Counter-Mirrors and Divergent Outcomes in *How You Grow Wings*

Onoseta does not suggest that Zam and Cheta grow simply because they leave home. Rather, they grow because experiences outside their home expose them to new mirrors, some healing and some dangerous. Zam's move to Aunt Sophie's house initially places her before another beauty regime. There she makes friend with her cousin, Kaira, who offers clothes, make-up and a new language of presentation:

'These are some of my old clothes. You can have all of them. We should be the same size.' . . . 'Come and sit down. I'll do your makeup for you.' . . . 'My foundation is too dark for you. I'm going to mix my mum's foundation with my own, hopefully it'll be close to your color,' she said . . . 'You have very good skin,' she said softly as she rubbed something silky into my face . . . 'Do you have to talk like that?' . . . 'With that thick Igbo accent?' . . . When she was done I went into the bathroom and watched my lips in the mirror as I practiced talking like her. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 84-85).

Here, Kaira's world offers Zam access to glamour and confidence but it also introduces new pressures in the form of the correct foundation, right accent and socially acceptable disposition. The mirror again becomes pedagogic. Yet, this new environment also gives Zam relational resources that her home denies her. For instance, Chef Gideon and Mr. Romieto ask what she likes to eat, a question she has never been asked at home (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 82-83). Also, Ginika's friendship gives her emotional safety. After confronting Cheta about the stolen money, Ginika massages oil into Zam's scalp and Zam feels the tension leave her body (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 177-178). These moments matter because they allow Zam to experience her body as cared for rather than inspected, like it was with Mama. Zam confesses, "We stopped pretending when the sun set and the lights went off. It was in those quiet moments that we spilled our secrets and discovered that we hurt the same way and wanted the same things—parents that cared." (Onoseta, 2022, p. 221).

In the new environment, friendship becomes a counter-mirror because it allows Zam, Kaira and Ginika to recognise shared wounds rather than compete through appearance or family status. This is why Zam can later

name Mama's grip on her with new clarity. When she learns that she may attend school in England, she reflects that she has slowly reduced Mama's calls and finally understands that 'existing shouldn't be painful' (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 248-249). As such, the new environment does not erase her trauma, but it offers her distance from the maternal mirror that made control and servitude feel like survival.

On the contrary, Cheta's external experiences are harsher. Unlike Zam, she does not have access to a protected, wealthy home. She has to navigate deprivation, risky friendships and exploitative economies. At one point, she is made over into a polished version for a gathering where women's bodies are again evaluated, this time for male patronage:

I couldn't recognize myself. I looked sophisticated. I looked like a cosmopolitan woman who travelled the world and brunched at upscale restaurants . . . Paulina gave us a brief rundown of the men in the room. She pointed out the ones to stay away from because their fetishes were on the darker side, the ones that already had a harem and wouldn't be worth our time, the ones that beat their girls, and the ones whose wives dedicated their time to making their husbands' mistresses miserable. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 280-281).

This event mirrors and distorts the similar depiction of Zam being made-up. Here, Cheta too is transformed before a social gaze but her new image is tied to danger, male control and commodification of women. Onoseta therefore refuses to romanticise her escape because outside the home, Cheta meets other versions of the same economy that valued Auntie Sophie, punished Mama and damaged the daughters. Nonetheless, Cheta's journey also produces insight because at the end of the story, she looks towards a future she wants to create, even if that future is not pure or uncomplicated:

If we had grown up in a different home, maybe Zam and I would have been the kind of sisters that laughed and had inside jokes and told each other everything . . . But that wasn't us and that would never be us and for the first time that realization filled me with regret . . . I had to focus on the future and the new life I wanted to create for myself. Maybe one day the things I had done would catch up to me but until then, I was going to make the most out of my fresh start and do my best to be happy. (Onoseta, 2022, pp. 326-327).

This passage shows that the contrast between Zam and Cheta is not a simple one between success and failure. Zam's outcome is shaped by friendship, class and status upgrade, while Cheta's is shaped by uncertainty, survival and self-discovery. Regardless their outcomes, both girls move away from Mama's fragmented mirror. In this sense, the story presents a counter-mirror because it exposes how colourism, quest for wealth, maternal body dissatisfaction and social mirrors influence female body image and self-perception. However, it also reveals how new relationships can disrupt inherited body anxieties as in the case of Zam. Such a reading expands Nigerian literary criticism by demonstrating that women's embodied experiences cannot be separated from family structure, colour hierarchy, class aspiration, patriarchy and the aftermath of colonial encounter. It also responds to scholarship urging more nuanced attention to specific pressures affecting Black women's body image, including skin tone and Eurocentric ideals.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Rimma Onoseta's *How You Grow Wings* as a significant Nigerian fictional engagement with female body image. The feminist-psychoanalytic mirror framework deployed enables the paper to read the "mirror" in the novel not only as physical reflective glass but as a symbolic gaze, image, inheritance and counter-mirror. From a feminist lens, the mirror exposes the colourist hierarchy and cultural norms that condition women to scrutinise their bodies. Psychoanalytically, it reveals misrecognition, fragmentation and the desire for an image that will confer wholeness.

The paper concludes that Onoseta's novel functions as a counter-mirror within contemporary Nigerian literature. Mama is read as both victim and conduit of body shame. Her childhood labelling as 'Blackie,' Papa's betrayal and her secret valorisation of Auntie Sophie converge to shape her unequal treatment of her daughters. Nonetheless, Zam and Cheta's different outcomes also show that inherited body anxieties can be disrupted.

Zam's relationships with Kaira, Ginika, Auntie Sophie and the domestic staff offer her new ways of seeing herself, while Cheta's tougher trajectory pushes her towards self-invention. In doing so, the novel invites focused critical literary attention to female body image in Nigerian literature.

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