

The Individual and Society: A Study of John Munonye's Early Novels

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There seems to be a consistent attempt by John Munonye to view and treat the heroes of his novels as individuals who break out beyond the framework and limitations of their community. These individuals feel no longer constrained by the conventions of their milieu. They are invariably individuals with problems, but who seem to be up against society in their attempts to find solutions to these problems. The various methods and ways of solving these problems constitute the distinguishing marks of these heroes. Whether we deal with Nnanna in *The Only Son* (1966) who has to attend school against the wishes of his relatives and thus becomes isolated from his immediate community; or with Joe in *Obi* (1969) who finds himself in conflict with the traditional group in his village on the issue of his marriage; or with Jeri in *Oil Man of Obange* (1971) who leaves the traditional economics to embrace the Western one and becomes an oilman suffering alienation and isolation by so doing; or even with Ayasco in *Dancer of Fortune* (1974) who is forced by the circumstances of his trade to resort to intrigue, blackmail, and exploitation in order to survive and look after his family, we are all the time dealing with different manifestations of the individual trying to be himself, and to survive in an often hostile society determined to thwart the individual's efforts at self-realization.

Munonye's heroes generally are presented in isolation, facing their fate as they make their choices, often guided by certain moral sense which ultimately brings them to disaster. They and their problems present us a series of faltering uneasy attempts to match the desires of the individual with the desires of the community. Most often this delicate balance act falls apart as the tension flares up leading to the destruction of the isolated individual. In traditional African society solidarity in the highly developed sense of community would seem to be a necessity rather than a social virtue: it is indispensable for survival amid the hard conditions of an underdeveloped agrarian economy. A group or an individual that tries to break up or isolate himself is doomed to destruction. The traditional community set up is based on the principle that the individual is like a cell in a body. A living cell will die if deprived of oxygen and light.

Applying this concept of community to the novels of John Munonye, we see that in *The Only Son* the hero Nnanna grows up in a suffering family and is brought up by a widowed mother. It is the community that prescribes what he is to do to be regarded as successful. His ideal which revolves around the continuation of the lineage and the building up of the homestead is set for him by the community through the mother Chiaku¹. The possibility of achieving this ideal grows elusive as the novel progresses and Nnanna's separation from his community widens. Again, as the mouthpiece of the community, she builds up a picture to which Nnanna must conform or face the wrath of his people as a whole. According to Chiaku Nnanna will grow up to be "a man of great skills and strength . . . a masquerader, wrestler, hunter, dancer . . . a

¹ John Munonye, *The Only Son* (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 11. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

successful farmer with twenty double rows of rich rotund yams in his barn . . . the husband of two and father of many" (*The Only Son* p. 48). Nnanna will be all these without reference to his individual preferences, and without regard to his peculiar potentialities, limitations, and circumstances.

It is against this background that one must see community's reaction to Nnanna deciding to go to school to satisfy his curiosity for the white man's education. To the question what evil spirit drove him to go to school he replies, "nothing drove me . . . I decided to go, and I'll continue to go" (*The Only Son* p. 87). This is the individual standing up against society and its restrictions and prescription. Nnanna finally leaves his home to live with a stranger, one Joseph who will send him to Ossa to live with the Rev. Father. What we see here are the efforts of the community to frustrate the aspirations of the individual, to destroy his spirit by being over-paternalistic or overrepressive.

In *Obi*, Munonye's second novel, the story of Nnanna, now Joe is continued. He starts as a mission boy as Anna, his wife, says of him, "He is the only son of his mother, and yet he left her to join the church and to be a Mission boy."² As the story opens, he and his wife are returning to Umodiobia, Joe's hometown "to live there permanently and to restore the Obi—his father's homestead" (*Obi* p. 5). Joe is regarded as a wise man among the people of Umodiobia and appreciated for following the traditions of his people in spite of his education and status. For instance, when he is about to build a house, he complies with the community's procedure and invites his kinsmen to tell them what he intends to do. His trouble with the community starts when he refuses to be forced into taking a second wife by a delegation from his kinsmen (*Obi* p. 99). His reply to them shows how deeply he feels about their intrusion into what he regards as his private affair, "I will not leave the church and will not marry a second wife. Go and tell those that sent you" (*Obi* p. 101).

This defiance of community's norms and expectations proves the beginning of sorrows for him. For a Christian like him, the bearing of children has lost its centrality to marriage. What he fails to realize is that in the community where he lives, events in the individual's life are not seen as isolated incidents in the life of one man, but events that have bearing on the life of the community, and therefore not separable from the collective destiny of society. A break in the individual is tantamount to a break in the society. Consequently, Joe's reply is bound to arouse indignation and draw upon his head the fury and thunder, especially of his immediate relations; people who believe strongly in a system he is calling to question. For instance, Joe's sister Adagu goes as far as "swearing never to talk to either Joe or Anna again in her life" (*Obi* p. 143). In Joe is typified the individualistic tendency which Western education and exposure tend to foster in the individual, pitting him against the communal attitude of the society. By continuing to disregard the pleas of his community for a second wife, Joe finds himself at variance with his people, risks hostility and rejection, and is forced to walk a lonesome road of isolation. Community's chance comes when Joe, in a state of anger at being called a "castrated bull" by Akueze, his brother's wife, beats her unconscious. One can say that it is his people's insistence on the production of children as the sure sign of manhood that drives Joe to let go all the control he had tried to keep at abeyance as a Christian.

Akueze did not die of the beating but gradually recovered, thanks to Emenike Nwoye, the native doctor. When however Akueze dies as a result of an injection by one quack, Jacob Ikeogu of Ozala, the community still is convinced that Joe is the

² John Munonye, *Obi* (London: Heinemann, 1966) p. 24. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

cause of Akueze's death and has him banished from the town. Ironically, Joe learns of his wife's pregnancy the very day he and his wife were supposed to leave Umodiobia for good. Thus the tragedy of the exile is neutralized by the expectation of a baby, the cause of Joe's predicament. By this twist of irony, Munonye, while not siding with the individual, is somehow sympathetic towards his failures, and seems to point fingers at society that drives him to disaster.

Jeri in *Oil Man of Obange* shares with Joe isolation from the community by virtue of their embracing the Christian faith. In fact, there is an anticipation of the tragedy of the oil man of Obange in *Obi*. The oilmen are the liberals as opposed to the elders known for their orthodoxy and fierce intolerance (*Obi* p. 186). Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* portrays the life of a man who strives independently to accomplish his life's ambitions in the midst of societal and occupational odds. Jeri (Jeremiah Oko), after the near total decimation of his family in a land dispute with the family of Ikendu of Obange, and after escaping the jaws of death through baptism by a priest, decides to abandon the land in dispute and take to the oil trade.³ This apparently untraditional decision creates a chasm between Jeri and his immediate community because the latter sees it as a height of indifference to the value of society. Obange, like any other Igbo community of the period, is rural and agrarian with much importance attached to land tenure and farming. Moreover, land has a mystic connection with the ancestors who actually own the land. So Jeri's abandonment of his ancestral land or the selling of it would be unthinkable, traditionally speaking. It is not only cowardly but antisocial, foolish, and rebellious. To make matters worse, the oil trade was considered a betrayal of the tradition and its practitioners were seen as outlaws, and objects of ridicule.

Jeri's conflict with his society results from his reaction to the sufferings inflicted on his family by society and is heightened by his love for Western education and desire to use it to triumph over difficulties created by his enemies. Here, as in the case of Joe, Munonye manages to win our sympathy by his presentation of Jeri's predicament. In spite of consistent opposition from society, Jeri struggles to send his children to school, to continue with the oil trade never adulterating his oil. In Jeri, Munonye again gives us another portrait which is part of his corpus of the lonely, hardworking, self-righteous individual who destroys himself by severance from his community. One would not say Jeri is totally destroyed at the end, for although he dies a pathetic death, he leaves a hard core of heirs and survivors who will successfully, one hopes, carry on the work he has started.

One is tempted to see Jeri's dying with his head in Onugo's arms as symbolic of society or tradition's triumph over the individual. The same act could also be seen as an oblique condemnation of the indigenous society. There is something to be said for both views. Firstly, the individual without the capacity to sense his relatedness to his community cuts himself off from the capacity to grow, and starves or destroys himself. This is the common traditional African thinking. One needs an awareness of one's separate identity, no doubt, but too complete a separation cuts one from human growth. Secondly, too much emphasis on communality smothers the individual's efforts to effect a change.

Munonye is one of the African novelists concerned primarily with the traumas in the African society caused by Western cultures and with their influence on the individual's psyche. He depicts the frustrations, the disappointments, the anger, the cynicism over unfulfilled hopes, and the inability of the individual working alone to

³ John Munonye, *Oil Man of Obange* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 5. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

reverse these situations. The central question which the three novels discussed in this paper attempt to answer is, what is the best attitude to take towards Western cultures? The dialectic of these novels is that survival and salvation may well lie in an integration of the old and the new. It follows that none may be rejected in toto for any reasons whatsoever. Accordingly, the novels are not tracts of antitraditional pose or pro-Western stance. They are the author's blueprint for the African's survival in the face of conflicting values. He is convinced that the African situation demands and deserves serious and delicate consideration. To survive, the African cannot afford to close his eyes to the new ways, or to refuse to draw inspiration from the solidarity of the past based on communalism. Mere individualism exercised outside the communal interest is bound to falter because it is antithetical to the African way of life. Stated differently, the question Munonye raises is not whether the principles of the new religion and Western education are valid for Africa, but of finding out whether the Africans are capable of overcoming the insurmountable obstacles of a changing universe.