



## Japa (Migration) Syndrome in Nigeria Palace: A Reading of Selected Francophone and Anglophone Literature

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**Abstract.** The phenomenon of ‘Japa’ syndrome, characterized by the mass emigration of Nigerians abroad, has emerged as a significant aspect of Nigeria's contemporary landscape. This paper adopts a literary lens to delve into this phenomenon, employing Lee’s push-pull theory and Bhagwati’s brain drain phenomenon as integral components of its methodology with an interpretive design. Through an analysis of Sanusi's *un nègre a violé une blonde à Dallas (Nègre)* from the French literary bloc and Adichie's "*Americanah*" from the English literary bloc. This study seeks to unravel the complexities of Japa and its repercussions on Nigerian society. The selected literary works are scrutinized to discern the motivations and experiences driving Nigerians to migrate abroad, shedding light on the social, economic, and political forces underpinning Japa. By employing a comparative framework, the study elucidates the similarities and disparities in the portrayal of Japa across linguistic boundaries. Furthermore, it probes into the potential influence of language itself in shaping perceptions surrounding Japa. The findings of the study reveal that many Nigerians, like most Africans and third-world-nation citizens, experiencing Japa are pushed by factors like limited economic opportunities and political instability while being pulled by the promise of higher wages, better living conditions, and greater opportunities in the West. This trend could lead to brain drain and obstruct the country's advancement as talented people leave. The study contributes to a more complex understanding of Japa syndrome by

elucidating its causes, effects, and position within Nigeria's broader migration and identity narratives.

**Keywords:** Japa, Emigration, Nigeria, *Americanah*, *Un nègre a violé une blonde à Dallas*

### 1. Introduction

The recurrent departure of able-bodied young Nigerian youths as it is prevalent in many African countries and third-world nations has consistently been on the rise since the independence of so many nations. In contrast to the West, emigration is the main form of migration in Africa, claims Kuper (2022). Emigration is the act of departing a nation of origin to live perpetually in another (Adam et al., 2020). This is emphasized by Denisenko (2020) as a fundamental aspect of human migration, which entails the deliberate and often permanent departure of individuals from their country of origin to establish residence in a different nation or geographical region. This process involves a significant personal and societal transition, as individuals choose to uproot themselves from familiar surroundings, cultural contexts, and social networks in pursuit of new opportunities, experiences, or a better quality of life in their chosen destination. This is captured as Japa in Nigeria palace, a word originating from the Yoruba ethnic group in South-West Nigeria. Akanle (2023) explicates that the word "Japa" literally means "to run away" or "escape," but in Nigerian slang, it signifies emigration for better opportunities abroad. However, following the recent addition of Nigerian pidgin to the

Oxford dictionary in 2025, The term "Japa" refers to the departure of Nigerians to other nations, particularly those in Global North, in pursuit of economic opportunities, jobs, or more education." (Oxford, 2025) cited in *Punch Newspapers* (2025, January 8). The slang therefore has taken a new meaning in Nigeria palace and the globe to mean the act of emigrating to seek better opportunities abroad.

There exists a dichotomy between emigration conceived as "Japa" in this study and tourism. Tourism encompasses the practice of individuals embarking on journeys for the primary purposes of leisure, recreation, or cultural exploration (Chen et al., 2020). Tourists engage in temporary visits to various destinations, immersing themselves in diverse activities, sights, and experiences that offer relaxation, enjoyment, and opportunities for personal growth. Du Cros & McKercher (2020) explain that these travelers typically stay for a finite period, during which they engage with the local culture, traditions, and attractions before eventually returning to their country of origin, enriched by their encounters and memories from their sojourn. In contrast, emigration is the permanent relocation to another country for work, family, or a better life. Emigrants leave their homes behind to establish a new life elsewhere. While Europeans come in as tourists, Africans (Nigeria) have perpetually taken the route of emigrants. Mokwenye (2013) explicating this reality and linking it to the West Indies explains that the dream of an average young man in the French Caribbean is to go to France and remain indefinitely.

Writers of francophone African descent in the diaspora as well as those at home have consistently foregrounded the concept of "Japa" conceptualized as emigration in this study. Contemporary novelists like Alain Mabanckou, in *Bleu Blanc Rouge* (1998), *Lumière de Pointe-Noire* (2013), *Demain J'aurai vingt ans* (2010), *Black Bazar* (2009) among other novels, has consistently portrayed not just the reality of Africans departure from the continent, but their perception and bias towards their continent. Other current acclaimed writers in the francophone world living in the Diaspora such as Mohammed Mbougar Sarr in *La plus secrete memoire des hommes* (2021) while addressing the reality, go further in refracting the experience of African writers in Europe through the resurrection of Ouloguem's experience of plagiarism. Waberi in *Dis-moi pour qui j'existe* (2022) and *Passage des larmes* (2009) a mixture of nostalgia and resentment is portrayed.

Contrary to many writers from the francophone bloc living in the Diaspora, Nigeria literary creators have

proven to be more engaging with the realities of their nation as portrayed in the thematic and stylistic tropes often deployed in artistic creation to portray socio-political socio-economic realities amongst other concerns of the nation. Olowolagba (2021) submit that dictatorship and lawlessness as demonstrated in Ojo-Ade's *Les paradis terrestres* is a significant factor encouraging the Japa phenomenon in Nigeria. Prominent among the realities captured are the push and pull leading to emigration and brain drainage phenomena in the nation. Push factors are unfavourable conditions of the nation of origin that encourage individuals to go elsewhere. Pull factors are favourable attributes of the country of destination that entice migrants.

## 2. Literature Review

There are several sorts of migration research in Nigerian scholarship among academics. In their study of Nigerians' college degree student travelling to Canada, Adeyanju and Olatunji (2022), who specifically focus on parent-funded individuals at Canadian universities, make the case that low-income and upper-class Nigerians choose Canadian institutions due to the employment opportunities associated with student visas and the chance they provide for obtaining permanent residency in Canada. The critics suggest that migration for higher education aligns with Canada's neoliberal immigration policies targeting skilled and self-sufficient international students pulled in by the financial benefits for both parents and the Canadian state through higher tuition fees paid by international students. On the other hand, Nwosu et al. (2022) looked at youth migration, focussing on the push factors that encourage juvenile movement in spite of the hazards involved. They specifically looked at the connection between contemporary slavery, illegal migration, and poor governance. Twenty-five young people from the Umuozu community in Isiala-Mbano Imo State, Nigeria, who were chosen by stratified selection, are included in the study using a qualitative research design and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that while youths are aware of the dangers of illegal migration, many are still willing to take the risk due to strong push-pull factors, potentially leading to voluntary slavery amid increasing poverty rates.

However, for 'Japa' in Nigeria palace, Akanle (2023) submits that there exist various drivers of migration among Nigerians and provides a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon through innovative methodological approaches. By combining primary migratory insights, autoethnography, and empirical engagements with Nigerian migrants across various

countries, the critic uncovers the complex motivations behind Nigerian migration which reveals that there is a significant increase in the number of Nigerians living abroad, with the concept of "Japa" symbolizing the urgent emigration trend. What Akanle portrays as drivers of migration is conceived as the push and pull factors in the framework of the study.

The push-pull theory of Lee (1966) offers a framework for comprehending patterns of migration. It pinpoints the "push" factors—detrimental elements of the place of origin, such as political unrest or poverty—that drive individuals to migrate (Black & King, 2012). On the other hand, "pull" factors are favourable aspects of the country of destination that attract individuals, including better living circumstances or higher earnings (Carli, 2018). Brain drain is the term used to describe the exodus of highly educated or competent people, which may result in a loss of human capital in the country of origin (Docquier & Rapoport, 2013). This is often observed in literary texts through the depiction of characters that possess valuable skills or knowledge and are motivated to emigrate due to a lack of opportunities in their home country. Likewise, the push and pull factors are captured within the experiences and motivations of characters as demonstrated in the selected text analyzed in the exploration of 'Japa' in Nigeria in this study while underlining the interplay of languages in the foregrounding of the "Japa" syndrome.

Furthermore, whereas the limited studies on Japa rely on primary migratory insights, autoethnography, and empirical engagements, this study takes its departure from literary text. The literary exploration investigates the pull and push factors in the selected texts of Sanusi and Adichie written in French and English to establish the reflection of Nigerian writers in the two broadly used languages of artistic creation among academics and writers nationwide.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study utilizes an interpretive design. Qualitative analysis is deployed to explore how meaning is constructed within literary works (Flick, 2014). A comparative framework is embraced by analyzing two distinct novels: Sanusi's *Un nègre a violé une blonde à Dallas* and Adichie's *Americanah*. The choice of Sanusi's French novel offers a unique perspective, allowing us to see if the portrayal of Japa transcends language and gender or if there are culturally specific nuances within French-speaking Nigerian communities. Adichie's well-established English novel, on the other hand, provides a comprehensive understanding of Japa's motivations and effects,

servicing as a strong foundation for comparison. This linguistic diversity acknowledges Nigeria's multilingual landscape of scholarship and explores the potential influence of language on how Japa is portrayed by both male and female genders. This is carried out within the theoretical framework of the push-pull theory and the brain drain phenomenon. Furthermore, both novels demonstrably explore themes directly relevant to Japa, such as migration, economic disparity, and the pursuit of a better life abroad. Through this comparative analysis, we aim to gain a richer understanding of the complex motivations, anxieties, and experiences surrounding Japa in contemporary Nigeria.

### 4. Push-pull factors propelling Japa in the Selected Texts.

There exists a relationship between how the languages are used and the negative forces depicted in the selected texts of Sanusi and Adichie to illuminate the motivations behind the Japa phenomenon in Nigeria. A reading of the text from Lee's push-pull lens on migratory studies reveals that there exists an abundance of sociopolitical, economic, educational, monetary, and safety factors that propels migration over the years that has culminated into the contemporary "Japa" syndrome experienced in the milieu of the texts (Nigeria). Sanusi's and Adichie's selected fictions, paint a vivid picture of the motivations behind Nigerians choosing to Japa.

Limited economic opportunities in one's home country often act as a significant push factor for migration, driving individuals to seek better prospects and improved living conditions elsewhere. This is captured in the selected texts by both authors in line with Lee's theory of migration. Sanusi, through the narrator in his selected text submits:

Prends ton sac ! Prends ton sac ! Prend ton sac, et va à Lagos te débrouiller comme tes camarades du village, me dit-il. Je n'osai même pas dire un mot. C'était comme un ordre militaire. Il fallait que j'obéisse à la lettre. Sinon, ce serait d'autres coups de pieds lancés sur moi comme sur un chien galeux. Je n'étais rien sous les yeux de mon oncle ... *Nègre*, p.3

"Take your bag! Take your bag! Take your bag and go and hustle in Lagos like your mates", he said to me. I dared not say a word. It was like a military order. I had to obey to the letter. If not, I would receive hard kicks upon me like those thrown upon a dog with scabs. I was nothing before my uncle's eyes.

The protagonist's uncle's commanding tone and the threat of physical violence underscore the power dynamics and lack of agency experienced by the

individual, highlighting the push factor of economic hardship and vulnerability. The directive to go to Lagos and fend for oneself like others from the village suggests a lack of economic opportunities and support in the current environment, pushing the protagonist towards seeking better prospects elsewhere. The fear of repercussions and the dehumanizing treatment, symbolized by being compared to a diseased dog, further accentuate the desperation and marginalization faced by the individual, reinforcing the push towards migration as a means of escaping economic deprivation and mistreatment. The protagonist's sense of insignificance in the eyes of the uncle reflects the deep-rooted economic disparities and power differentials that can drive individuals to pursue migration in search of a more promising future, illustrating how economic inequality and coercion can serve as potent push factors in migration decisions.

Adichie's portrayal of limited economic opportunities is poignant. In *Americanah*, the narrator decries this unpleasant reality in Nigeria as it concerns youth employment and employability in general. The narrator explains in the paraphrased section of the text: He started sending out applications for positions advertised in newspapers, but no one ever invited him for an interview... anxious that he would once again hand over another résumé in vain. One day, Nneoma remarked, "I know a very wealthy man, Chief. He pursued me relentlessly, but I refused. He has a serious weakness for women, and he could even infect someone with AIDS... I usually go to pay him visits. He actually gave me the money to restart my business after those devils stole my savings last year. He still believes that one day I will accept him. Ha, it is laughable, never! I will introduce you to him. When he is in high spirits, the man can be extremely generous. He is well connected in this country. Perhaps he will write us a recommendation to a managing director somewhere." *Americanah*, p.30

In the context of Lee's push-pull migration theory, the character's initial struggle to secure employment despite actively seeking opportunities reflects a push factor compelling individual to consider leaving their current environment due to limited prospects and social isolation. The rejection from potential employers and the avoidance of friends due to job-seeking pressures contribute to a sense of exclusion and frustration, reinforcing the push towards seeking alternative paths for advancement. Also, meeting Chief in the context of the narrative reflects the concept of inequality for individuals who lack connections or referrals. In the above scenario, Nneoma's acquaintance with Chief provides her with access to potential opportunities and resources that are not readily available to those without such

connections. The character's reliance on Nneoma's relationship with Chief to potentially secure a job or financial support highlights how social networks and affiliations can create disparities in access to opportunities. For individuals without influential contacts like Chief, the absence of referrals or connections can exacerbate existing inequalities, limiting their ability to navigate and access avenues for advancement or assistance. The reliance on personal connections to bridge gaps in opportunities underscores the unequal distribution of resources and privileges based on social networks, emphasizing the challenges faced by those who lack the social capital to facilitate their aspirations or address their needs effectively. This ultimately serves as a push factor to those without such connections to consider and undertake the Japa route where such disparity and economic inequality are minimal.

To further buttress this inequality in economic opportunity, the narrator underlines the case of Yemi seeking employment opportunity from Obinze, "I'm not certain about your field of work, sir, but I'm constantly seeking improved employment opportunities. I'm currently finishing my master's degree," (*Americanah*, p.38). The case of Yemi is relatable to lots of Nigerians with higher college degrees. The subordinate clause "however, I still in search of a gainful employment" in the context of the push-pull theory of migration reflects both push and pull factors. The push factors are the limited economic opportunities and dissatisfaction with current employment in the individual's home region, driving them to seek change. Conversely, the pull factors are the prospects of better job opportunities, higher wages, and improved working conditions elsewhere, which attract the individual to migrate to regions offering these advantages.

Corruption acts as a significant "push" factor in the push-pull theory of migration, compelling individuals to leave their home countries in search of more stable and transparent environments. Sanusi and Adichie foreground this reality in the selected text in the reflection of Nigeria's milieu and the reasons for the continuous rise of the "Japa" syndrome. The narrator in *Nègre*, remarks

Le chef de notre gang s'appelait Esu. Il était dangereux comme le diable. Il y avait peut-être de quoi car son nom signifiait DIABLE dans mon parler local. Esu avait des liens très solides avec certains officiers de police avec qui il travaillait en collaboration. Ces derniers lui procuraient des kalachni-kovs et d'autres armes qu'on utilisait dans nos opérations. On aura tout vu. On aura tout appris à Lagos. *Nègre*, p.22

The leader of our gang was called Esu. He was as dreadful as the Devil himself. No wonder, his name signified DEVIL in my local tongue. Esu had some consolidated ties with certain police officers with whom he worked. The latter would procure them with rifles and other arms used in our operations. We had seen it all. We had learnt it all in Lagos.

In the context of the push-pull theory of migration, the narrator highlights how corruption, exemplified by the collaboration between the gang leader Esu and police officers, serves as a significant push factor for Nigerians considering Japa. The dangerous and corrupt nature of Esu, who has strong ties with law enforcement officials, underscores the pervasive influence of corruption in Nigerian society, creating an environment of lawlessness and insecurity. The access to weapons provided by police officers for criminal activities reflects the deep-rooted corruption within the system, leading to a breakdown of trust in institutions and exacerbating the push for individuals to seek better opportunities elsewhere. The mention of learning and experiencing everything in Lagos suggests recognition of the pervasive corruption and criminality in the city, further emphasizing how the prevalence of corruption as a push factor can drive individuals to migrate in search of safety, stability, and a more conducive environment for personal and economic advancement.

Similarly, to the portrayal of Sanusi, Adichie, in *Americanah*, subtly depicts the pervasive influence of corruption and political instability. Halima's remark in the saloon to Ifemelu as she prepares to return to Nigeria underscores corruption. "Yes, Nigeria is extremely dishonest. The most crooked country in Africa. I watched the movie but no, I would never travel to Nigeria!" She gestured faintly with her hand. "I cannot wed a Nigerian and I will not allow anyone in my family to wed one," Mariama declared, casting Ifemelu a regretful look. "Not everyone, but many of them engage in terrible acts—even taking lives for money." *Americanah*, p.189.

Corruption acts as a powerful push factor for migration by creating an environment where trust in institutions and safety is compromised, leading to widespread disillusionment and fear among citizens. In Lee's push-pull theory of migration, push factors like corruption as observed in the submission of the character above, drive individuals to seek better opportunities and security elsewhere. The clause "Nigeria very corrupt" followed by the phrase "Worst corrupt country in Africa" highlights the pervasive distrust and negative perception associated with Nigeria due to rampant corruption and criminal

activities, reinforcing the desire to migrate without an option of return. The stigma attached to Nigerian nationality, as expressed through her refusal to engage with Nigerians, underscores how deeply corruption affects social dynamics and personal decisions. Consequently, the pervasive nature of corruption fuels the urge to leave in pursuit of a more stable and ethical living environment.

Another push factor veritably portrayed in the text is the issue of school inconsistency and personal safety concerns. Sanusi portrayed the issue of insecurity in *Un Nègre a violé une Blonde à Dallas* as protagonist, Ajanaku explained:

À Lagos, on s'est lancé dans des cambriolages et dans des crimes divers : On a cassé les banques à Lekky! On a cassé les maisons à Ikoyi! On a cassé les appartements à Ikeja! On a complètement cassé tout à Surulere! On a même violé les femmes à OPEBI! Vraiment, j'étais devenu un bon cambrioleur comme Agbako. J'étais devenu un cambrioleur de première classe. C'est-à-dire que j'étais devenu un cambrioleur diplômé... *Nègre*, p.20

In Lagos, we were involved in several housebreaking and criminal attacks: We broke into banks in Lekki. We robbed houses in Ikoyi. We burgled apartments in Ikeja. We robbed Surulere completely. We raped women in Opebi. Of a truth, I became a good burglar like Agbako. I became a first-class housebreaker. I mean, I became a certified burglar.

Safety concerns act as a powerful push factor for migration according to Lee's push-pull theory, compelling individuals to leave areas plagued by crime and insecurity. In Lagos, rampant criminal activities such as burglaries, bank robberies, home invasions, and assaults, as described in the excerpt above, create an environment of fear and instability. The pervasive threat to personal safety and property undermines residents' sense of security, prompting them to seek refuge in safer locations. These safety concerns push individuals to migrate to areas with better law enforcement and lower crime rates, where they can live without constant fear of violence. Thus, the desire for a secure and peaceful living environment drives migration away from dangerous locales.

Adichie on the other hand, with less emphasis on security concerns, brings to the fore to her readers the inconsistency of academic programmes and calendars in Nigeria due to the recurrent academic Union Strike. In an exchange between Ifemelu and a friend, the narrator underlined "Ginika asked if you left Nigeria because university lecturers are constantly on strike there.?" (p.150). Focusing on the push factors that drive individuals to leave their home country, the

constant strikes by college professors in Nigeria serve as a significant push factor influencing the decision to migrate. This is because the unreliability and disruption caused by frequent strikes in the education sector create instability and hinder academic progress, leading to a lack of confidence in the educational system and prospects within the country. This push factor is compounded by the impact on students' learning experiences, career opportunities, and overall quality of education, prompting individuals to seek better educational environments and opportunities abroad. The perception of a more stable and conducive academic environment in other countries becomes a compelling pull factor that attracts individuals seeking to escape the challenges and limitations imposed by the persistent strikes and disruptions in the Nigerian educational system

By incorporating these push factors into the storytelling; Sanusi and Adichie skillfully illustrate the internal struggles faced by characters such as Ajanaku and Ifemelu as they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by their homeland and the prospects of a better life overseas. Through the characters' experiences and decisions, the authors effectively portray the complex dynamics of migration, shedding light on the dilemmas individuals encounter when contemplating leaving their familiar surroundings in search of a more promising future in a foreign land. Ajanaku and Ifemelu's journeys serve as poignant reflections of the broader societal issues and personal aspirations that influence migration decisions, offering readers a nuanced exploration of the motivations and consequences associated with seeking opportunities beyond one's homeland.

### 5. Brain Drains Phenomenon in the Selected Texts Milieus

The brain drain phenomenon is a resultant effect of the push-pull factors proposed by Lee in migratory studies. Both reflect this reality through the depiction of their characters. Concerning economic inequality, Adichie captures the reality of Brain drain in the conversation between Obinze and Yemi thus:

Yemi had read English at the university ... “but I’m constantly searching for a more rewarding job. I’m finishing my master’s now,” Yemi remarked, in the style of a quintessential Lagosian—forever striving, eyes perpetually watchful for something bigger and better.... *Americanah*, p.38

This precarious situation serves as a push to seek opportunities in the diaspora, ultimately culminating in the ongoing Japa and brain drain as educated and

able-bodied young men take the slightest opportunity to take the ‘Japa’ flight.

More so, the pervasive safety concerns and high crime rates in cities like Lagos as captured in Sanusi’s text discussed above, have had significant impacts on Nigeria as a nation. Firstly, there is outflow of residents seeking safer environments. This migration also leads to brain drain, as skilled professionals and educated individuals leave in search of stability, weakening the country's human capital and economic potential. Additionally, widespread crime undermines foreign investment, as investors are wary of the risks associated with operating in such unstable environments, thereby hindering economic growth. Thus, the social fabric of the nation is strained, with communities living in fear and trust in law enforcement and governance eroding. Overall, the safety concerns contribute to a cycle of instability and underdevelopment, impeding Nigeria's progress and development in the long run.

Furthermore, it is possible to interpret the frequent strikes by Nigerian university lecturers, which force people to relocate abroad, as a form of brain drain, which in this context entails the departure of highly qualified and educated professionals from their nation in pursuit of better opportunities overseas. This tendency has consistently led to the loss of critical knowledge and skills that could have facilitated the nation's development and is likely to do so in the future. The continuous strikes also encourage the driving away of skilled academics that are essential for the country's educational system and overall development. The departure of these professors due to the challenging working conditions and instability caused by the strikes resulted in a loss of valuable human capital and knowledge that could have been utilized for the advancement of education and research within Nigeria. This reflection of Nigeria’s tertiary educational systems reinforces the postulation of Bhagwati's brain drain phenomenon highlighting how systemic issues such as labor unrest and inadequate working conditions can lead to the outflow of skilled professionals, exacerbating the brain drain problem and hindering the country's ability to retain and benefit from its educated workforce.

### 6. Conclusion

The exploration of the Japa (Migration) Syndrome in Nigeria through a literary lens has provided valuable insights into the complex motivations, experiences, and repercussions of mass emigration among Nigerians. By employing Lee's push-pull theory and Bhagwati's brain drain phenomenon as theoretical

frameworks, this study has shed light on the multifaceted realities propelling young Nigerians to seek better prospects outside and the continuous loss of human capital in the home country. The methodology employed in this study, utilizing an interpretive design and qualitative analysis of selected literary works in both French and English, has allowed for a nuanced understanding of the Japa phenomenon. By comparing and contrasting the portrayals of migration in different linguistic contexts, this research has highlighted the cultural and language-specific nuances that influence how Japa is perceived and experienced by individuals in Nigeria.

The findings of this study have revealed that limited economic opportunities, political instability, corruption, and safety concerns act as significant push factors driving Nigerians to migrate abroad in search of better prospects and improved living conditions. The depiction of characters in the selected texts exemplifies the struggles and aspirations of individuals grappling with the decision to leave their homeland in pursuit of a brighter future. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Japa syndrome in Nigeria, elucidating its causative factors, repercussions, and position within the broader tapestry of migration and identity narratives. By delving into the complexities of migration through the lens of literature, this research underscores the importance of considering cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic factors in analyzing the dynamics of emigration and brain drain in the Nigerian context. Moving forward, further research could explore additional literary works, incorporate perspectives from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and delve into the long-term impacts of brain drain on Nigeria's development and societal fabric, thus contributing to informed discussions on migration policies and strategies for sustainable development in Nigeria and beyond.

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