

## Original Paper

# Images of Body Shaming in Ezeigbo's Magic Breast Bags

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### Abstract

*Body shaming is an old sociological phenomenon that leaves a mark in the life of its recipients and could drive them to take drastic actions in order to fit into societal perceived and accepted looks. Several literary works expose the open criticism and mockery of a person's physical appearances which could demoralize or impede the mindset of the individuals and yet nothing is done about it in most situations. The act of body shaming is an act of bullying which the effect oftentimes is trivialized in certain situations and communities. Body shaming might not even be regarded as an act of bullying or wrong-doing to a person's mental state and general perceptions of their being. The objective of this study is to expose the resultant effect of body shaming, proffer ways in which it can be curbed and examine the role of literature as a corrective medium. From a sociological stand point, using the symbolic interactionist perspective theory, this study draws its strength from Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo Magic Breast Bag a collection of short stories with a focus "Magic Breast Bags", "The Runaway Prophet" and "I Go Drive Myself". The selected choices aim at exploring the causes of body shaming, the psychological effect of body shaming and the perceived gender labeling of body shaming.*

### Keywords

*akachi adimora ezeigbo, body shaming, labelling, self-worth*

## 1. Introduction

Body perceptions and acceptance is both important for a sustainable mindset and the posterity of the human society. Very often however, individuals have been subjected to and have subjected themselves to body shaming based on perceived societal definitions of what the ideal is in terms of body forms. The "ideas about the female body vary from culture to culture. What is considered perfect in one culture could be seen as abnormal and unacceptable in another" Ezeigbo (8). Using Ezeigbo's comment as a backdrop, it therefore becomes pertinent to further examine the other many ways that constitute the idea of wrong criteria for judging women. This idea of wrong criteria leads to issues of body shaming

as a result of what is the perceived body structure of the woman and the idea of suitable roles women can aspire to operate in. In examining the images of body shaming in the works of Ezeigbo's short stories collection *Magic Breast Bags*; it tells the story of a young lady Somtochi who while entertaining her friends felt uncomfortable by the sudden appearance of her grandmother in terms of her looks and later her grandmother interruption of her conversation with her friends when she succinctly reminded her that she, Somtochi, had forgot to bring in her breast bag drying outside in the sun. The mention of "akpa-ara" makes Somtochi and her female friend uncomfortable in the presence of their male friends who they assumed would snicker at how her grandmother had preferred to call "bra" "breast bags". Upon seeing how Somtochi felt, her boyfriend Ifeka tries to break the ice by asking her why her grandmother prefers calling a bra "akpa-ara" which translating means "breast-bags" and not by the English term bra. Ifeka through his effort was able to convince both Somtochi and Olachi that there was nothing wrong with the way her grandmother had chosen to call a bra. They need not feel self-conscious, and embarrassed rather be proud of the word akpa-ara which is even a better fit than the word bra. *I Go Drive Myself* tells a quick story of how women as drivers are perceived and treated in most part of Nigeria. Nneka had just gotten herself a car and had instructed her driver to take the day off so she could explore her driving skills. After several temptations on the way to her destination, she finally arrives at her destination and was about to drive through the gate when a red car who had wanted to drive in through the wrong gate was asked to reverse and go in through the right gate. The driver of the red car was not too concerned about the car honking behind him. He ignored Nneka warning and bashed her car. To complicate matters he came out of his car to meet a rather surprised Nneka still in shock as to what had just happened to her car after all her effort at driving carefully earlier on. The man came out and insinuated that the accident had been Nneka's fault because she had decided to drive herself instead of employing the services of a driver. He labelled her with the 'I go drive myself' and proceeded to slap her in the face. Angrily, Nneka bashes the mans' head with the heel of her stiletto shoe. "The Runaway Prophet", revolves around the story of Mayen through the eyes of Ozioma. Mayen a beautiful lady by all standard had always felt insecure in her own skin. Likewise, Ozioma had always been ridiculed for her robust frame. She is constantly defending her 'robustness'. Mayen and Ozioma worked as maid to Chief and Mrs Ndulue. Chief Ndulue was sick and Mayen attended to him while Ozioma attended to the grandchild of the couple. Mayen insecurities about herself leads to her shallow sense of worth and she thinks everyone actually is envious of her beauty. She eventually fell scam to a false prophet who took away all her saving and her incredible attitude also led to her losing her job with the Ndulues. Mayen and Ozioma both felt body shamed and this affected their self-perception and influenced their attitude towards life. Each of these stories examine body shaming from different perspectives.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology selected will be to consider a descriptive qualitative approach of the stories to have a better understanding of the novels by using the symbolic interactionist perspective tenets to understand better the way societal perception can also play a vital role in the understanding of the body shaming as experienced by characters in the three stories.

## 3. Body Shaming as a Concept

Body shaming happens constantly in all societies; however, it is not considered as a serious issue. Victims of body shaming according to Brewis and Bruening (9) attest that the aftermath of body shaming can lead to anxiety and depression. Body shaming is defined as “the act of insulting a person’s body type by expressing or insulting judgments about their body form and size” (“Body Shaming”) It is also the act or practice of subjecting someone to criticism or mockery for supposed bodily faults or imperfections (“Body Shaming”). Body shaming has its roots in the idea of feelings of insecurities as a result of expectations from internal and outward expectations of what is acceptable. The sense of shame that accompanies an objection to something related to a person can cause shame whether directly or indirectly. Hence, Kaufman suggested that shame is regarded as having its foundations in the complexities of interpersonal relationships (14). Relationships forms the bedrock of body shaming. Relationships with the society one finds herself. The society which constitutes the agreed perception of the norms of the people creates room for how and what the ideal body should be both for male and female. When there is a shift in the perceived recognized acceptable standard, shame occurs. Where there is a standard body perception there is body shaming. Bringing in its wake the capacity of been broken. Teo et al. stated that body shaming is a form of verbal bullying. The neurologist and psychologist had done some research, and their findings explained that body shaming could lead to a psychological problem. Evans argues that body shaming takes the form of comments and judgment both to self and to others (526). Appearances that are criticized can be due to face shape, skin color, body size, or body changes. Dolezal nevertheless posit that to “body shame is a process which can provide phenomenological insights into the manner through which the body is shaped by social forces, addressing a question not yet adequately answered by phenomenological accounts of embodiment...” (9) Arumugan et al. discovered that, people are criticized due to their physical appearance in terms of their shape, size and colour and that body-shaming affects 94% of female and 84% of male.

## 4. Shaming in Ezeigbo’s Stories

Body shaming as established is traumatic for the victim. In the context of the three stories selected, body shaming will be examined in each of the stories to emphasise the portrayal of body shaming as depicted through the characters by the writer.

#### 4.1 *The Magic Breast Bag*

In this story, Ezeigbo depicts body shaming from different perspectives:

**Dressing shaming:** from this story, it is exposed that people can be shamed based on the way they choose to dress. This sort of shaming is often expressed to ridicule, express wonder or dissatisfaction with the way someone has chosen to dress at that particular time. Somtochi, the host of the get-together expresses her dissatisfaction with the way her friend Olachi is dressed. She considers it overdressing especially as the weather is hot.

Somtochi sat next to Namu. “You have not helped matters, my friend. Look at the way you are dressed. High neck blouse with long sleeves and a long skirt to wit, in hot weather like this! What do you expect? How can air circulate around your body, covered as it is? She shook her head and her long braids swirled around her neck and shoulders.

Olachi looked at Ifeka and turned to her friend, addressing her with measured calmness. “Ah, you always find fault with the way I dress. You’d better get used to it. I make no apology for the way I wear my clothes or what I wear. You know my philosophy and that is standard. A woman should cover herself properly.” (MBB 2)

Through this conversation, it is observed that both ladies are governed by each perception of what is right in terms of dressing. For Somtochi, who could not understand Olachi point of view in terms of dressing and considers going by “dressing to fit the occasion” can be said to be as wrong as Olachi who considers dressing to be a function of propriety, that is, “cover herself properly”. Both ladies react to each other based on different societal dictate on what dressing should be or not. However, Olachi response to Somtochi shows that she has a good sense of self-worth as she calmly explained to her friend that she is fully aware of her choices in terms of what to wear. Olachi sense of self-worth as depicted in the story helped her get over her friend’s dress shaming. If Olachi had lacked a good perception of herself, she would have been made uncomfortable, wishing that she could excuse herself from the gathering and constantly feeling inadequate.

“Why then do you complain about the heat? Olachi, no one is asking you to go naked, Somtochi demurred politely. She thought Olachi was too fastidious about clothes and sometimes found this disconcerting, irritating even. “I think one should dress comfortably in accordance to the weather.” (MBB: 2)

Items of the body is another way in which body shaming is examined in the story. In this stance, the bra becomes an object of body shaming as a result of the words used in describing the item “bra”.

“The old woman shook her head and said, Somtochi, you are sitting here and it is raining so heavily. Are you not going to bring in your *akpa-ara* before they are soaked?”

Somtochi wilted like banana leaves touched by a flame. She could barely look at Namu and Ifeka. It was to Olachi that she directed her agonized gaze and saw that she too was embarrassed. Somtochi got up and hurried out of the room. She was thinking: *Oh, Nne, did you have to embarrass and ridicule me before these guys? Akpa-ara indeed! Couldn't you have used another word, a better word like cloth if*

*you didn't want to use the right word bra? What are Namo and Ifeka thinking now? Akpa-ara indeed! Na waa.* (MBB: 7)

## 5. Shaming by Labelling

Here, the character Nwanyi-mgbaragada-ara is given this queer name because of the size of her breast. Due to the village ridicule and name-calling, she constantly stays back at home and refused to go out for fear of people using her breast to abuse her. It was not until Nwecheonye, Somtochi grandmother, made her an *akpa-ara* that fit her breast was she able to confidently walk the street of her village.

### 5.1 I Go Drive Myself

In this story, body shaming takes a gender approach in terms of skills perceived that are and should be masculine. Women are not perceived to be good drivers and this stems from a patriarchal point of view. In some part of Nigeria, women are not considered good drivers and when they do, they are quick to label them "I go drive myself". "I go drive myself" shames the victim, making them doubt their skill as a competent driver and in the case of the story, it made Nneka so angry that she smashed the head of her abuser.

The driver of the white car leaps out, fuming. His wife rushes out from the other side. Nneka struggles out of her wrecked car, terribly upset.

"Look at what you've done to my car!" the man shouted, examining his damaged headlamps. "You won't employ a driver – *I go drive myself*. Nonsense!"

"How can you possibly blame me?" she asks bewildered. "It wasn't my fault and you know it. Didn't you see what happened?" She turns to her wife, appealingly, willing her to speak up, for she must have seen clearly what happened, from her vantage position at the passenger seat in front.

The man slaps her face. "You're a very stupid woman," he shouts. "Idiot!"

(MBB: 21)

The perception that women are bad drivers is an offshoot of societal perceived gender roles. These gender roles are believed to be the norm by all in the society. This could explain the accusatory remarks of Nneka's abuser wife, who supported her husband by blaming Nneka to be at fault for the accident. The abuser's wife in this context is acting out the script that society had written out for her as the ideal way of life. The wife becomes a body shaming enabler.

### 5.2 The Runaway Prophet

In this story, Mayen and Ozioma experience body shaming from a more personal perspective.

## 6. Criticism

They experienced criticism about their looks. Ozioma description of Mayen brought to the fore how beauty is judged by onlookers:

Mayen had the type of body that only beauty queens possess except that her nose was too long and pointed like a shrew's and her lips a little too wide and thin. Anyone who met her noticed her flaw

immediately. She was conscious of it, tried to push out her lips and ended with a permanent pout. (MBB: 39)

Mayen consciousness of her flaw (as onlookers viewed it) led to her conscious effort to fix it hence leading to a permanent pout. This also explains the need for body alterations by people who feel inadequate about a particular part of their body, who are made to feel ashamed and hence they result to artificial means to rectify the perceived flaw.

### 6.1 Over-Valuing

Over-valuing is another way people body shame others they perceived not to be as beautiful as they are. Mayen is described as a beautiful lady. She is aware of her beauty and to make others around her feel less comfortable she rubs her beauty in their faces by singing spiteful songs

If you argued with her about anything, she would sing a crazy song to you:

*Some people jealous me*

*I say, some people jealous me*

*Some people jealous me*

*Because of my beauty*

### 6.2 Comparison

Ozioma, in describing Mayen's beauty, compares herself with Mayen and is dissatisfied in her conclusion. Ozioma feels insulted by her critics (teacher) for blaming her for the way she looks.

One of my teachers in secondary school once said that I ate much of the wrong foods and that was why I was putting on weight like a middle-aged woman. I hated her for saying so. Was it my fault that in Uncle Donatus' house, where I spent my holidays, we ate *akpu*, cassava meal, twice a day. And the *akpu* my uncle's wife pounded was the worst kind called *eketeke*. It made you grow a potbelly. (MBB: 39)

### 6.3 Effects of Body Shaming

Walker-King in her introductory comment suggests that "...the constant bombardment of fictionalized female body images, externally conceived personas, and rules of body play (such as "black women do this" or "older women don't do that") alienate women from each other, it also fragments minds, (7-9) This guides the construction of the effects of body shaming on individuals. Body shaming affects the mind of its victims and it also causes division amongst individuals which are under a perceived acceptable notion on the ideal construction of bodies. This is even made harsher within the onus of literature where bodies are imagined and constructed according to the writer's perception.

Shame cannot have an effect if there is no comparison. Comparison is enabled by language, culture, values and situations in which "...certain behaviours, actions or modes of being are prohibited and seen as deviant and others are socially sanctioned and considered "normal" or "acceptable". Dolezal Maria Cuba posits that the body is crucial to self-construction and identity. (78) The physical appearance of an individual is the major reason for people to body shame. Therefore, people who do not have an ideal body always feel insecure with themselves and have anxiety or depression as they continuously suffer

from negative comments about their body. Valentina (98)

People engage in body shaming others because of a person's physical appearance, especially their weight. Arumugam et al. also reveals that body shaming makes a person feel distressed, embarrassed, and treated differently by other people (18).

Through *Magic Breast Bag*, Adimora-Ezeigbo intentionally sets out to highlight the emotions that occur after an episode of body shaming between characters. Some of the effects of body shaming as depicted in the short stories are self-consciousness, self-criticism, gender labelling, being on the edge, defensive responses, tension between the characters, envy and anger.

It therefore shows that writers /write about "body perception" and use it as a tool for character description, however few of them actually seek to use their writing as agencies for communal acceptance of individuals and promoting self-love.

#### 6.4 Curbing Body Shaming

All writers share an equal responsibility for rewriting the stories about. Literature has always been saddled with the responsibility to entertain and teach. Teach in this stance should not be limited to highlighting the flaws in human nature, it should be more compassionate in the rehabilitation of the minds of the readers to foster self-acceptance and self-love through the use of language that champions body positivism. Now more than ever, writers should be burdened with telling stories about bodies that reflect the dangers of body shaming.

### 7. Conclusion

Body shaming is a way of life as seen depicted in the selected short stories. From the images given, it can be deduced that when body shaming occurs, although the reaction it triggers often leaves the recipient feeling unworthy, however, nothing is done most of the time. Body shaming as portrayed in the short stories assumes the role of character-to-character description. The character describing the other, might not even consider their actions as one that could cause harm to the other since it is a norm. Adimora-Ezeigbo sets the pace for the discussion of body, bodies and images of bodies in Nigeria literature especially in body shaming.

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