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Had there been no Chinua Achebe and no Things Fall Apart, John Munonye as a novelist would have occupied a different, more elevated ~~secure~~ niche in the annals of Nigerian literary history. But then, there were Achebe's enormous talents as a novelist and there was also Achebe's advantage of early start. Achebe had anticipated John Munonye and other followers so completely that whatever else they tried to accomplish in fiction was cast in an unfavourable light whenever comparisons with Achebe came into the picture.

Yet, John Munonye has not been eclipsed by Achebe as an Igbo writer. The point at which the two writers converge—the issue of culture-conflict—is at the same time the beginning of their divergence. For Achebe, the conflict of cultures attendant on colonial intrusion into Africa could only result in ^a general sense of loss for Africa, and all Achebe's heroes—Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi Okonkwo—are losers after a fashion, as ^{African} ~~our~~ culture, ~~our~~ clan unity, ~~our~~ religion, ~~our~~ language, ~~our~~ land, ~~our~~ ~~and~~ ~~collective~~ ~~unity~~ ~~against~~ ~~foreign~~ ~~invasion~~, equally suffered ~~setb.~~ ^{during the colonial period.} ~~corresponding loss.~~ But while Achebe's philosophic pessimism wears the face of tragedy, ~~in its record of our collective loss,~~ Munonye's novels of culture-conflict ultimately wear the face of comedy as they record ~~our~~ ^{the} collective gain from ~~our~~ ^{Africa's} contact with Europe.

While for Achebe ~~our~~ ^{the Igbo} encounter with Europe led to the death of several protagonists and to the death of ~~our~~ ^{the Igbo} way of life, for Munonye, the coming of Europeans with their new administration, their new religion, their new schools, offered ^{his} ~~the~~ protagonists new challenges, opened new vistas, provided better alternatives

that lead to progress. In the ~~un-Achebean~~ optimism regarding the colonial intrusion which informs Munonye's novels, villagers move out to the new cities, form social clubs and cooperatives, and change backward-sounding village-names to more modern prototypes, in order to ~~comp~~^{attain} modern amenities like pipe-borne water, electricity and good roads ~~to be attracted to~~^{for} these villages. The ~~committee appointed to change the name of Umodiobia to a more progressive-sounding one, had argued that~~

As long as Umodiobia lasted, so long ... would it fail to attract amenities, especially industries. For who would put his capital in a queer-sounding place? (Bridge to a Wedding, p.93).

To effect ~~the new and various~~^{these} changes, old men who are regarded suspiciously as ~~a badge against~~^{antagonistic to} progress are ignored and young men, iconoclasts eager for a definite break with the past, are appointed to committees that are committed to ~~effect quick changes~~^{transforming their communities}. These are optimistic village novels focusing on the plight of the common man like the MECE (Mudi Enlightenment Committee), and MAWUS (Mudi Abroad and on his efforts to improve his lot in life Welfare Union, Sankia). These are the youth who share with the ideas of the editor of The Tidings at Ossa that the new roads are "arteries of progress," repudiating in a vehement and angry tone all and sundry who oppose construction of new roads:

That fellow was definitely out of his senses who said that the new road running from Uji-ji to Salaku into places like Mudi and Nade would banish the peace and quiet of the countryside and should therefore be halted. What sane person would long to retain those jungles which had once been the dumping ground for the execrable. They were not all that quiet such spots. Let's be honest about it; they were haunted and terrifying, striking a nightmarish note in the mind, especially during the nights when all was dark and spirits were supposed to parade the earth (Bridge to a Wedding, p.120).

Munonye agrees that the predicament of the common man in society is the central theme of his novels. And society for him

is not just an abstract idea but a corporate living body which in many cases hinders rather than helps the individual who is often ^{weak,} ~~helpless,~~ lonely and neglected. ^{Traditional societies were some} ~~If society was not so~~ indifferent, ^{to their members,} ~~the oil man's death, in Oil Man of Obange,~~ would not ~~have been either pathetic or tragic.~~ Traditional societies exploited the talents of the individual for their own selfish ends but ^{making} no arrangement for his welfare. In Oil Man of Obange society looks on indifferently as Jeri Oko is dispossessed of his land by Ikendu, and no one comes to the rescue of Jeri's children after his death. Society equally does not lift a finger in Bridge to a Wedding as Samson expropriates Kafo's land (while Kafo was in exile) and jails Obiakizu for setting the plantation on fire in protest.

Nor are modern societies any better: no welfare schemes, no social services, no insurance coverage, no free education, no free health care services. ~~The result is that when a man like Jeri dies, all his aspirations and plans for the welfare of his children die with him. Only in A Dancer of Fortune does the protagonist turn the weapons of society against itself and emerge successful.~~ Munonye complains: "Nigeria sends millions of Naira to the liberation movements outside Nigeria. This is not wrong in itself. But this altruism is not matched by similar concern for the down-trodden in Nigerian society who need to be liberated from the slavery of poverty, ignorance and disease."

One cannot read Munonye for long without being struck by his abiding interest in family relationships. He revels in depicting boys and girls ^{living} ~~growing up~~ in a close-knit family, ^{set up,} ~~set up,~~ with their parents anxiously watching them grow up, fall in love, and get

married. And Bridge to a Wedding is the best realized example of Munonye's interest in the happy family. Munonye is the novelist of happy marriages and happy family ~~life~~ life within the nuclear household. Of this interest in the family he says:

"One wonders if it could be otherwise. We grew up in the village and we knew how closely knit families, even on an extended scale, had to be. Life wasn't terribly secure then. Everybody knew everybody, and everybody came to everybody's defence or rescue, when anything threatened or happened from outside.... I think I must also admit that the family has a fascination for me as an individual—a happy family. Maybe because I came from a large family ... But the man-woman relationship, the husband-wife, the mother-son, it has a fascination for me. It is poetic and, let me add a word—pure".

Often ~~indeed~~, this interest in the family centers on the welfare of the children. In The Only Son, it is the delicate relationship between a troubled widow and an only son that supremely matters. In Obi, ~~what~~ occupy center-stage, ~~are~~ the temptations that beset a young childless Christian family under pressure from traditional elements in society. In Oil Man of Obange it is ~~the~~ ^{parental} excessive love and concern for the welfare and educational progress of ~~the~~ children ~~that have overruled but ambitions~~ that lead ~~to~~ to disaster. Munonye admits this interest in young people:

"I think my books have been of particular relevance to the young in Nigeria. I just have a feeling for young people; they can really absorb things. I always tell my colleagues ... that the best thing we can do for the country is to produce good teachers who will go out and teach the young."

Munonye's novels are set at definite periods in Nigerian history. He says that the "mental span" of his novels is fifty years—from the early days of colonial administration in Nigeria (The Only Son, Obi) through independence, to the Nigerian civil

war (A Wreath for the Maidens), to post-civil war events around the 1970s, with attention to the general political, cultural and religious climate. Bridge to a Wedding, he asserts, "attempts a dialogue between the old and the new, traditional and modern. We do need the bridge."

The subject of his novels he admits, is "the ordinary man and woman under the impact of economic, social, and political forces. In fact, we should be treating religious factors soon." Characters he loves to sketch in his novels are, by his own admission, "people with high principles who pursue these principles, ideals or objectives unbendingly" From his canon, he picks a few characters he likes, though on close observation they are at variance with those of "high principles" he just mentioned. He likes the rascal, Luke, in Oil Man of Obange, "troublesome but very reasonable, very sensible." In Obi, he has a soft spot for Joe's wife, Anna, and for sentimental reasons, for Marcellina, Jeri's devoted wife in Oil Man of Obange. His favourite novel from his own corpus is Obi, for its "very touching scenes with a quiet style, mellow rhythm, and no thematic distraction," followed by Oil Man of Obange for its "powerful theme in poignant style."

Of favourite authors who influenced him, Munonye is rather eclectic, although "P.G. Wodehouse is number one.... He makes people speak, even if they are idiots." And Munonye adores Leave it to Psmith and Code of the Woosters. Next is Graham Greene where Heart of the Matter is non-pareil. Among the Russians, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina stands out pre-eminent, followed by Turgenev's A Little House of Gentle Folk after reading which he

wrote Obi. From France, Zola is his favourite. Among African writers, Munonye thinks Achebe is the best because he is "fantastic" and has "a simplicity of style which is very much to my liking"—but Amadi is "perhaps a better craftsman ... than even James Ngugi of Kenya."

A bird's eye-view of his novels will naturally start with The Only Son (1966). In this first novel the major issue is culture-conflict which was in vogue then. Here, Munonye is a miniaturist and confines the conflict to the delicate relationship between a widowed mother and an only son, Nnanna, for whose welfare she denied herself everything, including remarriage, until that son disappointed her hopes by becoming a Christian and going away to live with a white missionary, Father Smith, at distant Ossa. The Only Son is the beginning of a trilogy that includes Obi (1969), and Bridge to a Wedding (1978). Those, therefore, who discuss The Only Son in isolation, as a "tragedy," forget the open-endedness of this work. Chiaku, disappointed in her son's "apostasy" remarries to begin a new connubial life for herself where she is already expecting a baby, while Nnanna charts a new life of adventure full of promises under the tutelage of Father Smith.

In ~~the story of~~ the trilogy, ~~mentioned above~~, the position of John Munonye as a writer of ~~the~~ comic vision emerges clearly. Nnanna's double exile ends in a triumphant return for the protagonist in Bridge to a Wedding. He becomes the perfect example of the hero of myth coming back home with a boon and at a more enhanced status than when he first left. Munonye's optimism, his belief in the efficacy of the new order—Christianity and

the new civilization—is most clearly stated within the trilogy. Childlessness, which nearly lands Nnanna Joseph Okafor into ~~tragedy~~ tragedy, ends ironically as he embarks on exile. Pregnancy is achieved by repudiating the old ways, as Anna symbolically burns the charms and amulets prescribed by the native medicine man and submits herself to a medical doctor in a Christian hospital. Embracing Christianity fully, without looking back, has stood the Kafo family in good stead. Their daughter Rose, convent-educated and a role-model for the younger ones, marries Ebeneto Junior, one of the first graduates from the university, "a disciplined one [who] had never been associated with any of the excesses by which many of the young men from the university are known." Thus, Munonye's optimism about the new order includes a belief that modernity need not necessarily spoil the young. Thus, colonialism, which features such tragic consequences for Africans in Achebe, becomes the leverage for progress in Munonye.

Oil Man of Obange, may eventually ^{earn stature as} ~~become~~ Munonye's most artistically constructed novel in the timelessness of its tale and the leanness of its narrative. ~~edges~~. This is a novel conceived in irony with a touch of Moliere: love of one's children, a great virtue in itself, when indulged in, ^{be} inordinately, leads to the ruin of parents; and the brilliance of all six of Jeri's children in school, a great blessing in itself for many a parent, goads Jeri on to disaster in his effort to cater for the simultaneous welfare of all the children, from his meagre resources. ~~In the bud of~~ Jeri's ambition ^{for} ~~is sown the seed of his downfall~~ and ~~in~~ the success of ^{his} ~~the~~ children at school is the kernel of

his failure as a father.

Oil Man of Ochange is one of those novels in which the terse-
ness of the author's message is hidden behind the rubric of a
school motto, and the social vision is left at the level of an
enthymeme. The major theme is hidden in Mica's school motto:
Da nobis recta sapere (give us the right discernment), which
implies that had Jeri the oil man had the grace to relish what
is right and ^{to undertake} undertook to train only those children he could
^{to support} afford, from his meagre resources, he might have succeeded. And
the unstated social vision is an indictment of ~~the~~ Nigerian society
~~that~~ which has no social welfare system that could come to the aid of
Jeri and his children. The ^{novel highlights the pathetic,} ~~tragedy and the pathos of this novel,~~
^{especially the} ~~sense of loss, at the end of it all,~~ the wasted efforts,
the indifference of society, the feeling that these orphaned
children of Jeri would sink into such an abyss of poverty and
neglect after his death, that all ^{his efforts} had been in vain.

A Wreath for the Maidens, Munonye's most complex and ambitious
novel, is a roman à clef on the Nigerian civil war. It could easily
rank as Munonye's least successful novel in its lack of thematic
focus and its lack of artistic distance. It is part ^{#9} experience,
part ^g biography, part fiction, full of undigested bits of political
philosophy ^g and boiling like a stew pot into which a potpourri
of Nigerian history has been thrown. ~~Literature fails as belles-~~
~~lettres when it fails to enmesh ideas into a symbol or an image~~
~~and when a story fails to transcend the merely reportorial.~~ The
subject-matter ~~of this novel~~ is ~~is~~ familiar; ~~and~~ it begins with
the struggle for independence by corrupt politicians in Nigeria

and ends with the Nigerian civil war, catching in its sweep both the activities of acid-throwing politicians before independence and the bombing and strafing of the former Biafran territory during the internecine fratricidal warfare.

The three major political divisions of Nigeria before the civil war are depicted as ^{in conflict} ~~as they go for the threat of each other~~ before Bokenu (Biafra) broke away. Sakure state is the North where Bokenu citizens were massacred, and Doda state is the West which aided and abetted the aggressive Sakure warhawks in subduing Bokeru state. Munonye insists that this novel is a dialogue on the moral issues involved in the Nigeria-Biafra war. The title of the novel is suggested by a quotation from Iphigenia in Aulis by Aeschylus: "By the blood of the maidens slain thou shalt pacify the winds." The youths [#] slain during the conflict became the sacrificial lambs, as people in positions of power used the opportunity to exploit fellow citizens ~~over~~ and ^{precipitate} ~~above~~ their sufferings and privations, ~~which these men in power actually~~ ~~precipitated~~. For the two idealists—Roland Medo and Biere Ekonte—the original war they came to fight had abandoned them. As Munonye says "It wasn't ~~Albion~~ a war between the righteous Biafran side and the oppressive Federal side. In fact, it was no longer between Nigeria and Biafra, but corrupt Biafrans versus idealist Biafrans."

A Dancer of Fortune (1974) is unique ⁱⁿ ~~among~~ Munonye's canon. Ayasko, the dancer of fortune, like a true soldier of fortune, is a mercenary, a con-man who exploits his talents as a dancer to ruin one patent medicine-dealer after another until he esta-

blishes a monopoly. Those who argue that in Munonye's ^{works,} ~~canon,~~ society is the victimizer while the individual is the victim, agree that Ayasko turns society's weapons against itself and emerges successful. ~~The trajectory of the comic curve takes its ancestry from Ben Jonson's Volpone where~~ ^{Because} a trickster succeeds, ^{and} where evil triumphs ^h over good, ^{and} many a moralist will chide Munonye for teaching the youth that evil pays; ~~and may concede~~ ^{it is} to the author that his novel may be hilarious but ^{not} funny.

Munonye's last novel, Bridge to a Wedding, which celebrates the triumphant return of Joseph Kafo, was published in 1978. Since then, ^{Munonye} ~~he~~ has turned his attention to short stories, ^{which} ~~point to the direction his creative vision will take, were he~~ ^{mostly on religious themes.} ~~to produce a new novel - it is about the place of religion in the contemporary lives of Nigerians.~~ An unpublished novel written after 1978, House of Enoch, is about the place of religion and religious affiliations in the lives of Nigerians. ~~In fact, the titles of recent short stories by Munonye show this concern in the lives of Igbo people.~~ In "Horn of Salvation," "Land of Prophecy," and "The Missing Treasure" he concerns himself with the proliferation of religious sects in our midst - Anglican, Catholic, ~~the~~ ^{the} Salvation Army, Brotherhood of the Holy Cross, True Sabbath Spiritual Church, Mount Zion Spiritual Fraternity, Divine Fellowship Congregation, Holy Evangelist Assembly, Christ Apostle Healing Sabbath Church, and Supreme Sabbath Church of the Most Holy Spirit. In these stories Munonye wonders why the same ^{Christian} is as ready to embrace the cross as the idol, why this rush to "ride in a Freudian truck," why this

"orgiastic bewildering emotionalism." The escape by ^{Nigerians} ~~our people~~ into religion, Munonye thinks, is an effort ~~by all of us~~ "to dwell close to the frontiers of lunacy," ^{to avoid} ~~an escape from~~ the rigours of "rational, logical or constructive thinking," thus allowing "others to come in to do the thinking for us ... to think and research and invent and manufacture for us."

One of the paradoxes in John Munonye's life after his early retirement from the civil service, is the inverse proportion of his literary output to the amount of time he has in his hands. He obviously retired early from civil service to devote his time to writing, but to his consternation, the muse fled with regular employment. In a mild lament in recent "Letters from Retirement" he writes:

I must confess that in my own case I had assumed I would soft-land on retirement and then set out immediately writing, producing wonderful things. But then, it didn't quite work out that way.... I felt there was now all the time, limitless time, at my disposal—so why hurry. Next, my very sweet assumptions of the past concerning the environment into which I would be retiring, came in for some very severe tests. In those circumstances, it became almost impossible to settle down to creativity.... And my instincts began to blunt. Put precisely, I could no longer see with my usual eyes. Green leaves whose mid-morning sheen had been food for my heart became ~~as~~ ordinary to the sight. My perceptions and creative response had dulled. Men, women, boys and girls had changed terribly too. Were they not now too busy, intense, over-ambitious, blustering. In fact, I need to adjust to this new ambience.

^{Given} ~~Judged~~ by the serious critical attention ^{which} ~~which~~ ^{his} ~~Munonye's~~ novels are beginning to attract, ^{Munonye can be said to have earned} ~~his place is assured~~ among

^{secure place among}
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African novelists of the twentieth century. If he does not eventually become a "giant oak" on the top of a mountain, he will surely bloom as one of the "best-scrubbed shrubs" in the valley. John Munonye will be better known as the years roll by.

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