

BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, *Manchester Happened*. Kindle ed., Oneworld Publications, 2019.

Revathy Sivasubramaniam
Assistant Professor of English
Chellammal Women's College, Chennai

Centred on the lives of Ugandans living in Britain, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Manchester Happened* is a beautiful bouquet of stories that keeps readers hooked from beginning till end. The book is divided into two parts. The first part titled "**Departing**" consists of six stories and it portrays the trials and tribulations of migrant Ugandans in Britain. The second part named "**Returning**," comprising five stories, is about the lives of migrants who return to their homeland. The anthology provides a composite picture of the Ugandan diaspora and their voyage back home. The book problematizes the ideas of home, return, belonging and identity among a host of other issues.

The anthology begins with a prologue titled "Christmas Is Coming." It sets the tone and tenor for the collection. Laced with hope, expectation and disappointment, it portrays the challenges of living abroad. It depicts the mental agony and turmoil of a young boy named Luzinda due to his alcoholic mother. He is under the impression that his mother's drinking problem will vanish once they return to Uganda as his mother becomes an alcoholic only after they move to Britain. Both he and his brother Bakka especially feel for their father as he is beaten up by their mother during her drinking bouts. Luzinda is desperate to return to Uganda but his parents have other plans.

The first story titled "Our Allies the Colonies" is set in Britain in the 1950's. It revolves around the life of Abbey Baker, a Ugandan migrant in Britain who leads a difficult life doing multiple jobs to save himself enough money to return to his homeland. He learns to accept racism as part of life. His relationship with an Irish woman named Heather scars him psychologically as she gives away their child for adoption without even showing him the child and not informing him about her decision either.

The title story “Manchester Happened” is a captivating tale of Nnambassa and her migration to Britain. In the story, the glossy image of Britain is shattered with the empathetic and compassionate depiction of the harsh realities of migrant life. It presents the various phases in migrant life right from working hard to gain a foothold to working on accents and trying to assimilate in order to improve job prospects. “Manchester babe, Manchester happened. You’re no longer you, why should I be me?” Most importantly, it portrays how demanding the life is in Britain for migrants. The constant pursuit of wealth, first for sustenance, and then due to greed beyond a point, often leads to estrangement from family and the community at large.

“The Nod” is a witty narration of an encounter between a Ugandan woman named Lucky and a mixed-race woman named Teta at an engagement party. Lucky’s failure to acknowledge Teta’s black roots enrages Teta. With subdued rage, she informs Lucky about her African heritage. The story brings out Teta’s anguish at not being accepted as part of the African community due to her pale skin.

“Something Inside So Strong” is an interesting and endearing story of grit and determination of Mpony’obugumba Nnampiima Ssenkubuge. A pragmatic woman, she renames herself Poonah soon after her migration to Britain. “She had not come to Britain to showcase Uganda’s naming creativity. And if you challenged her on altering her name or questioned her loyalty to African culture she would ask *What has Africa done for me?*” A poor woman and a victim of domestic violence, she leaves behind her three children with her mother and aided by Carl, a Britisher charity worker, she moves to Britain to provide a better future for her children. The recurrent themes of racism, the need to integrate, the pursuit of wealth, social mobility and the toll the consequent hectic lifestyle takes are laid bare in the story in a realistic way without any melodrama.

“Malik’s Door” is an emotional story of a Ugandan student nurse Katula, who marries Malik, a handsome British convert to Islam. The story presents the risks, often drastic, taken by immigrants to procure a British visa. “Friends advised her to hook a British husband as soon as possible.” “Hook” Malik she does, marrying him after a brief period of courtship. However, the marriage does not last long, chinks in the hurriedly solemnized match surfacing soon, wrecking the relationship and causing considerable anguish to Katula.

“Memoirs of Namaaso” is a story of a Ugandan stray dog and its journey to Britain. Narrated from a dog’s perspective, it a humorous tale of the dog, its bonding and its struggle to adjust to the new land; the sense of alienation experienced by it. “Compared to Kampala, which- with all due respect- is an assault on everything sensory, Manchester is tame.”

The second part of the collection begins with “She is Our Stupid.” The story is about a carefully guarded family secret and a moving tale of Nnakimuli alias Aunty Flower who has travelled to Britain on a scholarship for teacher training and intends to settle down there. Fate, however, has other plans. The story offers glimpses of Ugandan culture and their values.

“My Brother, Bwemage” is a family saga of love, infidelity, abandonment, revenge and family bonding. A pulsating story, it makes it difficult for the reader to take sides. One can empathize with the remorseful community minister in spite of him cheating on his wife. At the same time, though, we feel the pain of a wronged wife and children caught in the crossfire. The reader gets glimpses of Ugandan culture in this story too, marriage rituals, specifically. The story ends on a note of hope of reconciliation.

Narrated in first person, “The Aftertaste of Success” presents the life of Kitone, a returnee to Uganda after her long stay in Britain. The depiction of Kitone’s grandmother Nnakazaana defies all conventions and stereotypes. She is a paradox. She is endearing and intimidating, fiercely independent, yet vulnerable. Despite her shortcomings, she finds a place in the reader’s heart. The story poignantly presents the empty lives of parents whose children are settled abroad. While the parents are financially well off due to the money sent by their children, they are emotionally starved. They wait endlessly to get a glimpse of their children and grandchildren and the story portrays how their desperation drives them to take extreme measures.

Winner of the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, “Let’s Tell This Story Properly” is a heart-wrenching story of love and betrayal. It revolves around Nnam who returns to Uganda to attend her husband’s funeral. Her world comes crashing down when her husband’s dark secrets come tumbling out upon her return. Nnam’s bitterness and anger is acute. “There is no sight more revolting than a corpse caught telling lies.”

The last story” Love Made in Manchester” set in 2018 ends the collection on a celebratory tone. The story details the circumcision of Masaaba a biracial Britisher. He travels to

Uganda with his family to undergo circumcision. It beautifully presents Ugandan culture, family and social ties and trashes the many stereotypes surrounding Uganda.

All in all, the collection presents a fascinating depiction of the lives of expatriate Ugandans in a witty, humorous and matter of fact tone. It presents and probes the myriad issues faced by migrant Ugandans in Britain in a lucid and relatable manner. Most importantly, the language employed by Makumbi deserves a special mention. The witty turn of phrases and her choice of words is commendable and makes reading enjoyable. Luganda words and phrases intermingled with those in English add a special texture to the collection. A picture of migrant Ugandan identity which draws and fuses elements from both Ugandan and British cultures clearly emerges from the stories. The anthology is an important and welcome addition to the ever-expanding body of migrant literature.

