

The Paradox of Enhancement and Erasure: Reading Beauty, Body Politics, and Feminist Resistance in Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty*

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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s); This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
Citation: OKUN AKIKA PAUL. (2026). The paradox of enhancement and erasure: Reading beauty, body politics, and feminist resistance in Damilare Kuku's <i>Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow</i> and Ling Ling Huang's <i>Natural Beauty</i>. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(8), 224-230.	<i>This paper examines the intersection of body modification, cultural pressure, and women's self-fashioning in Damilare Kuku's <i>Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow</i> (2024) and Ling Ling Huang's <i>Natural Beauty</i> (2023). Both novels, though situated in distinct cultural geographies, Nigeria and the United States, foreground the pervasive influence of globalized beauty ideals and the precarious autonomy women negotiate within them. Temi's pursuit of a Brazilian Butt Lift in Kuku's narrative reflects not merely an individual desire for transformation but also the social valuation of femininity as tied to corporeal enhancement. In contrast, Huang's protagonist confronts the commodification of natural beauty within the wellness industry, where bodily "purity" becomes as marketable as surgical alteration. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Susan Bordo's critique of the disciplined female body, this study situates these novels within broader feminist discourses on embodiment and power. While Kuku dramatizes the risks and silences surrounding cosmetic surgery in a postcolonial Nigerian context, Huang interrogates how neoliberal capitalism exploits women's bodies under the guise of health and self-care. Reading these texts side by side reveals the double bind of enhancement and erasure: women's bodies are simultaneously hyper-visible as sites of cultural investment and invisible as autonomous subjects. Fundamentally, the paper argues that both novels resist simple moralizing, instead offering nuanced portraits of women navigating impossible demands of beauty. Their narratives contribute to an emerging literary archive where surgery and selfhood converge, opening critical conversations on gender, globalization, and corporeal politics.</i> Keywords: Body politics, Cosmetic surgery, Feminist literary criticism, Global beauty culture, Women's narratives.

I. Introduction

Cosmetic surgery has become one of the most charged cultural markers of the twenty-first century. While the practice of reshaping the body is not new, the recent rise of procedures such as the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) has given the female body an even sharper visibility within global beauty economies. Across continents, social media platforms advertise sculpted bodies as symbols of success, desirability, and upward mobility, while wellness industries capitalize on discourses of "natural beauty" that often mask a different kind of bodily regulation. Within this contradictory terrain, women find themselves compelled to negotiate their identities, autonomy, and

survival through the body, which becomes a site of both personal investment and public scrutiny.

Two recent novels, Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty*, vividly dramatize these tensions. Though written from different cultural locations, postcolonial Nigeria and contemporary Asian American experience in the United States, both texts foreground the paradoxes of enhancement and erasure in women's lives. Kuku's Temi seeks transformation through a BBL as a way to secure love, recognition, and social capital, while Huang's unnamed protagonist becomes ensnared in the seductive

promises of a wellness empire that commodifies the “natural.” In both cases, women’s bodies are not simply personal canvases for change but contested territories where global beauty standards, cultural pressures, and economic systems intersect.

The analytical lens of feminist theory provides a useful entry point for understanding how these novels approach the body as text. Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity helps illuminate how femininity itself is constituted through repeated cultural scripts, including the demand for bodily modification. Susan Bordo’s critique of the disciplined female body underscores the way culture inscribes its values on women through ideals of slenderness, purity, or voluptuousness. Both perspectives reveal the body as neither fixed nor purely natural, but as a site of ongoing construction shaped by power, capital, and desire.

This paper argues that *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and *Natural Beauty* both expose the paradox of women’s pursuit of beauty in an era when the body is both hyper-visible and erased. On one hand, enhancement promises empowerment, visibility, and access to social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, it risks the erasure of authentic subjectivity, trapping women in cycles of surveillance, discipline, and commodification. By placing these two novels in conversation, the study highlights how literature can map the global circuits of beauty culture while foregrounding the resilience, ambivalence, and agency of women navigating these fraught terrains.

II. Literature Review

The question of how women’s bodies are shaped by cultural, economic, and political pressures has occupied scholars across disciplines. In feminist literary criticism, the body has long been theorized as a contested site where identity, autonomy, and subjection are negotiated. The emergence of cosmetic surgery as both a cultural practice and a literary motif deepens this conversation, highlighting the contradictions of empowerment and constraint that characterize women’s engagements with beauty.

Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity provides one influential framework for analyzing body narratives. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not an innate truth but the effect of repeated acts and discourses (34). Applied to cosmetic surgery, this insight suggests that women pursue procedures like the Brazilian Butt Lift not merely for aesthetic preference but as a reiteration of socially scripted femininity. Susan Bordo extends this analysis in *Unbearable Weight*, where she describes the female body as a “text of culture” on which societal

anxieties about beauty, discipline, and control are inscribed (Bordo 27). Bordo’s account of the “docile body” resonates with the ways both Temi in Kuku’s novel and Huang’s protagonist experience their bodies as disciplined, surveilled, and constantly at risk of erasure under cultural demands.

Scholarship on cosmetic surgery and body modification in contemporary literature is still developing, but recent fiction has increasingly made bodily alteration central to questions of identity, visibility, and social belonging. Allie Rowbottom’s *Aesthetica* (2022), for instance, explores the pressures surrounding beauty, self-fashioning, and the pursuit of an idealized body within a culture shaped by celebrity and digital visibility. Similarly, An Na’s *The Fold* (2008) addresses the relationship between beauty, race, adolescence, and assimilation through its portrayal of a Korean American teenager confronted with the possibility of cosmetic alteration. Read together, such narratives demonstrate that cosmetic surgery in fiction is more than a narrative device: it provides a means of examining how social expectations become internalized and experienced through the body. The body consequently emerges as a site where questions of desire, belonging, conformity, and self-definition converge.

African feminist criticism offers another crucial perspective. Scholars such as Amina Mama and Florence Stratton emphasize how African women writers navigate patriarchal and postcolonial pressures, foregrounding the body as a terrain of negotiation. Mama argues that the female body in African discourse functions simultaneously as a locus of agency and a primary object of patriarchal and state regulation (Mama 82). In Kuku’s *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow*, this duality is unmistakable: the BBL can be read as both a strategy of empowerment and a capitulation to a culture that values women’s worth through curves. Temi’s body is thus not simply hers to claim but a site through which broader postcolonial anxieties about modernity, capitalism, and gender roles are played out.

Within Asian American literary studies, questions of race, gender, representation, and cultural belonging have long shaped discussions of how identity is negotiated under conditions of social visibility and marginalization. Such concerns provide an important context for reading Huang’s *Natural Beauty*, particularly because the novel connects bodily appearance to wider structures of race and consumer culture. The protagonist’s experience suggests that beauty is never simply private or individual; rather, ideals of appearance are shaped by institutions and cultural systems that determine which bodies become visible, desirable, or acceptable. Huang’s novel therefore contributes to broader Asian American conversations

about identity and representation by exposing how the language of authenticity can coexist with powerful demands for conformity.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, there remains a notable gap in comparative literary analysis of cosmetic surgery and body modification across African and Asian American contexts. While studies have examined African feminist engagements with the body, and others have traced Asian American negotiations of beauty and identity, few have placed these narratives in dialogue. This is significant because beauty culture today is not bound by geography but circulates globally, shaped by transnational media flows and capitalist industries. The juxtaposition of Kuku and Huang's novels thus provides an opportunity to illuminate how women across cultures navigate the paradox of enhancement and erasure under different but overlapping systems of power.

This paper seeks to address that gap by bringing together African feminist perspectives on surgery and Asian American critiques of wellness capitalism. In doing so, it argues that *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and *Natural Beauty* enrich feminist literary criticism by showing how women's narratives of beauty complicate the binaries of agency and subjection. These texts insist that beauty, whether surgically enhanced or naturally commodified, is not merely an individual pursuit but a political narrative that demands close literary attention.

III. Reading *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow*

Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* dramatizes the social and psychological stakes of cosmetic surgery in contemporary Nigerian society. At the center of the novel is Temi, a young university student whose decision to undergo a Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) embodies not simply personal vanity but the entanglement of gendered expectation, capitalist aspiration, and postcolonial insecurity. The title itself underscores the narrative's irony and urgency: "big bumbum" is not just a desirable physical feature but a cultural currency, a future guarantee of recognition and opportunity. The phrase "matters tomorrow" conveys how women's worth is imagined less in terms of present being than in their capacity to project a marketable, socially approved femininity into the future.

Temi's desire for surgery emerges not in isolation but within a network of familial and societal pressures. Her peers and relatives repeatedly reinforce the idea that a woman's value is tethered to the shape of her body. In Nigerian popular culture, especially within urban spaces influenced by Afrobeats and Nollywood aesthetics, voluptuous bodies are associated with desirability, wealth, and social capital. The BBL, therefore, becomes more than

a medical procedure; it represents an initiation into full womanhood as defined by a patriarchal gaze. As Amina Mama contends, the female body in African contexts is a critical site where power is both exercised and contested (Mama 82) resonates here, as Temi internalizes these discourses and translates them into a bodily project of self-transformation.

Kuku illustrates this pressure most vividly in Temi's private reflections, where she equates her body with her future. In one striking passage, Temi insists that without surgery her life would remain incomplete:

I have always known that a flat body means a flat life. No man will look twice, no job will take me seriously, no one will respect me. But if I change, if I carry the weight of curves, then everything else will follow. A big bumbum is not just flesh. It is tomorrow itself. (56)

This moment makes explicit the cultural logic driving Temi's decision: enhancement is framed as destiny, while refusal of surgery threatens invisibility. Her words dramatize what Susan Bordo calls the inscription of culture onto the body. As Bordo explains:

The body... is not merely a biological entity but a medium of culture, a text of femininity through which anxieties about control, sexuality, and social order are played out. Women's bodies become the field on which these dramas are staged, disciplined, and repeatedly reinforced. (165)

Temi's "flat body" becomes legible here not as neutral biology but as a failed performance of femininity, one that requires surgical intervention to achieve cultural recognition.

At the same time, Kuku does not portray Temi as simply a passive victim of these cultural demands. Her decision to pursue surgery is also a form of agency, however compromised. By seeking a BBL, she attempts to secure her future in a society where opportunities for women are precarious and often mediated through beauty and marriage. This duality reflects what Bordo describes as the "politics of the female body," where practices of self-discipline and modification appear simultaneously as resistance and conformity (31).

Yet the narrative repeatedly underscores the risks and erasures that accompany this pursuit of enhancement. The surgery, shrouded in secrecy, threatens Temi's health and exposes her to the possibility of physical and psychological trauma. The silence around these dangers is itself telling: while society loudly valorizes the "big bumbum," it rarely acknowledges the pain, recovery, or even mortality rates associated with such procedures. In

this sense, Temi's experience exemplifies Judith Butler's notion of performativity. Femininity, as Butler argues, is not an essence but a performance that must be constantly reiterated to remain legible:

Gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (34)

Temi's surgically enhanced body becomes a stage upon which societal scripts of desirability are enacted, but this performance also erases the subject behind it.

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is how it links cosmetic surgery to intergenerational womanhood. Temi's mother and aunts embody older cultural scripts of femininity that value endurance, modesty, and silent suffering. Temi, however, is caught between these inherited scripts and the contemporary demand for bodily spectacle. This tension also reflects a broader concern within African feminist literary criticism with the complex relationship between resistance and the structures of gendered power that women confront. Florence Stratton's feminist study of African literature is useful here because it draws sustained attention to patriarchy and gender as important forces in the production and interpretation of African literary traditions (Stratton). Temi's situation can therefore be understood as deeply ambivalent. Her decision to remake her body may represent an attempt to exercise control over her future, yet that very attempt remains shaped by the social structures and ideals she seeks to negotiate.

Moreover, the BBL in *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* cannot be divorced from economic aspiration. Surgery is expensive, risky, and tied to global flows of medical tourism, social media influence, and capitalist advertising. In choosing surgery, Temi aligns herself with transnational beauty ideals that circulate through Instagram feeds, Nollywood films, and Afrobeats music videos. The irony, however, is that her attempt at empowerment further entangles her in a global capitalist system that exploits women's insecurities for profit. Thus, her "big bumbum" is simultaneously a personal achievement and a commodity available for public consumption.

Kuku's narrative voice, however, prevents the novel from becoming a didactic moral tale. Instead, it offers a nuanced portrayal of a young woman wrestling with impossible demands. Temi is not condemned for her choice, nor is she celebrated without critique. Instead, readers are invited into the complexity of her situation, where empowerment and erasure exist side by side. The novel's power lies precisely in this ambivalence: it refuses

easy binaries of victimhood or agency, instead portraying cosmetic surgery as a lived negotiation within specific cultural, economic, and gendered contexts.

In sum, *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* illustrates how cosmetic surgery operates as both a survival strategy and a site of vulnerability for Nigerian women. Temi's BBL underscores the paradox of enhancement and erasure: in seeking to make herself visible and valuable, she risks losing autonomy and authenticity. Through this portrayal, Kuku contributes to African feminist literary discourse by situating the body at the center of negotiations between tradition, modernity, and global capitalism.

IV. Reading *Natural Beauty*

Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty* provides a haunting counterpoint to Kuku's narrative by situating beauty not in overt surgical enhancement but in the commodification of "naturalness." The unnamed Chinese American narrator, once a promising pianist, enters the wellness and beauty industry after financial hardship. What appears initially as a refuge quickly becomes a suffocating environment where even the rhetoric of "natural" purity is revealed as another form of bodily discipline. Huang's novel thus interrogates how neoliberal capitalism exploits not only women's insecurities but also their desire for authenticity.

Whereas Temi in Kuku's narrative seeks surgery to make herself visible, Huang's protagonist confronts the erasure of individuality through the homogenization of "natural beauty." In one passage, she recalls how her workplace celebrated women's appearances while stripping them of agency:

Every face around me began to blur into the same mold, cheekbones sharpened, skin smoothed, smiles practiced but hollow. They told us it was effortless beauty, that we were free from artifice. But I could not help noticing that even naturalness had been sculpted, packaged, and sold. (Huang 102)

This moment highlights the paradox at the heart of the novel: the pursuit of "natural" beauty requires artifice, surveillance, and conformity. Just as Temi's surgery embodies performance, Huang's protagonist reveals how so-called natural beauty is itself a performance, one that erases individuality in the name of marketable sameness.

Theoretical frameworks deepen this reading. Judith Butler's notion of performativity, originally applied to gender, resonates with Huang's critique of authenticity. Butler insists that identity is never innate but always constituted through repeated acts: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are

said to be its results". (34)

In *Natural Beauty*, the category of "natural" functions in precisely this way. It is not an essence but a repeated performance, smiles, skincare routines, diets that gives the illusion of authenticity. What is marketed as freedom from manipulation is revealed instead as the most insidious form of manipulation, one that convinces women they are simply being themselves.

Huang also foregrounds how this performance intersects with race and class. As a Chinese American woman in a predominantly white industry, the protagonist experiences a double bind: she is exoticized for her difference yet pressured to conform to a homogenized ideal of beauty. This tension recalls Shirley Lim's observation that Asian American women's bodies often oscillate between hyper-visibility and erasure (Lim 63). The narrator, constantly reminded of her "delicate" features, begins to perceive how racialized beauty standards intersect with capitalism to dictate not only how women look but how they are valued.

One of the most chilling aspects of the novel is how wellness culture conceals exploitation under the guise of empowerment. Employees at the beauty company are promised health, longevity, and happiness, yet the demands placed on their bodies grow increasingly extreme. In a passage describing her grueling routines, the narrator confesses:

I had to eat less, sleep less, and think less. They told me my body was purging toxins, my mind becoming clearer. But I only felt smaller, shrinking into their ideal until I could no longer recognize myself. (Huang 145)

This confession echoes Susan Bordo's critique of the disciplined female body. Bordo argues that cultural ideals of beauty often disguise themselves as personal choice or empowerment, even as they enforce submission to disciplinary regimes:

Through diet, exercise, and cosmetic practices, the female body is rendered docile understood as freely chosen self-improvement but in reality conforming to a tightly policed normativity. (29)

The narrator's shrinking sense of self illustrates precisely this paradox: what is framed as liberation is actually erasure, what is sold as natural is in fact unnatural discipline.

Huang also uses the motif of music to underscore the violence of this erasure. As a pianist, the narrator once experienced her body as an instrument of creativity. Within the beauty industry, however, her body is transformed into a commodity, stripped of individuality

and expression. The contrast between artistry and conformity dramatizes the broader stakes of the novel: women's bodies risk being reduced to mute surfaces in the service of consumer culture.

What makes *Natural Beauty* especially powerful is its refusal to present wellness culture as benign. The novel insists that beauty industries, even when cloaked in the language of health and authenticity, perpetuate the same patriarchal and capitalist structures that undergird cosmetic surgery. In this way, Huang's text complements Kuku's by showing that enhancement and erasure does not only occur through surgical procedures but also through the subtle coercion of so-called natural practices.

In sum, *Natural Beauty* offers a devastating critique of how neoliberalism co-opts women's desire for authenticity. By portraying the commodification of naturalness, Huang reveals that authenticity itself can be weaponized as another standard of beauty, one that disciplines women just as thoroughly as surgical enhancement. Her protagonist's struggles echo Temi's in Kuku's novel, though situated in a different cultural geography: both women's lives expose the paradox of seeking empowerment through systems that demand their erasure.

V. Comparative Analysis: Enhancement and Erasure

Placing Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty* side by side reveals how contemporary women's fiction stages the paradoxes of beauty culture across different geographies. Despite their distinct cultural contexts, postcolonial Nigeria and Asian American life in the United States, both texts insist that beauty is never merely personal. Instead, it is produced and policed within social, economic, and political systems that render the female body a contested site of performance.

A striking point of convergence lies in the way both novels dramatize the tension between visibility and erasure. Temi, Kuku's protagonist, views the BBL as a means to become visible, to attract love and financial security in a society that places value on women's curves. Yet her choice also entails self-erasure: the authentic body she once inhabited becomes replaced by a surgically produced version of desirability. Similarly, Huang's unnamed narrator initially believes she has found empowerment in the pursuit of natural beauty, but this pursuit leads to a gradual erasure of self, as individuality dissolves into a corporate aesthetic.

Temi articulates this dilemma poignantly when she reflects on the secrecy surrounding her surgery:

I told no one, not even my closest friend. It was my burden and my hope, stitched together beneath the bandages. If they knew, they would laugh or judge. But

if it worked, if I emerged beautiful, then maybe they would finally see me. (Kuku 78)

The paradox here is sharp: in hiding her surgery, Temi also hides herself, erasing her vulnerability in order to gain visibility. Her silence testifies to the cultural stigma that shames women for seeking enhancement even as it pressures them to conform to beauty standards.

Huang's narrator undergoes a parallel yet inverted process. Instead of choosing surgery, she submits to the regime of wellness culture, or organic beauty where erasure masquerades as authenticity:

They told us we were natural, free, untouched. But every choice was already made for us, what to eat, how to smile, how to exist. I was becoming less myself every day, fading into their version of natural beauty. (Huang 153)

Both passages show how enhancement and erasure are intertwined: one woman modifies her body to gain social capital, the other disciplines her body to preserve an illusion of purity. In both cases, subjectivity is constrained by external demands that reduce the body to an object of regulation.

The divergence between the two texts, however, lies in their treatment of cultural geography. In Nigeria, as critics such as Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argue, the female body is often situated within patriarchal kinship structures that tie women's value to marriageability and reproduction (Oyèwùmí 45). Temi's surgery can thus be read as both compliance with and resistance to these structures, an attempt to rewrite her destiny through her body. By contrast, Huang situates her critique in late-capitalist America, where racialized labor and global consumerism produce a homogenized ideal. The unnamed narrator's erasure is not tied to kinship or marriage but to a corporate economy that thrives on women's bodily conformity.

Yet despite these differences, both novels converge in exposing the body as a site of negotiation where women attempt to reclaim agency within oppressive systems. Neither Temi nor Huang's narrator emerges fully victorious, but both demonstrate resilience by narrating their struggles. In this sense, the novels themselves become acts of resistance: they give voice to women's ambivalence, exposing the costs of beauty culture while refusing to reduce female protagonists to passive victims.

By reading Kuku and Huang together, we see that the paradox of enhancement and erasure is not limited to one cultural context but is a global phenomenon shaped by intersecting forces of patriarchy, capitalism, race, and class. Literature, in foregrounding these embodied struggles, not only critiques these systems but also gestures toward the possibility of new narratives where women's bodies might be understood beyond commodification.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has traced how Damilare Kuku's *Only Big Bumbum Matters Tomorrow* and Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty* navigate the paradox of enhancement and erasure in contemporary women's fiction. Though their protagonists inhabit vastly different worlds, Nigeria's postcolonial society and the globalized landscape of American wellness culture, their struggles illuminate a shared reality: the body is never free from the demands of beauty ideology.

For Temi, surgery becomes a strategy to rewrite her social destiny, a gamble that exposes both the agency and the vulnerability embedded in bodily modification. Her story illustrates the tension between empowerment and conformity, where agency is claimed through a procedure that simultaneously reinscribes patriarchal ideals. Huang's narrator, by contrast, faces the suffocating weight of "natural beauty" as defined by corporate capitalism. Here, erasure does not come from altering the body with surgery but from disciplining it to fit a homogenized, racialized standard. Side by side, these novels show that whether framed as enhancement or authenticity, beauty culture exerts power through regulation, discipline, and commodification.

By reading these narratives alongside feminist theory, we see that the paradox of enhancement and erasure is not simply a personal dilemma but a structural one. Butler's performativity reminds us that beauty, like gender, is enacted through repeated acts; Bordo's critique of the disciplined body reveals how freedom often disguises regulation. These frameworks highlight how the protagonists' struggles are not isolated but symptomatic of wider social and economic systems.

What emerges from this comparative reading is not a rejection of women's choices but a call to recognize the ambivalence of those choices within unequal contexts. Both Kuku and Huang refuse to present simple resolutions; their protagonists neither fully triumph nor fully succumb. Instead, the novels dwell in ambiguity, offering nuanced portrayals of women who negotiate survival, desire, and identity within beauty's demanding regimes.

Finally, literature becomes a space where these complexities are given form, voice, and critique. By centering women's experiences of enhancement and erasure, these novels expand the conversation on body politics, showing that beauty is not merely aesthetic but deeply political. In doing so, they invite readers and critics to confront the systems that shape how women are seen, valued, and remembered.

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