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The last to go



ONCE

MORE

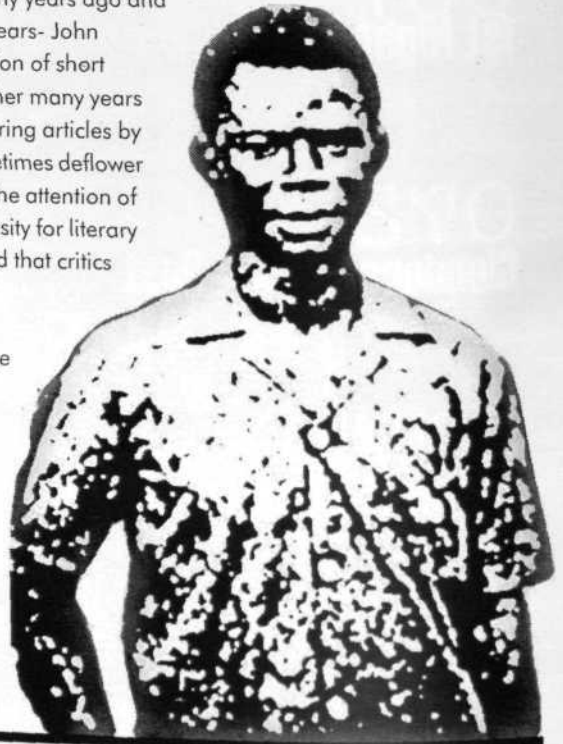
**Ezenwa-
Ohaeto**

I am constrained to lament the death of Nigerian writer, emphasise his contributions and celebrate his passage. Once more another tree has fallen in the forest of African literature. The list of departing writers is increasing in quick succession: Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Amos Tutuola, Sony Oti the dramatist and musician and now John Munonye. Death has visited again, leaving us staring - in a dazed manner. . .

John Munonye who was born in April 1929 had barely celebrated his 70th birthday in April 1999 before his departure on May 10, 1999. In the ebullience of the activities associated with the transition to civilian politics in Nigeria his death was not accorded the full respects it deserved. The writers did not assemble formally to bid him farewell; his former students did not gather as a group to pay tribute and several of his colleagues were not even aware of his passage. But that is not surprising considering the fact that his works never really received the attention they rightly deserved.

John Munonye did not see a published copy of his last novel which Heinemann, Nigeria, had accepted to publish many years ago and which they had listed as forthcoming in all those years- John Munonye did not see the publication of his collection of short stories which he had given to a local writer/publisher many years ago. John Munonye did not receive all those flattering articles by scholars and promotion-conscious critics that sometimes deflower African Literature. John Munonye did not receive the attention of biographers who have now woken up to the necessity for literary biographies of African writers. But it must be stated that critics like Azubuike Iloeje, Adebayo Williams, Charles Nnolim and myself (in interviews) gave Munonye some full length critical attention, but there was the need for more of such studies. In addition Ernest Emenyonu had in 1997 solicited and gathered essays for a book he wanted to edit on *The Emerging Perspectives on John Munonye*. If John Munonye did not receive the critical attention he deserved he certainly made his readers happy through his ability to narrate captivating stories almost effortlessly.

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John Munonye was not physically imposing but his literary works portray an 'impressive intellect'. In *The Only Son* he captures with telling accuracy the tribulations of a mother with an only son. His perception of the mother-son relationship in a colonial situation will remain one of the most perceptive and illuminating by African writers. The sequel entitled *Obi* extends the story to young adulthood and the consequences of kindred conflicts are analysed. In *Oil Man of Obange* he narrates one of the most emotionally touching stories that contrasts Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* in chronicling the thankless job of parenthood among a deprived disillusioned people. The tragedy of the *Oil Man of Obange* clearly portrays the futility and the hope associated with overwhelming desires to improve the economic and social conditions in a society full of social disparity. In *A Wreath for the Maidens* Munonye criticises the futility of wars and condemns the attendant vices and terrible carnage. *A Dancer of Fortune* chronicles the life of one of the most captivating comic characters ever created by John Munonye. This character known as Ajasco uses his wit and intelligence to survive and triumph over his adversaries and adversities. In *A Bridge to a Wedding* which he regarded as his retirement novel Munonye appears to bring all the strands of the stories in the preceding novels together in order to emphasise the need for reconciliation and harmony in human relationships.

There is no doubt that John Munonye's fictive versatility deserves more critical attention. The excuse that he was threading the path mapped out by other writers is mistaken because he brought to novel writing a sense of purpose, an ability to analyse and study his human characters closely, a knowledge of intricate domestic relationships and a sense of life that is constantly under pressure but which refuses to give up the struggle. He was clearly devoted to literature especially after his retirement from public service and decision to live in his hometown of Akokwa in Imo State, Nigeria. The few years he travelled outside his home town was on the invitation of Ernest Emenyonu as the Provost of Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, who had nominated him as a writer-in-residence. Sadly many of his colleagues at that time never appreciated his presence in their academic ignorance and myopic pursuit of intrigues against themselves.

Nevertheless, it was at that institution that John Munonye delivered his last public lecture on the 14th of July 1993. He had entitled it 'The Last to Go'. In that lecture Munonye starts by going down memory lane: 'twenty years ago, in the year 1973, following three great years as head of this institution and among staff and students whom there could have been none better I stood on this very platform, this very spot almost, to announce with some feeling of distress my impending departure'. He adds: 'And now, here I am, back to stay and live in the College again; back to the very house in Shell Camp, as we used to call it, which gave me two of my novels; and back in the even more elevated role of resident artist'. He acknowledges that his experience as a resident would provide grist for his writer's mill for as he argues: 'What is art, especially literature, about after all if not perceptible representation of human feeling-of agonies and ecstasies, hopes and despairs, passions, elations, levities, visions ... and human feeling'. He then confesses that the title of his paper 'The Last to Go' is taken from a poem by America's great Walt Whitman in which he says:

*But for all this liberty has not gone
out of the place, nor the infidel
entered into full possession. When
liberty goes out of a place it is not
the first to go, not the second or
the third to go. It waits for all
the rest to go, it is the last.*

John Munonye then extends the metaphor of the 'last to go' to refer to art in

Nigeria. It was at the peak of the terrible military destabilisation of the country. He, therefore, asks his audience not to lose hope but to confront the philistines and to go on with their artistic pursuits inspite of the deprivations of the moment. He criticises the tendency in the Contemporary Nigerian situation in which the people, while relegating and even abandoning their art, believe themselves highly religious and are ready at very short notice to rise to the highest pitch of zealotry and pentecostal emotions. It is a paradox worth investigation.

Munonye insists that all great cultures have always risen above such impediments to produce literary works that can stand the test of time. He emphasises that 'Literature is in fact the area where Nigeria has scored its highest on the world scene; not politics certainly, or commerce, or science or agriculture or sports either'. He points out, however, that literature faces 'the serious danger of premature decadence'. This decadence John Munonye observes is reflected in the environment in the cities. He argues that there are both communal and private responsibilities for making the society habitable and pleasant. Munonye also points out the deficiencies of the publishing industry: 'What many of them do at the moment with men of authority and money is, in my thinking, absolutely damnable. They print things and then make fund-raising events with them, with hardly much regard for literary or intellectual quality. Such practice is of course literary inflation; or debasing of the artistic and academic coinage'. All the same he recognises the fact that there is rising cost in book production. The writer then reminds his audience that 'Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and the rest are as human as you are. They were lucky in a way to have discovered themselves in good time. You are now being presented with such an opportunity to discover yourself'.

He adds that 'the present clouds will lift one day, for sure; and may be then, on going through your files you will discover things that you never thought you did write so well and which publishers would be happy to take to the world to see'. John Munonye concludes that the degree of neglect for the arts in our 'contemporary Nigerian society is to (his) mind, approaching suicide proportions'. But he ends on an optimistic note when he urges his audience to remember:

*But for all this, all the present
difficulties, art has not gone out
of our hearts. Nor has the
barbarian entered into full
possession. When art goes out it
is not the first to go, not the
second or the third to go. It waits
for all the rest to go, it is the last.*

Unsurprisingly the writer received a standing ovation at the end of the lecture. Perhaps there were some members of the audience in whose minds some literary seeds had been sown. It was such an insightful lecture and his creative works that made the death of John Munonye painful.

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