

JAPA AS AN EXODUS OF POST-INDEPENDENCE NIGERIANS IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *BETTER NEVER THAN LATE*

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Abstract

The emerging “Centre” from the hitherto “Other” has reconstructed “Otherness” in post-independence African states. Consequently, the disillusioned subjects of the “neo-Other” find escape in *japa* as exodus to safety and self-actualisation. Extant studies most often concentrate on the experiences of African immigrants abroad, without much attention to the leadership at homeland which sets up the citizenry for a hellish encounter in the host land. Therefore, this study is designed to investigate *japa* as an escape for the disillusioned Nigerians, with a view to critiquing the homeland as the “neo-Centre”, and examining the social and economic conditions of Nigerian immigrants in Europe as depicted in Unigwe’s *Better Never Than Late*. Eyoh Etim’s post-postcolonialism, complemented by Homi Bhabha’s strand of postcolonialism, is adopted as framework for this paper. Interpretive research design is applied. The primary text was purposively selected because of its relevant leitmotif. Literary analysis reveals that post-independence Nigerians are forced out of their motherland because of the ineptitude of political leaders, which has wrought unemployment, hardship, insecurity, violence, and terrorism on the people. Moreover, young Nigerians resort to *japa* as a way of escaping Nigeria’s life-threatening sociopolitical and economic landscape. However, post-*japa* is traumatic to most Nigerian immigrants as the illusion about the host land is cleared by realities on arrival. Consequently, the unfortunate immigrants suffer losses, humiliation, starvation, disillusionment, and regret after leaving the homeland. Thus, *japa* as exodus for Nigerians is a complex web of escapism, illusion, reality, disappointment, struggle for survival, and a raffia bag of laughter and tears in the adopted land.

Keywords: *Japa*, post-independence, Homeland, Otherness, Chika Unigwe

INTRODUCTION

The political class in post-independence Africa has assumed the status of “neo-Centre”, while the citizens become the “neo-Other”, terms which refer to the oppressor and the oppressed, respectively in Etim’s (2019) post-postcolonialism. The emerging “Centre” from the hitherto “Other” has reconstructed new “Otherness” in post-independence Nigeria such that the disillusioned subjects of the “neo-Other” or new margin find escape in *japa* as exodus to safety and self-actualisation. The term *japa* is a popular expression used in Nigeria to refer to the migration of Nigerians to the global North. This novel term has made its way into the Nigerian English lexicon, particularly gaining prominence in the post-COVID-19 era. Okunade and Awosusi (2023) argue that *japa* is a buzzword that describes the trend of Nigerians leaving the country *en masse* due to economic challenges, political instability, and insecurity. In Nigeria, “Life is replete with occurrences as one catastrophe leads to another...and outrage follows outrage” (Urujzian & Etuk, 2024:313). Thus, *Japa* has become widely used among contemporary Nigerians, and has become a part of the Nigerian youth culture, most often symbolising a desperate search for greener pastures abroad. In a paper presented at the 22nd Meeting of the Joint Planning Board (JPB) and National Council on Development Planning (NCDP), on September 13, 2023, in Osogbo, Osun State, Bassi (2023:1) argues that *japa* is a Yoruba slang which means “to leave for greener pasture”. In other words, *japa* is synonymous with wilful migration, especially from Africa to Europe or America in search of better economic opportunities and condition of living.

Moreover, *japa* is conceptualised as the migration of post-independence Nigerians, recently the Gen Z, “...a class of people born between late 1990s and 2010” (Etuk & Okon, 2025:141). Life itself consists of a series of migration from one stage to another. From the biological perspective, life begins with the calculated migration of the spermatozoa to the uterus, and the sustained strategic movements which the cells, at advantageous positions, make for sustenance and continued preservation of life. The period from birth to adulthood and death is another critical movement and signals the biological evolution of humans. According to Maxwell (2014:250), generally, “migration in Latin *migrare* means to change residence”. It involves crossing some cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries to settle in a new religio-political, and economic environment often called the host land. Ajibola (2022:128) opines that “... migration from place to place has been part and parcel of human existence”. This underscores the fact that migration has existed from antiquity.

Consequently, it is more logical to state that there is hardly any human race which has not experienced migration, though the purpose may vary from one person to another or from one race to another. However, the conception of migration in contemporary times differs slightly from the traditional perspective. According to Pourijafari and Vahidpur (2014:680-681), "... in modern usage, migration entails the displacement and movement made by individuals in the hope of finding better personal convenience or improving their material or social conditions". Migration from Africa has taken this new perspective in the wake of the twentieth century where technological evolution and mobility of labour have taken a dynamic dimension, thereby offering people of different races, and ethnocultural backgrounds the opportunity to explore the world. It is not surprising that contemporary Nigeria experience a significant trend in migration. Rushdie (2002:425) describes the nature of migration in the contemporary age, thus: "the distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries". This explains the role of globalisation and innovation in technology in the current trend in migration. Regarding this, Akpan and Udoette (2023:64) aver that "In the recent decades, migration has not only been made convenient and possible through advances in transportation technology, but has also received prominence in socio-political, economic and literary discourses around the globe". This makes sense of the current wave of migration from Africa, and especially Nigeria in recent times. The Westward migration of Africans, especially Nigerians in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, is justified by their need for safety and better socio-economic conditions.

Notwithstanding, the migration of Africans to Europe is primarily driven by push factors like poor economy and insecurity in the homeland, which are orchestrated by the ills of post-independence leadership. This critical stance is corroborated by Okpiliya and Akpan (2020), who argue that the driving forces of migration include economic hardship, political instability, and violence. They opine that, "For close to two decades now, Nigeria has been faced with a worrisome security challenge as orchestrated by the faceless Islamic fundamentalists known as Boko Haram ..." (Okpiliya & Akpan, 2020:50). Etuk and Okon (2024:93), while examining the interconnectedness between language and ideology in *Black November*, a movie "Inspired by true events of the life and circumstances surrounding the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and activist from the Niger Delta", identify how, in addition to insecurity, corruption and political oppression render Nigerians second-class citizens in their own countries. Equally, Asaju and Yohanna (2022) as well as Adebayo et al (2024) acknowledge the prevalence of insecurity and poverty in post-independence Nigeria, and the effects they have both on the citizenry and the global economies. The adverse conditions of these twin sinister problems create a strong push for Nigerians to seek better opportunities and safety in foreign lands. Additionally, Okunade and Awosusi (2023) state that internal and external factors are responsible for *japa* in Nigeria. They note that the threatening brutality that greeted the October 2021 ENDSARS national protest and the Lekki Toll Gate massacre have influenced mass migration in Nigeria. This constitutes a significant determinant of *japa* in Nigeria, and reflects the failure of government to provide the necessary infrastructure and security to enable citizens to thrive.

Thus, the causes of *japa* in post-independence Nigeria give impetus to the intellectual engagement, and conception of *japa* in this work. Within the purview of critical praxis of this study, *japa* is theorised as the 'exodus of post-independence Nigerians'. By exodus of post-independence Africans, it is meant the kind of migration of Nigerians which marks their significant journey of escape from poverty and insecurity to the assumed prosperity in the global North, but with the accompanying post-migration, agonies, disillusionment, and trauma. Additionally, the concept denotes the traumatising experiences of Nigerians who struggle to travel to America and Europe in search of better means of survival, as a response to poor infrastructure, insecurity, the increasing rate of unemployment, poor standard of living, gender inequality, reflecting patriarchal "dominance and suppression" of the other gender (Etuk & Akpan 2023:70) and the inevitable brevity of life in their homeland. It equally implies the illusionary freedom from poverty in Africa, and the unpleasant experiences Nigerian immigrants are confronted with in America and Europe. Hence, *japa* as the exodus resonates with an escapist journey which mostly results in disillusionment, socio-cultural, and psychological changes in the immigrants after arrival at their target destinations.

Furthermore, African writers have dutifully reflected and interrogated their environment and the realities therein. In the words of Etuk and Umoh (2024:366), "Art becomes meaningful when it examines succinctly the dynamics of the particular society from which it springs..." It is not surprising that contemporary African writers, especially those of Nigerian descent, have taken the challenge of engaging the social phenomenon of the century: migration. Chimamanda Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Helon Habila, Yejide Kilanko, Michael Afenfia, Taiye Selasi, and Uwem Akpan, among others have documented migrant experiences in their respective literary works, thereby commenting on the condition of African immigrants in the diaspora. Ojaruega (2024) holds that contemporary African diasporic writers create narratives which depict Africa as a socio-political space fraught with corruption. Thus, these writers live up to the expectations of a true African writer.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, the condition of African immigrants in America is narrativised through the character and characterisation of Ifemelu, the central character. Her journey, experiences and longings are a microcosm of the general experiences and trajectories of African immigrants, especially Nigerian immigrants in America. However, what is much of concern in this paper is Adichie's subtle treatment of Ifemelu's homeland, Nigeria, as what Etuk and Urujzian (2024:194) term "...the miasma of death and decay" which no sane person should think of living in, let alone returning to, after escaping from the horrific and nasty experiences. This becomes significant in the conversation between Ifemelu and Aisha, an African hair braider in Trenton, who is too surprised to hear Ifemelu say she (Ifemelu) is planning to return to Nigeria. Though Aisha is a barely educated Senegalese, she understands the socio-economic dynamics of Africa, and recognises *japa* as the escape route.

Moreover, Eziafakaego, in Yejide Kilanko's *A Good Name*, leaves Nigeria for America in pursuit of a degree in Computer Science, with the hope of getting a well-paid job upon graduation. This trope resonates in other migrant works like Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, where Ikechukwu Uzondur, the central character, flees Nigeria to study for a degree in Economics in America so that he would be gainfully employed upon graduation. Although most of the immigrants have different *post-japa* experiences, these narratives make it obvious that migrating from a malfunctioning Nigeria becomes the only hope for post-independence Nigerians in contemporary times.

Furthermore, there is a large corpus of research on migrant fiction in Nigeria. Studies such as Olaniyan (2021), Ajibola (2022), and Akpan and Udoette (2023) focus on various challenges of African immigrants. Olaniyan (2021) examines the trauma of departure in Helon Habila's *Travelers*, highlighting the perplexity of the life of immigrants, and the trauma which results from their despicable post-migration realities in the host land. Therefore, the scholar notes that leaving the homeland in search of greener pastures leaves psychological scars on African immigrants. Ajibola (2022) investigates the representation of female immigrants in Nigerian migrant fiction. She holds that against the general belief that the global North provides opportunities for the prosperity of all, the female characters in the selected texts are at point zero, a level of struggling, with or without hope for survival. Akpan and Udoette (2023) interrogate the reconstruction of female migrants' experiences in Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*, wherein they argue that Unigwe gives females agency in the narrative.

However, there is a paucity of research on *japa* as an escape from the post-postcoloniality of Nigerians homeland. Additionally, extant studies most often concentrate on the experiences of African immigrants without much attention to the homeland or the "neo-Centre", which sets up the citizenry for a hellish encounter in the host land. Therefore, this study seeks to interrogate *japa* as an escape route for the disillusioned post-independence Nigerians, with a view to critiquing the homeland as the "neo-Centre", and examining the social and economic conditions of Nigerian immigrants in Europe as depicted in Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*.

Interpretive research design is adopted for this study. Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* constitutes the primary source of data, while relevant journal articles, library and internet materials comprise the secondary sources of data for the research. The primary text is purposively selected based on its relevant thematic preoccupation. The text is subjected to literary analysis, with Etim's (2019) post-postcolonialism as the framework complemented by critical insights from Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, specifically used in examining the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in Europe.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Eyoh Etim's (2019) post-postcolonialism complemented by Homi Bhabha's (1994) postcolonialism as its theoretical framework. Post-postcolonialism is a critical literary lens through which African problems are critiqued without blaming them on the long-gone years of colonial preoccupation of Africa. Etim (2019:5) describes it as:

... a periphery-searching and margin-centering theory. And in centering the margin, the theory hopes to expose the oppressors among the oppressed. It is a theory that creates a centre out of the Otherness of Africa. Such a re-Othering and re-Centering is based on the deconstruct-able self-posturing of the previous binary structures which, from all indications, can no longer sustain our postcolonial realities.

Etim and Omobowale (2020) aver that post-postcolonialism could be traced to Etim's paper, "Post-postcolonialism: Theorising on the Shifting Postcolonial Paradigms in African Fiction", read at the fourth Postcolonial Narrations Conference in Munich, Germany, in October 2016. The "post-" in post-postcolonialism denotes after postcolonialism. The theory holds that postcolonialism has unnecessarily focused on Europe, while the hitherto "Other" had long acquired a hegemonic selfhood.

Etim (2019:1) avers that "... the postcolonial critique has been plagued by its over-excitement at confronting the Centre." Etim and Omobowale (2020) question the continuous location of postcolonial scholarship within the prism of colonial impoverishment of Africa. According to them, "Until recently, the enduring postcolonial discourses in Africa have been based on the binaries whose arrows pointed towards the West as that which bears the exclusive agency in Africa's postcolonial woes" (Etim & Omobowale, 2020: 6). Thus, it suffices to incorporate in this study the intellectual offerings of post-postcolonialism to effectively critique *japa* as freedom from the falling walls of post-independence African states. Thus, post-postcolonialism argues that attention be paid to the new "Other" created by the post-independence "Centre" where 'the leader' constitutes the dominant and manipulative "Centre", while 'the led' falls within the marginalised "Other".

"Post-postcolonialism urges criticism to look beyond the race and the bourgeoisie-proletariat relationship between Africans and the western nations to the ethnicity, corruption, inept leadership and the various oppressive class structures within the African continent, which are more immediate and directly impacting" (Etim & Omobowale, 2020: 11). What this implies is that postcolonial criticism must shift from the traditional blame game, and begin a serious critique of Africa, Africans, as well as African leaders as embodiments of the Neo-Centre" which must be questioned in the face of deteriorating economy, poor standard of education, insecurity, poverty, and other poignant post-independence realities. In this case, "...political information often is a form of discourse processing" (Etuk & Urujzian, 2018: 87). Thus, there is a need to critically engage the internal "Centring", "Othering", and subalternity which thrive in post-independence Africa. Etim and Omobowale (2020) assert that such assessment becomes integral to the total decolonisation of Africa. The decolonisation of Africa project must interrogate the few powerful and privileged Africans against the many weak and poor black Africans. Thus, it becomes necessary to interrogate these dynamics in the context of *japa* in post-independence Nigerian.

Nevertheless, Bhabha's ideas on ambivalence and hybridity are equally important in this work, especially in examining the *post-japa* experience of African immigrants in host lands. His contributions to postcolonial criticism are evident in *The Location of Culture* (1994). It is within his discourse on the ambivalence of the colonised that he expounds the concept of hybridity, a product of the intermingling of cultures. Ashcroft et al (2007) argue that the concept of ambivalence was introduced into postcolonial studies to advance the discourse on the nature of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Bhabha's (1994) explication of ambivalence within the intellectual conception of the cultural mimicry of the coloniser by the colonised foregrounds the socioeconomic relations among African immigrants and their hosts. Thus, Bhabha's ideas on ambivalence, *Centring* and *Othering* are deployed in interrogating the place and experiences of post-independence Nigerian immigrants in Europe.

***Japa* as Exodus of Post-independence Nigerians in Nigerian Migrant Prose Fiction**

Nigeria has become a horror sight and a locale of frustration, insecurity, poverty, corruption, and systemic oppression of poor citizens in the last few years of civilian rule. One might have thought that the triumph of democracy over military dictatorship in 1999 would lighten the weight of the burden on an average Nigerian; however, the politics of corruption and weaponisation of poverty have become the bend of the supposed democratic state. The disease of colonialism was probably easily cured as the pathogens were external, but the palpable symptomatic of post-independence Nigerian leaders' ineptitude at governance makes it almost impossible to think of the liberation of the masses. Consequently, many Nigerians have turned to *japa* as a means of escape from the rubble of a once great African state, Nigeria. Unigwe employs potent language to document the trajectories and the biting experiences of Nigerians in their struggle to find freedom from the trapped landscape: Nigeria. In the words of Urujzian and Etuk (2023: 271) "Language is the most important instrument through which a writer organises... (their thought pattern)" (Emphasis mine). Etuk (2024: 289) adds that "The choice of language to convey specific messages...is vitally important". The stories in Unigwe's *Better Never than Late* are tales of embarrassing insecurity, poverty and poignant experiences in the homeland, and the disillusionment of immigrants in their host lands.

Unigwe's *Better Never than Late* is a quintessential artistic portrayal of the condition of post-independence Nigeria, the burden of insecurity and unemployment, and the dynamics of escape to find freedom in European and American countries. In the short story entitled "The Transformation of Rapu", the author reveals the horror of a failed Nigerian state through Gwachi, a Nigerian man of Igbo descent who flees Nigeria to find safety and means of livelihood in Europe. Gwachi's exodus begins when he leaves Nigeria for Germany from where he relocates to Holland, and later Belgium in search of a safer, economically viable and accommodating landscape for the blacks in Europe. Gwachi's decision to leave his wife and children in Nigeria elucidates the urgency with which it is to find a safe place in Europe for himself, and later his family. He would later send for his wife and child as it has become the culture among Nigerian immigrants who cannot leave Nigeria with their families. His

action is a pointer to the bad condition of the homeland, and the immediacy in escaping the death trap that the once prosperous nation has become.

The author uses Gwachi's description of Nigeria to Hilde, his European wife 'on purpose', to cast aspersions on the shameful and failed leadership of Nigeria which gradually converted the country to a death trap. Gwachi's explanation foregrounds the escapist notion of *japa* held in this work. The frightening tale of the Nigerian state is given by Gwachi, thus: "It's not a country like Kenya or South Africa where you can go on safaris. Why do you think I left?" (7). Therefore, in explaining the security of the nation, Gwachi equally makes known the rationale behind his *japa*. Thus, he becomes an archetype of all Nigerian immigrants who *japa* because of insecurity and other factors connected to causes of poverty and death. These factors are explicitly captured by the author, and they include: "...kidnapping at gunpoint; of policemen who sold their uniforms and rifles to armed robbers, of constant power outages and air so thick with exhaust fumes of rickety old cars that it was impossible to breathe" (7-8). Unigwe is unapologetic in her portraiture of the collapse of Nigeria, detailing the ineptitude of Nigerian leaders at governance, and exposing the endemic corruption in the nation's institutions.

Gwachi's comparison of Nigeria to other African countries like Kenya and Ghana gives a critical implication on the level of insecurity and underdevelopment in the homeland. Additionally, the author's mention of the unwholesome practices of some Nigerian policemen opens a broader spectrum into the analysis of the degree of corruption and insecurity in Nigeria. According to Asaju and Yohnna (2022: 171), "The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report rated Nigeria as 3rd most terrorized country in the world, behind Afghanistan and Iraq". Consequently, the post-independence Nigerian landscape has become a site of struggle signifying horror, death trap, struggle for survival, and mass migration to escape from terror and death. Hence, it is not surprising to find Nigerians escaping through *japa*. Therefore, post-postcolonialism questions the post-independence factors leading to insecurity, economic sabotage in Nigeria, and the continued dispersal of Nigerians across the continents of the world. Scholarship in postcolonial studies must shift attention from African coloniality to the neo-Centre which has plunged the country into a continuous deterioration of the economy, standard of education, as well as insecurity, and poor healthcare infrastructure. It is for this reason that post-postcolonialism critically interrogates African leaders' complacency in the impoverishment of African states, especially Nigeria.

Furthermore, Unigwe maintains the tradition of writing about the deteriorating homeland as the propellant of *japa* among post-independence Nigerians. In the short story entitled "Becoming Prosperous", Unigwe narrates the misery brought upon contemporary Nigerians by the ineptitude of indigenous leaders. Among the monsters threatening the security of the former British colony are violence and insurgency occasioned by the Islamic extremist and terrorist groups, especially the Boko Haram terrorist group. This is one of the push factors for *japa* in post-independence Nigeria as noted by Okpiliya and Akpan (2023). Adebayo et al (2024) note that insecurity, terrorism, banditry, and kidnapping have caused fear and threat to life among Nigerians. In the short story, Agu and Prosperous are a couple threatened by insurgency in the failed Nigeria. The violence which is caused by Islamic extremists in Jos results in the death of hundreds of people, and the destruction of property worth millions of naira. It is the instance of this insecurity and government indifference to human life that Agu and Prosperous embark on their exodus. Prosperous recounts her misery while being occupied with cooking for Agu, her husband, and his friends in Belgium. The scars left on her mind by this memory are not only traumatic but also destructive.

Through Agu and Prosperous, Unigwe x-rays the malfunctioning security system in Nigeria, citing insecurity as one of the reasons most Nigerians *japa*. It is evident in the text that this is the major cause of *japa* by Agu and Prosperous. Before the unfortunate incident in Jos, Prosperous has been a banker with about five years of experience. Agu runs a successful business in the same city. Apparently, the family is satisfied and happy. Agu and Prosperous have domestic servants who attend to them promptly, and the maids are equally given a good life. Thiers is paradise found and undisturbed. Agu and Prosperous live their dream life and respect each other:

Agu respected her job, her need to rest after work. She never felt that she was sacrificing her life for him. Weekends were spent in bed, talking about colleagues and dreams and whether or not to go Sunday-night dancing, and should they start having babies? (37)

This excerpt indicates the state of paradise found in Agu and Prosperous' family. Agu does not regard his wife as subservient and one whose worth reflects in her culinary skills every day. Prosperous is not a mean employer as she treats her maids like her children or sisters: "She never beat them. She did not keep a special whip for them like their neighbours in Jos did She bought them clothes at Christmas. She bought them shoes at boutiques ..." (38). Unfortunately, Agu and Prosperous' paradise is disturbed by Islamic extremism leading to religious intolerance, violence, maiming, and killing in Jos. The riot claims Agu's fortunes in his supermarket which is burnt by Muslim extremists who hate him because he is a Southerner and a Christian. This heinous crime changes the

course of Agu's life and that of his family; his business is gone and his life and that of his wife are threatened by insecurity. "... everything gone in one night. His investment. His will to live. There was no question of his wife continuing her job at the bank. She was marked too" (41-42). Thus, Unigwe portrays how religious intolerance and fanaticism have impacted peace and security in Nigeria, thereby causing the citizenry to panic and scamper for their lives.

Moreover, Unigwe's text is a poignant portraiture of a country with embarrassing leadership and insecurity. Leadership failure in Nigeria has seen the country wallow in unprecedented disasters and pains. This is appalling and very symbolic of a national tragedy to which political leaders have turned blind eyes. The post-independence government in Nigeria has taken a crooked dimension such that democracy has become the government of few Nigerians, by few Nigerians, and for few Nigerians: constituents of the "neo-Centre". Consequently, their existence within the uncomfortable and life-threatening becomes a suffocating experience. This state is what Homi Bhabha describes as unhomeliness (Tyson, 2006). It is upon an understanding of this dynamics that Agu and Prosperous begin to lobby their way out of the hope-bereft and precarious homeland.

Unigwe succinctly expresses the urgency with which Nigerians like Agu and Prosperous desire to begin their exodus, thus: "They cleared their joint account to buy a passage out. No choice. The man who said he could help them out had only one country he could get them into. Belgium" (42). It could be argued that the obvious treachery and indifference exhibited by most Nigerian leaders are the catalysts for *japa*. Thus, Etim (2019:1) argues that "leaving the enemy within to feed fat, grow robust and prosper freely" is a misplaced priority for the African critic. Therefore, post-postcolonialism interrogates this "neo-Centre" which has assumed the enemy status. Etim's (2019) post-postcolonialism holds that the twenty-first century African immigrants have been marginalised by the "neo-Centre" which had claimed victim of colonial oppression. It suffices to state that the political elites in Nigeria who have refused to address issues concerning the masses' security and wellbeing constitute "the neo-Centre" while their subjects become the double-margin and the periphery. This makes the political leaders rich, powerful and secure, while the citizenry is marginalised, exposed to insecurity, and death. Thus, the "neo-Other" thinks of *japa* as the fundamental solution to both economic and life insecurity.

Therefore, Agu and Prosperous' decision to leave Nigeria for Belgium has an escapist motive, rather than mere seeking of greener pastures in the global North. According to Adebayo et al (2024:1) insecurity in Nigeria "... is compounded by hunger, unemployment ... and other vices too numerous to mention". These forms of national maladies precipitate *japa* in post-independence Nigeria. Thus, it is argued in this paper that *japa* is struggle for survival in continuum, just as what Fox (1999) describes as a continuous "middle passage", though not with uprooting and displacement occasioned by slave trade, but by the complex web of opportunities to survive outside the homeland. Nigerian immigrants in Europe or America, just like Agu and Prosperous in the short narrative, have assumed the state of the historical middle passage wherein there is the transcending of international borders in search of safe havens. Following the argument of Adebayo et al (2024), the matrix of this phase of the historical phenomenon is corruption in the homeland which naturally incubates and nurtures insecurity in Nigeria, thereby leaving innocent victims no better alternative. Consequently, it becomes pertinent for African postcolonial scholars to focus on the new paradigms of *Centre* and *the Other* or margin created within the hitherto acclaimed *Other*. The politics of criticism needs to move away from the over-emphasised and stuck-in blame of African woes on coloniality, and embrace a retrospective approach to postcolonial criticism. This is the concern that the post-postcolonial critic must note in his or her interrogation of Nigeria's post-independence texts.

Published in 2019, Unigwe's narrative details violence, negligence by leaders and the corrosion of human value in post-independence Nigeria. In view of this, the influx of Nigerians leaving for Europe and America is critiqued from the perspective of push factors rather than dwelling on only the ambivalences and racialism that the immigrants suffer in the host lands. In "Becoming Prosperous", Agu and Prosperous are forced out of Nigeria because of government's inability to address the problem of religious intolerance, and forestall a further outbreak of violence and killing of innocent citizens. Through explicating Prosperous' frightful life after the massacre in Jos, Unigwe reveals the impact of violence in Northern Nigeria, and how traumatic the sight of human destruction is, thus: "She does not want to think of the charred corpses she saw the day after the riot" (42). Thus, it is argued in this paper that *japa* is triggered by leadership failure and corruption in post-independence Nigeria. The citizens have become helpless in the face of threatening socio-economic realities, just like Agu and Prosperous have. Hence, *japa* becomes the only escape on sight as portrayed in the circumstance of Agu and Prosperous in the story entitled "Becoming Prosperous".

Post-japa Trajectory in the Narrative: A Raffia Bag of Tears and Laughter

The dynamics of changes Nigerian immigrants experience in the diaspora spans from anxiety, ambivalence, hybridity and other psychological and spatial dislocation and reconfiguration. Many immigrants are disillusioned by the reality of the host land which they considered the biblical Canaan, a land full of milk and honey. It is not surprising that most immigrants take life-threatening risk in their cross-border exodus to Europe. The significance of such strong will and mental strength could only be fully understood within the corpus of illusionary abundance and self-actualisation which form the complex web of the push and pull factors of *japa* by post-independence Nigerians. Therefore, Unigwe comments on the complexity of *japa* and *post-japa* in her migrant narrative.

In “The Transfiguration of Rapu”, there is a stench of disappointment perceived by Rapu, trauma and later the shattering of her marriage with Gwachi. First, she leaves her child in Nigeria to meet her husband in Europe. Her expectation is that of an atmosphere of bliss, abundance, and comfort. However, reality strikes her when she realises that Gwachi, her husband, has a “paper-wife” with whom he loves and lives with, but whom he intends to divorce her after getting his green card. To calm her fears, she is made to believe that she will regain her paradise as soon as the divorce process is successful. Regardless, Rapu suffers psychological trauma because of abandonment by Gwachi who is yet to leave Hilde, his European wife. Rapu is disturbed whenever Gwachi rushes to see her off after having a brief time together. Out of frustration, she asks when the hide-and-seek love life would end: “How long still?” (4). Gwachi gives the customary answer that it is only for short time. From a critical stance, the continuous probing by Rapu highlights the disappointment in her European dream. She is sorrowful and traumatised by the unexpected reality such that when asks Prosperous about who and how Hilde is, “... her voice [is] low and soft, her eyes dull” (5).

Moreover, Rapu’s emotional torture in Europe is glaring when she visits Prosperous after two weeks to lament about her rejection by Gwachi, and the depression she suffers because of that. Her disappointment in Gwachi, regret and disillusionment in the exodus are expressed, thus: “Rapu shook his hands off her back and walked away into the kitchen. Prosperous followed. ‘You know I kept asking heee... him to bring me. Bring me over. Bring me, I said, I can hah... han-handle it. I missed him. Now, I don’t know. Maybe I should ha... ha... have remained in Nigeria’ (9). This reality contrasts with the fantasy or illusion which beclouds her decision to leave her son in Nigeria to meet her husband in Europe. This transformation from the stage of illusion in Rapu’s consciousness marks a critical psychological and socio-economic turning point for most Nigerian immigrants who seek greener pastures in the global North. The impact of disappointment is so severe that while telling Prosperous that Gwachi has left for a holiday with Hilde in Turkey, Rapu “... sounded like she was about to cry or had been crying. The hip-throwing, finger-snapping woman at the party had been usurped by this nervous-looking one” (6). Without any financial autonomy on sight, which she would have consoled herself with, Rapu becomes what Ajibola (2022) describes as a female immigrant at point zero. Perhaps, this explains her sad demeanour and regretful contemplation on leaving Nigeria.

Additionally, Rapu is not only sad because of the rejection by Gwachi, but also emotionally broken and traumatised by the feeling of loss of her beloved husband to a white woman, and the emptiness she feels. Rapu’s loss and emotional trauma find expressive mode in this excerpt: “She sleeps with my hus-hus-husband every night. She’s got him and what ha... ha... have I got?” The gaps in Rapu’s expression reflect the shattered mind structure of someone whose illusion and obsession with the host land have caused her disillusionment and depression. Rapu and Gwachi’s marriage is unamended when Rapu gets pregnant for another because of uncertainty about when Gwachi will leave Hilde as promised. Gwachi equally suffers a huge loss as he is yet to be aware that Rapu is pregnant for someone else, while he has asked Hilde for a divorce. The politics of survival in the host lands has resulted in multiple marriages, and love lust. It is not surprising that Rapu finds solace in her pregnancy for a stranger. Her reaction to the current of events later in the story indicates a process of transformation from a morally sound African woman to an African immigrant in Europe whose values have been eroded by the European culture, and the survival ideology of immigrants. Thus, it suffices to state that *japa* as the exodus of the post-independence Nigerians has its raffia bag of tears and laughter as exemplified by Unigwe in the experiences of Rapu in the narrative.

Furthermore, “Becoming Prosperous” is a narrative in which Unigwe explicates the illusion, ambivalence, and struggle for survival that welcome Nigerian immigrants in Europe. Agu and Prosperous who leave Nigeria because of insecurity that nearly takes their lives are certain that with their experience and education, they would undoubtedly have good-paying jobs, after all, there are stories of people who have made it in Europe without much education. Prosperous expresses her perception of host land, thus: “*I thought they’d take a look at our degrees and offer us jobs on the spot. Company cars, a company house with a massive lawn, a butler and a chef.*” (32). However, reality dawns on her and Agu, upon their arrival, that all those thoughts are mere illusion which exists only in the imaginary world. Consequently, they become uncertain about their fates upon survival in Belgium, and

wish they relocated to somewhere else like Canada. Their struggle for survival and coming to terms with the diasporic realities for African immigrants begin as they resort to menial jobs because language barrier has denied them jobs in the teaching and banking sector.

The trajectory of Agu's and Prosperous' survival encapsulates the gamut of disillusionment upon arrival in the host land, the determinate motive to survive, and the series of changes which occur in them as they strive to transcend all odds to get a better life for themselves and families. It is important to note that their 'invalidity' in the New World is facilitated by language barrier. They are not offered their preferred jobs because they speak neither Dutch nor French and even German. This process of integration into the European cultural expression becomes a critical point in the *post-japa* experience of immigrants from Nigeria, or Africa generally. This experience is frustrating and exhausting such that Prosperous cannot bear anymore. Thus, her feelings find an expressive outlet in this excerpt: "Haba! All those languages and a teaching degree to teach mathematics [sic] to a bunch of kids!" (32). It is worth noting that language is a tool of power and domination, and for expression of cultural identity. Therefore, immigrants' struggle with the linguistic demands of their new environment as prerequisite for decent jobs is very significant in their manifestation of *self* as colonial subjects. The frustration involves in learning new languages before gaining access to a reputable job connotes the European hegemony which Unigwe gives relevance in her migrant fiction.

Agu and Prosperous' inability to get decent jobs in Belgium because of certain language limitations, provides a bird's-eye view to the European cultural hegemony, and the *Othering* of Nigerian immigrants in Europe. The import of this linguistic and cultural reality elucidates post-independence Nigerian immigrants' lack of agency in their host lands. Consequently, they constitute the minority class and culture which are arrogated subservient roles as a symbol of power relations between the superior and inferior or minority cultures. Accordingly, Bhabha (1994:6) posits that "Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multinational division of labour." It follows that Agu and Prosperous become a factory worker and a cleaner, respectively, to concur with the allocation of values among cultures of the formerly colonised subject and the coloniser. This labour discrepancy between the aborigines and the Nigerian immigrants in Europe typifies the *Othering* of the colonial subjects, and the *centring* of the colonisers within the migrant discourse. Even the semiotic imports derivable from this labour division exhibit the power relations between the immigrants and their hosts. More so, dissatisfaction and disillusionment among Nigerian immigrants like Agu and Prosperous who are the oppressed periphery both at homeland and in diaspora become an impending doom of *japa*. Therefore, it is understandable when the characters regret their *japa*, thus: "*We should never have left. We would have been better off in Nigeria*" (34). The tense in the verbal phrases of the last two sentences buttress the regret in the characters past actions. According to Udoka, Umoh and Etuk (2020: 58), "Tense is a category that locates the action of a verb on a timeline in relation to the time of speech relating to the action in question."

The traumatic impact of disillusionment on Prosperous is grammatically captured, thus: "There were days when she felt as if someone had stuck a knife in her back and any sudden movement might kill her ..." (43-44). In the words of Etuk (2021:3), "...the ways members of a certain society perceive the world or conjecture it to be are captured in their language use". Thus, through language use, it becomes glaring how the expected bliss is rather bleached, and the immigrants face a bleak future of uncertainty in the host land. Therefore, regrets and disillusionment form a complex web of nostalgia, return migration and the fear of returning without actualisation of dreams. Agu and Prosperous are frustrated in their host lands given the politics of becoming which, itself, is influenced by a complex system of globalisation, race, culture, and identity. The *pre-japa* dreams become the illusion and enigma of *post-japa* realities of these post-independence Nigerian immigrants in the global North. Therefore, this contradiction between expectation and reality among Nigerian immigrants in the diaspora provides a critical understanding of *japa* and the *post-japa* experiences of African immigrants.

Consequently, the immigrants' "escape" seemingly becomes a trap, as it lands them on a site of uncertainty, despair, cultural dichotomy, and power play between citizens of the host land and the former colonised people in the space of the defunct coloniser. More to this are fear and dissatisfaction permeating their thoughts of return migration. For instance, it is the wish of the couple to return to their homeland, but the fear of backlash from the unhomely home becomes the source of strength for enduring harsh realities in the host land: "And yet they – like many of their friends who visit every weekend – cannot return until they have made enough money, acquire enough material possessions, to be seen as successful" (34). It is unthinkable that a top-ranking banker, and a prosperous business tycoon in Nigeria would become a cleaner and bread factory worker, respectively in Europe because of violence and insecurity in their motherland. In post-postcolonialism, Etim (2019) argues that all these are caused by the failed government of their homeland. This is evident in the text as Agu and Prosperous leave Nigeria because of insecurity and violence that threaten their lives. Unfortunately, their perception of Europe as a place of bliss is proven otherwise by the turnout of events after their arrival. Hence, Unigwe notes that the envisioned diaspora

most often becomes a site of loss and regret to most post-independence immigrants of Nigerian descent, thereby highlighting the enigma and ambivalence in the exodus of most Nigerians.

Conclusion

This study critiques *japa* as the exodus of post-independence Nigerians from the perspective of post-postcolonialism. Textual exploration reveals that Nigerians are forced out of their motherland because of the ineptitude of post-independence democratic leaders, which has wrought unemployment, hardship, hunger, insecurity, violence, terrorism, and death on the people. Most Nigerians escape to other parts of the world in search of better means of survival. Thus, the home is presented as barren land which is incapable of saving her citizens from starvation. Moreover, violence and terrorism have become widespread, causing citizens to resort to *japa* as a means of escaping this life-threatening and repressive landscape. However, *japa* has become traumatic to most immigrants as the illusion about the host land is pulled down by realities on arrival. Consequently, these unfortunate immigrants live a sad life, counting their losses, humiliation, suffering, starvation, disillusionment, and in most cases, regretting leaving the homeland. Regardless, the possibility of reverse migration is stalked by unfulfilled life, and the disappointment they would be to their families and friends if they return without any accomplishment. Therefore, *japa* as exodus for Nigerians is a complex web of escapism, illusion, reality, disappointment, and the struggle for survival in the host land.

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