

Literary Perspectives of the Japa Syndrome in the 21st Century Nigerian Society: Selected Migration Narratives.



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Abstract

The recent upward trend in transnational migration in the 21st century Nigerian society has become an issue of great concern among scholars from different fields. The advancing trend of issues like insecurity, unemployment, declining standard of education, ethno-religious disputes, and the resultant social instability are considered to be the major contributors of this alarming exodus. These experiences create uneasiness and disillusionment in the nation, giving rise to the ideology that relocating to other nations is a sane decision as well as an escape route from suffering. Thus, the term *japa* has become an adopted concept by many for the migration discourse in Nigeria. Although the word originates from the Yoruba language, *japa* is recently used to explain an escape or flight from trouble or suffering. This goes to suggest that for many citizens in 21st century Nigeria, emigration is an escape route from the harsh socio-economic conditions in the nation. However, the concept of emigration has generated myriads of discourses from literary writers both within the country and in diaspora. This paper adopts the migration theory to examine how Micheal Afenfia and Chimamanda Adichie perceive the causes, effects and solutions to the *japa* syndrome in Nigeria through their respective novels: *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon* and *Americanah*. It seeks to conclude that transnational migration is not an ultimate solution to the predicaments of post independent Nigerian society rather, the solution lies within the citizenry, especially the leaders.

Keywords: The *Japa* syndrome, 21st century, literature, migration, trauma.

Introduction

Right from her first year of independence till date, Nigeria has had her fair share of appalling socio-economic and political problems. The instances of economic relapse, insecurity, educational decline, administrative inadequacies and resultant social instability tend to increase on a yearly basis. These instances account for the recent upsurge in transnational migration among the citizens.

The migrating individuals include the highly skilled workers breadwinners of families, entrepreneurs and, even promising youths whose talents are yet to be harnessed for the development of the nation.

Having observed or witnessed certain disparaging events in their homeland, most of these individuals consider the nation a death territory for them and their loved ones. This negates the initial hopes of the people that the attainment of independence for the nation portends freedom from colonial domination, an open door for better opportunities of livelihood and a complete access to all their basic needs. There is therefore, a widespread display of disappointment towards almost every sector of the nation. The disappointment results in the desperate attempt to find places which hold better opportunities for safety, economic emancipation and overall survival. Apparently, the European countries and American countries seem to be the locations for the desired greener pastures.

Paradoxically, challenges of unemployment, harsh economic conditions, intellectual relegation, physical and psychological displacement, and a variety of racist attitudes of their host countries become the factors which they have to grapple with before settling in. In order to surmount some of these complexities, these migrants are left to choose the substandard living conditions, distortion of identity, the lifestyle of mimicry among other undesirable conditions or they return home. Worse still, these challenges confront them not even in their native land but in foreign countries where they are strangers and obviously do not have the strong foothold to raise any protest. Most Nigerian literary writings, especially those written by Nigerians in diaspora strive to capture these migration experiences through their motifs and by this means, they attempt to counter the erroneous concepts that life abroad is a sure escape from the frustrations which have besieged their homeland in contemporary times. It is against this background that the migration theory has been chosen for this discourse.

As Bueno and Prieto-Rosas assert, “migration theories seek to understand the reasoning behind and motivations for the decisions of individuals and households to move from one location to another- domestically or internationally as well as the factors that explain the maintenance of migration flows over time” (1). The 21st century Nigerian society is characterized by a daily occurrence of disheartening events. Presently, these events are becoming more rampant than they were in the past two decades and so they breed more cases of trauma, depression and suicide than

there were in the 19th and 20th centuries. Comparing the nature of emigration in different decades after Nigeria's independence, Racheal Inigbedion observes that:

the Nigerian emigration experience can be divided into four eras: the civil and political unrest stages of the 1960s, the downfall of the petroleum boom in the 1980s, the military regime of the mid 1990s and the past two decades of mass migration from Nigeria to other countries across the world. The factors that cause Nigerians to leave the country can be classified as socio-economic factors, political factors and migrant networks (3).

This classification of the emigration trend in the nation shows that there is a more significant upsurge in transnational migration in the 21st century than in the previous decades.

Thus, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Micheal Afenfia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon* have been chosen for this paper since they are novels written on the subject of the realities of migration in the 21st century. The narratives are significant as each of the novelists are writers in the diaspora; Adichie is an American-based Nigerian writer while Afenfia is a Canadian-based Nigerian. Possibly, they have witnessed the intricacies of life outside the African soil, especially outside Nigeria. Researchers like Esther Olumoyo and Abiri Olusola explain that; "*Japa* means 'to run, flee or to escape'. It is Yoruba word which takes its root in the aspiration that young Nigerians have to leave the nation for good. It means the emigration of Nigerians in mass usually for greater opportunities" (*International Journal of Development and economic Sustainability*, 87). The two migration novels in focus here attempt to demystify the complexities of the *japa* syndrome for both the individual migrants and the entire Nigerian society.

Some scholars provide information on some practical causes of this emigration pattern in the present Nigerian context. On this note, Olajide Adeola remarks that:

The inequalities of the society give credence to the fact that for many, migration is the window through which they can improve their income, have educational opportunities and improve the prospects of their future generations. As such, people move both within the country and across international borders with the expectation that they will have access to better opportunities in their destination location in order to benefit themselves, their immediate families and their communities. (3).

This very point suggests that unequal access to opportunities, unemployment and declining standard of education are some outstanding triggers of the *japa* syndrome in Nigeria. This is illustrated in Adichie's *Americanah* through the migration experience of some of the characters.

First, the narrator pictures Obinze, who is a university graduate and a victim of unequal distribution of opportunities and unemployment in the nation. The narrator reveals:

His job applications yielded nothing. He travelled to Lagos and to Port Harcourt and to Abuja to take assessments tests, which he found easy, and he attended interviews, answering questions fluidly, but then a long empty silence would follow. Some friends were getting jobs, people who did not have his second-class upper degree and did not speak English as well as he did. He wondered whether employers could smell his America-pining on his breath, or sense how obsessively he still looked at the websites of American universities. (270).

For a youth like Obinze, favoritism is rife in the employment sector of the country, since people like him who work hard to make good grades in school and even perform excellently in interviews are made to stay unemployed whereas those who do not do so well in their academics are employed. There is therefore no sense in remaining in the country, emigration becomes the next option.

Considering the shortfalls of Nigerian education system as a causative factor for the migration wave in Nigeria, Tunbosun Ogundare posits: “It appears that more and more Nigerians are either growing dissatisfied with its education sector offering or are losing faith in its promises” (3). Adichie identifies with this observation through her presentation of Ifemelu’s experience as an undergraduate whose academic calendar is often disrupted by frequent strike actions by university lecturers in the nation. So, she prepares to leave for America, having gained a student visa to study overseas. In a conversation with Auntie Uju (who will host her abroad) in the novel, Auntie Uju questions worriedly about the unending strikes in Nigerian schools: “Ahn-ahn! The strike hasn’t ended?” and then Ifemelu complains: “No, that last one ended, we went back to school and then they started another one” (120). The complaint simply exposes the unresolved issues in the Nigerian education system for which strikes occur and reoccur, plunging many youths into the migration frenzy recently known as *japa*.

Bad governance is also observed as a fueling force for the recent *japa* syndrome. Adichie exemplifies this through Auntie Uju, another character in her novel. While lamenting the insult which she receives in the hospital where she works, just because she is a black medical worker in America; Auntie Uju unveils the major cause of her migration to American: “Why do I have to take this rubbish? I blame Buhari and Babangida and Abacha, because they destroyed Nigeria”. (253). The unfriendly treatments received by some migrants in their host countries make them remember and lament over the chaos in their nation which pushes them into the migration venture with its excruciating inconveniences.

As Asaph Kofi avers: “Any literature is dominated by some themes and motifs which are generally related to the socio-political and economic atmosphere of its era” (2). Based on this, Adichie’s work underscores the major issues which surround the Nigerian society as at the time of its writing in 2013. However, Afenfia’s own novel is written ten years later, in the year 2023; a time when insecurity, which is a sign of socio-political failure trails the air in the nation. In Afenfia’s novel therefore, insecurity is depicted as a dominant contributor to the recent tide of emigration among Nigerians. Presenting an explicit illustration of the gruesome killing of the wife of Owoicho and his three children by armed bandits along the road from Maiduguri to Abuja, Afenfia discloses the poor state of security in the country. Therefore, his relocation to Canada with Ochanya is described as an escape route by Alegwu in the novel. In congratulating his friend as it is the usual response made by many Nigerians towards successful migrants in the 21st century, Alegwu declares:

I am happy you found an escape route out of this country. It is the best thing any father can do for his child right now when it feels like the government isn’t doing anything to make this country work again. Our leaders have no idea how to solve the many problems besetting us as a nation, and that’s scary as hell. (78).

Further description of the situations in which “the bandits, herdsmen, kidnappers, have more ammunitions than the policemen and soldiers” (36), Afenfia explains why citizens endorse the *japa* concept as an escape or a flight from danger.

As Omoyele Sowore notes “expectations of many Nigerians of Eldorado in Diaspora are often dashed because they suffer cultural shock and dislocation in their new environment” (2). Several literary writers perceive the diasporic experiences as characterized by many forms of indignity. So, most of their works hold the opinion that the concept of *japa* as an escape strategy is just a mirage. This illusion in the *japa* mentality is expressed in the migration experiences of the characters in the two narratives. Adichie portrays Obinze’s dashed dreams as he only manages to secure the job of a toilet cleaner in the United Kingdom. Adichie reveals that “he was indeed abroad cleaning toilets, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a pail, in an estate agent’s office on the second floor of a London building” (273). Getting such a demeaning job even requires losing his identity. He therefore to bear the name of ‘Vincent’ so as to use the National Identity Card of the original owner of the name and succeed in the job interview. Worse still, Obinze pays 40% remittance of his income from the same humiliating job to Vincent, without which he will be reported as a an illegal migrant and be deported back to Nigeria.

Afenfia's own novel expounds the illusions of the migrant characters who get to Canada to do jobs lower and less prestigious than their former jobs back in Nigeria. First, Bimpe who is formerly a teacher in Nigeria confesses to Owoicho the type of derogatory jobs she and her spouse engage in just because they are in Canada:

I work in a care home for the elderly. To put it simply, I bathe, wash, clean and feed the aged. Damiete works as a security guard in an apartment building in the city. It pays our bills, and we are happy doing these jobs here in Canada, but it isn't something we talk about with people back home in Nigeria. We just don't think they will understand why we accept to do these menial jobs, so we prefer not to talk about it unless they come over here and see things themselves, and then we don't have to hide anymore (160).

Moreover, these literary works reveal that the downturn of education standard in Nigeria and the mad rush of Nigerians to foreign countries generate an impression of worthlessness in the minds of the host countries towards these migrants. Thus, Nigerian certificates are given no recognition abroad. This is exemplified in Damiete's own comments about his source of income which has no connection with his original profession:

I know I should quit this job and look for something in Engineering, which is my field, but employers here don't recognize my non-Canadian qualification and experience. Someday, I hope to get an engineering certification or something, or even branch off into another field entirely, but I keep procrastinating. That is why for now, Owoicho, I have to take what I can so we can pay our bills. (160).

These references to payment of bills go further to explain that living conditions are not so favorable for many migrants, this is contrary to the imaginary 'luxuries and greener pastures' which most people ascribe to the *japa* concept.

Additionally, the novelists present an aspect of the displacement of Nigerian cultural heritage which is one of consequences of the 21st century *japa* syndrome. Generally, it is a norm in the Nigerian society which is part of the African society that special titles are attached to the names of elders when addressing them. But, the patterns of mimicry adopted by most migrants as a means of adapting to the cultures of their host countries negate this norm. Adichie shows this displacement in her novel as Auntie Uju advises Ifemelu her younger one to withdraw the title 'Auntie' whenever she addresses her. The same instance is illustrated in Afenfia's work as Bimpe responds when Ochanya addresses her as 'Auntie Bimpe'; "Here in Canada, no one calls anyone auntie or uncle. People are addressed by their first name only, so please remove that auntie you say whenever you call me. I am not old" (157). Also, the social norm of inculcating moral rectitude

among children through punishment when they misbehave is waning fast as some Nigerian parents now adopt the foreign parenting style. Bimpe is therefore mirrored as she enlightens Owoicho on the Canadian way of child training:

You know, this is Canada and not Nigeria. You don't just shout at your children anyhow o. you will get into trouble. In fact, the worst thing you can do here is touch a child or dare get physical within even your own pikin. You may land yourself in a big problem. You can't hit her or scream at her or something like that. Here, you talk to them. It is called negotiating. You have a conversation (218).

Importantly, these writers note that the major ways of reducing this undue obsession of citizens with travelling abroad is through tackling insecurity and providing employment as well as conducive job conditions so as to give the disenchanted migrants a sense of recognition in their various professions. Afenfia creates a vivid picture of this through Owoicho's conversation with his state governor in the narrative:

You were talking about bandits and terrorists, Sir. Yes, those wicked criminals and murderers that don't want our children to go to school. Even our men and women in the village cannot farm anymore. I wish something could be done about them, your excellency. Many of us won't be cut here struggling if we felt safe in our own country. (222).

In conclusion, Adichie and Afenfia among other writers of migrant literature express their exclusive perceptions of the *japa* syndrome. They explicate the causes of migration, its consequences on both the individual migrants and the society and then proffer possible ways of curbing its fast-growing trend in the 21st century Nigeria. In essence, their perspectives hold that the *japa* syndrome is not a death sentence for the Nigerian society, it is just one of the responses of the disappointed citizens towards the enduring nature of socio-economic and political predicaments of the nation. Just as Julius Ihonvere suggests: "The *japa* syndrome is a response to impunity and lawlessness in the country. The solution is to restructure our country and the institutions otherwise, a lot of the problems will remain" (thisdaylive.com). This simply underscores the point that solutions to the mass emigration of citizens and the adverse consequences on different aspects of the society are accessible, and these to a great extent lie in the hands of the leaders in various sectors of the nation.

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