



Japa and Other Stories

Iheoma Nwachukwu

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African identities are diverse in Iheoma Nwachukwu's haunting, award-winning collection *Japa and Other Stories*.

Japa is both noun and verb, identity and a place in the mind. Japa children escape Nigeria to far-flung continents, existing as "outlanders." Full of dreams and wanting to japa for a better life elsewhere, they become bootleggers, nurses, even human smugglers.

"Japa Boys" concerns a group of university students smuggling beer into Utah, focusing on Ahamefula, whose Nigerian politician mother and absentee father have left psychic scars and made him "loco." In "Japa Girls," Ahamefula rolls up at a nursing home near Boston, where japa nurses feed him weed to expel his bad immigrant modus vivendi that they feel disgraces all Africans. So much weed causes his physical self to fragment and multiply, a visible metaphor for the mental toll of displacement.

Japa Town is also a place in Nigeria that people searching the heavens for mystical signs are desperate to leave. In later stories, migrants are preyed on by human traffickers and transported like "beads in a jar" across the Niger to Europe. A smuggler is embroiled in a dilemma with a disabled client. One migrant makes his way to Russia, using a World Cup soccer event to sneak into Finland. Another returns to Africa after being deported, ending up in Zanzibar, reduced to a life of being a pool boy and thieving from hotel guests. And behind the characters' desperation lie the unspeakable political terrors of Boko Haram, the exploitation of workers by Chinese investment in Africa, and other political turmoils.

Displaced souls are blown hither and thither, rootless, like bees that have lost their homing instinct, in the muscular, poignant diaspora short stories of *Japa and Other Stories*.

ELAINE CHIEW (September / October 2024)

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