



THE ONLY ON

By Charles Nnolim

Had there been no Chinua Achebe and no *Things Fall Apart*, John Munonye as a novelist would have occupied a different, more elevated niche in the annals of Nigerian literary history yet Munonye has not been eclipsed by Achebe an Igbo writer. The point at which the two writers converge the issue of

culture conflict is also 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 heroes including Okonkwo, Ezeulu, and Obi Okonkwo are losers in some ways, as African culture, clan unity, religion, and language suffered setbacks during the colonial period. But while Achebe's philosophical pessimism wears the face of tragedy, Munonye's novels of culture conflict ultimately wear the face of comedy, as they record the collective gain from Africa's contact with Europe. While for Achebe the Igbo encounter with Europe led to the death of several protagonist, and to the death of the Igbo way of life, for Munonye the coming of Europeans with their new administrations, religion, and schools offer his protagonists new challenges, opens new vistas, and provides better alternatives that lead to progress. In 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 attain modern amenities such as pipe-borne water electricity, and good roads for their villages. To effect these changes, old men who are regarded suspiciously as antagonistic to progress are ignored, and young men, iconoclasts eager for a definite break with the past, are appointed to committees that transform their communities. These are optimistic village novels focusing on the plight of the common man and on his efforts to improve his lot in life. 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 living body that in many cases hinders rather than helps the individual who is weak, lonely, and neglected. Traditional societies were sometimes indifferent to their members, exploiting the talents of an individual for their own selfish ends but making no arrangement for his welfare. Nor are modern societies any better; especially if they have no welfare schemes, no social services, no insurance coverage, no free education, and no free health-care services. Munonye complains, 'Nigeria sends millions of Naira (dollars) to the liberation movements outside Nigeria. This is not wrong in itself. But this altruism is not matched by similar concern for the downtrodden in Nigerian society who need to be liberated from the slavery of poverty, ignorance and disease.'

Munonye was born on 28 April 1929 in Akokwa, in eastern Nigeria, and was the fourth of seven children. His education began in his hometown, then continued at Christ the King College in Onitsha, where he graduated in 1948. Going on to University College, Ibadan, he studied history, Latin, and Greek, earning his B.A. in 1952. He moved to England for his postgraduate work, attending the Institute of Education at the University of London. After returning home, he took a job with the Nigerian Ministry of Education in 1954, later becoming principal of the Advanced Teacher Training College at Owerri. He has now retired. Munonye is married and has two children.

One cannot read Munonye for long without being struck by his abiding interest in family relationships. He revels in depicting boys and girls living in a close-knit family, with their parents anxiously watching them grow up, fall in love, and get married. Munonye extols happy marriages and happy family 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 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 this interest in the family centres on the welfare of children. In *The Only Son* (1966) it is the delicate relationship between a troubled widow and her only son that supremely matters. *Obi* (1969) focuses on the temptations that beset a young, childless, Christian family under pressure from society. In *Old Man of Obange* (1971) excessive parental love and concern for the welfare and educational progress of the children lead to disaster. Munonye admits his 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



John Munonye, extreme right,
with the Nnolims of the
University of Port Harcourt.

'mental span' of his novels is fifty years—from the early days of colonial administration in Nigeria (as in *The Only Son* and *Obi*) through independence, to the Nigerian civil war (in *A Wreath for the Man* 1973), to post-civil-war events in the 1970s, with attention to the political, cultural, and religious climate. *Bridge to a Wedding* (1978), he asserts, 'attempts a dialogue between the old and the new, traditional and modern. We do need the bridge.'

In his first novel, *The Only Son*, the major issue is culture conflict, which was in vogue then. Munonye acts as a miniaturist and confines the conflict to the delicate relationship between a widowed mother, Chiaku, and her only son, Nnanna, for whose welfare she has denied herself everything, including remarriage, until Nnanna disappoints her 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* and *Bridge to a Wedding*. Therefore those who discuss *The Only Son* in isolation, as a tragedy, forget the openendedness of this work. Chiaku, disappointed in her son's 'apostasy,' remarries to begin a new connubial life for herself (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 trilogy the position of Munonye as a writer of comic vision emerges clearly. Nnanna's double exile ends in a triumphant return for him as the protagonist in *Bridge to a Wedding*. He becomes the perfect example of the hero of myth coming back home with a boon and with a more enhanced status than when he 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. Embracing Christianity fully, without looking back, has stood the Kafo family, for example, 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 new university, 4ta 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. Colonialism,

which causes such tragic consequences for Africans in the novels of Achebe, becomes the leverage for progress in Munonye's fiction.

Oil Man of Obange, which may eventually earn stature as Munonye's most artistically constructed novel in the timelessness of its tale and the leanness of its narrative, is a novel conceived in irony with a touch of Molière: love of one's children, a great virtue in itself, when indulged in inordinately, leads to the ruin of parents; and the brilliance of all six of Jeri's children in school, a great blessing for many a parent, goads Jeri on to disaster in his effort to cater simultaneously to the welfare of all the children with his meager resources. Jeri's ambition for the success of his children at school is the kernel of his failure as a father.

In *Oil Man of Obange* 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 oilman had the wisdom to train only those children he could afford to support with his meager resources, he might have succeeded. The unstated social vision is an indictment of Nigerian society, which has no social welfare system that could come to the aid of Jeri and his children. The novel highlights the pathetic sense of loss, the wasted efforts, the indifference of society, and the feeling that the orphaned children of Jeri will sink into an abyss of poverty and neglect after his death—that all his efforts have been in vain.

A Wreath for the Maidens, Munonye's most complex and ambitious novel, is a roman à clef regarding the Nigerian civil war. It could easily rank as Munonye's least successful novel in its lack of thematic focus and lack of artistic distance. It is part experience, part biography, and part faction, full of undigested bits of political philosophy and boiling like a stew into which a potpourri of Nigerian history has been thrown. The subject matter is familiar: the story begins with the struggle for independence by corrupt politicians in Nigeria and ends with the 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 in conflict before Bokenu (Biafra) broke away. In the novel Sakure State represents the North, where Bokenu citizens were massacred, and Doda State is the West, which aided and abetted the aggressive military in subduing Bokenu State. Munonye insists

that this novel is a dialogue on the moral issues involved in the Nigeria-Biafra War. The title of the novel was 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 were sacrificial lambs, as people in positions of power used the opportunity to exploit fellow citizens and precipitate sufferings and privations. For the two idealists in Munonye's book—Roland Medo and Biere Ekonte—the original war they came to fight has abandoned them: "It wasn't ... 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 unusual in Munonye's canon. The dancer Ayasko is also a mercenary con man who exploits his talents as a dancer to ruin one patent-medicine dealer after another until he establishes a monopoly. Those who argue that, in Munonye's works, society is the victimizer while the individual is the victim, agree that Ayasko turns society's weapons against itself and emerges successful. Because a trickster succeeds and evil triumphs over good, moralists might chide Munonye for teaching the youth that evil pays.

Munonye's *Bridge to a Wedding*, which celebrates the triumphant return of Joseph Kafo, was published in 1978. An unpublished novel written after 1978, *'House of Enoch'*, is about the place of religion and religious affiliations in the lives of Nigerians. Since then, Munonye has turned his attention to short stories, mostly on religious themes. In *'Horn of Salvation'*, *'Land of Prophecy'*, and *'The Missing Treasure'* he concerns himself with the proliferation in Nigeria of religious groups including Anglicans, Catholics, 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 the Supreme Sabbath Church of the Most Holy Spirit. In these stories Munonye wonders why the same Christian seems as ready to embrace the idol as the cross, why this rush to 'ride in a Freudian truck,' why this 'lorgiastic bewildering emotionalism. 'The escape by Nigerians into religion, Munonye thinks, is an effort "to dwell close to the frontiers of lunacy," to avoid the rigors 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 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 on his hands. He obviously retired to devote his time to writing, but to his consternation the muse seems to have fled with regular employment. In a mild lament in *'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 midmorning sheen had been food for my heart became 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 the serious critical attention his novels are attracting, Munonye can be said to have already earned a secure place among African novelists of the twentieth century. And Munonye will be better known as the years go by. **GR**