

## JOHN MUNONYE'S TRAGIC VISION IN *OIL MAN OF OBANGE*

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### ABSTRACT

*There is indeed a dire dearth of critical studies on John Munonye's works in spite of his prolificacy which is evidenced in his publication of six novels and several short stories while he lived. Regrettably, this lack of extensive critical studies on Munonye's works has led to the eclipse of some of the important ideas he embedded in most of these unstudied works. In the light of the above challenges, this paper, therefore, turns attention on exploring the concept of tragedy in John Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* (1971). In particular, this study seeks to demonstrate that in this enthralling and intriguing novel, Munonye successfully projects a refreshingly new model of tragic vision firmly rooted in the subsoil of common traditional Igbo worldview on tragedy. The study further argues that this Igbo-centric concept of tragedy differs tremendously from the popular Classical and Medieval models of tragedy, and then, concludes that *Oil Man of Obange* is Munonye's tour de force; a well-crafted tragic novel that is in a class by itself among his other novels.*

**Keywords:** *Tragedy, John Munonye, Tragic Vision, Tragic Flaw, Oil Man of Obange.*

### 1. Introduction

There is, indeed, a paucity of critical studies on John Munonye's works – both novels and short stories – despite his well acknowledged prolificacy, which is evident in his publication of six novels and several short stories while he lived. Charles Nnolim, indubitably, one of the most prominent and perceptive critics of Munonye's oeuvre, aptly captures this worrisome situation when he writes that: "the more Munonye writes, it would seem, the more are critics determined to ignore him" (128). Nnolim goes on to proclaim that "one of the factors... that have kept Munonye in critical limbo is his apparent lack of high seriousness, for:

*He seems usually delighted with frivolous scenes where adolescent boys and girls frolic, either wrestling or fighting or throwing stones at one another. In Munonye's work, there is never a confrontation between the troubled mind and the*

*consequences of his actions, no conflict between the human agent and his destiny, no character with 'dark power' in his psyche that he has to purge, no conscious encounter of the personality with the stranger within.... (129).*

Nnolim further posits that:

*No one seems to be stimulated to point out any particular philosophy of life in any of Munonye's work, either through the utterances by his characters or through the narrative. No great moral conflicts or issues beg for argument in any of his novels. Nor does Munonye's language carry with it what Longinus calls 'the sublime', which with its nobility of diction, grandeur of expression and impressiveness of thought, creates in the reader a sense of being carried to new heights of passionate experience,*

*thus making a minor work,  
whatever its defects, appear truly  
impressive. (129).*

These observations are true indeed, but evidently, Nnolim made them based on his critical evaluation of Munonye's earlier novels, notably *The Only Son* (1966) and *Obi* (1969). However, by the time he had read Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* (1971), Nnolim proudly proclaimed that "Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* is in a class by itself among Munonye's works; it is the one novel that deserves a second reading" as well as "has high seriousness that is lacking in his other novels" (129). Sadly, though, in spite of all the accolades, Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* has still remained grossly under-studied. Williams Adebayo, one of the few critics of Munonye's works, declares that Munonye's novels predominantly focus on "the average man locked in a grim, existential combat with the invariably hostile forces of society" (163). To him, Munonye is "a novelist of the common man *par excellence*" (163). Again, this is true even of his *Oil Man of Obange* where Munonye successfully adapts the concept of tragedy to aptly capture the condition of the common man from an Igbo-centric perspective. The rich philosophical quality of Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* ND the author's aesthetic accomplishments really compel serious critical attention.

In the light of all these, it will indeed, be interesting to carefully explore the concept of tragedy Munonye projected in *Oil Man of Obange* – a task which the present study sets out to perform.

A close study of this enthralling novel reveals that in it Munonye successfully dramatizes the Igbo man's concept of tragedy, which is solidly anchored on the belief that fate plays a crucial role in one's life; that the success or failure of an individual in life is mainly determined by the forces of fate, coupled with the individual's actions. This concept of tragedy, as will be later demonstrated in this study, greatly differs from both the Aristotelian and the Shakespearean concepts of tragedy where the tragic character turns out to be the sole orchestrator of his or her tragic fall. The study will also attempt to show that

unlike the Aristotelian or Shakespearean models of tragedy where the main actions revolve around a protagonist, from a noble background; that of Munonye revolves around a common man in his grim struggles for survival. But before we go into the nitty-gritty of the study, it will be profitable to first refresh our minds with some scholarly views on the concept of tragedy.

### **Conceptual Clarification: What is Tragedy?**

According to M.H. Abrams, "tragedy is broadly applied to literary and especially to dramatic representations of serious actions which eventuate in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist" (408). For Aristotle, who blazed the trail in the serious study of tragedy (in his highly influential book: *Poetics*), tragedy is:

*The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself... incorporating incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions (8).*

Aristotle further postulates that tragedy necessarily involves what he calls the "tragic hero/heroine's tragic fall" resulting from his/her celebrated mistake, which he terms "tragic flaw". A major point Aristotle raises here is that the tragic is the sole architect of his/her fall. Following the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, therefore, the protagonist, who either comes from a noble background, or rises from a humble background to a glorious status in society, eventually falls beyond the level of an ordinary person because of his/her celebrated error, thus triggering catharsis from the audience. A.C. Bradley further enriches our understanding of tragedy by stating that tragedy "is, in fact essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death" (3); and that:

*... such exceptional suffering and calamity, then, affecting the hero, and – we must now add – generally extending far and wide beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are an essential ingredient in tragedy, and a chief source of the tragic emotions, and especially of pity. (3)*

Bradley goes on to explain that the tragic action that precipitates the calamities in Medieval tragic works is essentially caused by the tragic hero/heroine, and not by external forces. As he articulates the point: "... the calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those actions of men" (6). In other words, in Medieval tragedy, it is the hero's/heroine's weakness in character or error in judgement that solely leads to his/her tragic fall. Cassius, a leading character in William Shakespeare's famous play, *Julius Caesar*, captures the view by telling Brutus that their problems are not in the stars, but in themselves ( Act 1, Scene III, pp 140 -1). This hero/heroine, as in Aristotelian tragedy, is usually an eminent person (King, Prince, leader in society or member of a great House whose actions are of public importance) who falls from prosperity to wretchedness, from eminence to disgrace, and from fortune to misfortune.

It is, however, noteworthy that these times – honoured concepts of tragedy have recently come under heavy attack by some radical literary scholars. Arthur Miller has, for instance, strongly argued that the common man is also "an apt subject for tragedy" ("Introduction to *Death of a Salesman*" vii). He went on to demonstrate this view in his famous tragic drama – *Death of a Salesman* (1949) whose actions centre on the tragic life of Willy Loman, a poor travelling salesman who eventually dies unsung. Similarly, Elechi Amadi has wondered why, to Aristotle, the tragic hero/heroine must be "better than the average man" before his/her fall could possibly elicit the emotions of fear and pity from the audience (62). He firmly insists that, "we do feel pity for characters that are less than average, or less than us and indeed for outright criminals if the punishment goes beyond a certain limit" (62-3). As for the aspect of fear, he asserts that:

*A source of fear has to be formidable, more than we can cope with, and capable of harming us. If a tragic hero comes to grief because of the fatal flaw in his character, we may feel pity, but little or no fear. This is because his misfortune is*

*explicable and predictable. Also, since we may not share his flaw we believe we are unlikely candidates for the same misfortune. If however a tragic hero comes to grief or dies in spite of his best efforts and in circumstances which are not easily explained, we are more likely to be afraid because firstly, we can imagine ourselves in the same circumstances, and secondly we do not know when, where or how the agent of misfortune or death will strike next. (63-4)*

All these diverse views on tragedy serve as a suggestive starting point in our discussion of Munonye's concept of tragedy in *Oil Man of Obange*. At this juncture, a fundamental question needs to be asked: what is the nature of tragedy Munonye projected in *Oil Man of Obange*? In other words, what is Munonye's concept of tragedy in *Oil Man of Obange*? This does not, however, imply that Munonye ever asked or answered such a question, at least, to the best of our knowledge, nor that he even ever framed a definition of tragedy. Rather, our close study of *Oil Man of Obange* strongly suggests to us that Munonye's treatment of tragic issues in the novel represents his view on the nature of tragedy, especially from the Igbo worldview, which is akin to Elechi Amadi's earlier quoted view on tragedy and the common man.

In his study on Munonye's works, Williams Adebayo has noted that in most of his works, Munonye often portrays ordinary individuals, usually drawn from his Igbo environment, who are involved in a grim struggle for existence (163). This observation that Munonye often writes about the common man is, indeed true, for Munonye's first novel, *The Only Son* deals with Chiaku, the widow, and her relationship with Nnanna, her only son. In the end, she surrenders and yields her only son to Christianity and then remarries. The next novel, *Obi*, deals with Joe, the protagonist, and his wife, Anna's efforts to relocate to another environment in order to make a fresh start in life. His other novel, *A Wreath for the Maidens*, deals with the horrors of the Nigerian civil war – from

the Igbo perspective. *A Bridge to the Wedding* captures the conflicts between Kafor and his kinsmen, which are eventually successfully resolved. It is also noteworthy that all these novels are set in Igbo land, and that each features ordinary individuals striving for survival, against challenges of life as Adebayo has rightly observed.

Though *Oil Man of Obange* is also set in Igbo land, and centres on the struggles of an ordinary individual, Jeri Oko, it significantly differs from Munonye's other novels because it projects a tragic vision that is evidently rooted in Igbo worldview, a serious issue that compels critical attention. This concept of tragedy Munonye dramatized in *Oil Man of Obange*, as earlier hinted, significantly differs from the Aristotelian and Shakespearean models.

To begin with, to the Igbo, success in life ultimately comes from hard work backed up by good luck. The Igbo fervently believe in the wisdom enshrined in the proverb: "When a man says 'yes', his chi (fate) will echo 'yes'"; but when a man says 'yes' and his chi refuses to affirm it, then, such a man is destined to end in tragedy. Another important aspect of Igbo philosophy on the twin issues of hard work and success is that when a man lives up to a very ripe age and reaps the fruits of his labour; he is deemed a successful and lucky man. For instance, if a man begets many responsible children, (especially, if majority of them are male – the Igbo society is dominantly patriarchal) and later dies at a ripe age, and his many children and grandchildren are able to give him a befitting burial, then, such a man cannot be termed a tragic personality. This is the main ideological plank upon which Munonye built his tragic vision in *Oil Man of Obange*.

### **The Tragic Vision in *Oil Man of Obange***

Munonye's tragic vision in this novel is that the tragic character suffers alone. His major idea in the novel is that life is full of topsy-turvy and inscrutable vicissitudes. In the case of Jeri Oko, the protagonist in *Oil Man of Obange*, his courageous confrontation with the various caprices of life ends in outright tragedy. Obviously, he severally said "yes", but his chi said "no". The end of one hardship or obstacle often marks the

beginning of another for Jeri despite his hard work, his unquestionable high sense of integrity and genuine quest for success. Jeri's tragic end is one that leaves the reader sighing with sympathy and grief for him. This is because Jeri is not an evil man; his misfortunes are, indeed, greater than he deserves. By all standards, Jeri is a hardworking, kind and upright business man. The author tells us, for instance, that Jeri's "guiding principle could be summed up in a simple word: caution" (*Oil Man 12*). He continues:

*... caution demanded that he should deal only in first grade oil, that transparent type which was always in demand in Otta, even though the profit was not much really in view of what the dealer had to pay for it himself. And he must not adulterate it. Never. Some oil men did and sometimes got away with that... caution! He must not expose himself to such danger.... (Oil Man 12).*

He is also not a violent or troublesome man. It could be recalled how his quest for peace made him to surrender his large piece of family land to Ikedu's family, for which his sister, Onugo, often called him "a mad man". Some critics have noted that Jeri's tragic fall essentially stemmed from his lack of discernment and his irrational quest to satisfy the whims and caprices of all his children. Charles Nnolim, for instance, wondered why a poor man like Jeri should insist that "all his six children must receive a good education, all paid from his meager income" (131). He further avers that from Jeri's tragic end, "the novel emerges as the greatest indictment in the literature of Igbo people against unbridled love for and devotions to the welfare of one's children" and that "there is a touch of Moliere in Munonye's posture: even a great virtue, if practised immoderately will give rise to absurdities and, in Jeri's case, to tragedy" (132). He further reveals that Munonye subtly hid "this central meaning of the novel in Mica's school motto which reads: "Da nobis recta sapere" (Latin for 'Give us the right discernment') (132). Like Nnolim, Adebayo also opines that "the tragedy of Jeri has a self-destructive edge to it: the self-

destruction of a man who loved his family more than himself" (13). Their views are, of course, valid and constitute some of the major themes in the novel.

In our views, however, Jeri's tragic fall is also (and indeed is mainly) attributable to the handiwork of fate; his pre-destined hard luck. Come to think of it, was Jeri the only oil man that plied the several roads where he had several accidents, despite all his cautiousness, resulting in monumental losses? Was Jeri the cause of the land conflict which robbed him of his inheritance? And why did he lose his wife when he needed her so dearly? Is it a crime for a responsible father to work extremely and genuinely hard in order to provide basic education for his intelligent and hardworking children...? Jeri seems to be fated to end in tragedy; even though it must be admitted that he may have over stretched himself in trying to provide for his children. Fate, nevertheless, had a noticeable hand in his tragedy.

Jeri, we are told, had six intelligent children who were a great source of pride and joy to him. He, therefore, resolved to give them good education to the best of his ability. This was at a time school education was for a privileged few. He toiled day and night, in all seasons of the year, even on Christmas Eves, carrying six tins of oil (symbolizing his six children) on his old bicycle to and from Otta, where he sold them. The author vividly captures Jeri's serious devotion to his business thus:

*The festive period did not affect Jeri. Perched on the bicycle saddle, with six tins of palm oil on the carriage behind, he ground the chain up the hills with his feet. People made remarks as he passed. Why, they asked, did he not know that it was on the season of rest: he should go home and rest: go home and look after himself for two weeks or so: go home and rest and forget everything to do with money for just a brief period. That was what everybody else was doing. (Oil Man 44).*

All these did not perturb Jeri, for he had a

worthy dream. Not even the endless abuses from his only sister, Onugo, could distract him from his chosen path of struggling to train all his children in school. He had several accidents on his way to business during which he sustained injuries, suffered economic losses and mental agonies, yet Jeri was never deterred from pursuing his set goals. The sudden death of his dear wife, Marcellina, staggered but never crushed him. When he lost his bicycle, tins and oil in one of the accidents, he had to hire another bicycle at an exorbitant rate from Oganabo, the shrewd bicycle repairer and lender. He also borrowed from Mr. Brown, to whom he supplied oil, in order to recapitalize his business and pay the school fees of his first son, Mica, who had gained admission into a famous secondary school. With part of the loan, Jeri hired a bicycle from Oganabo and embarked on his business with even greater determination and vigour.

Unfortunately, during his return from a very profitable business trip to Otta, Jeri was robbed of the hired bicycle, all the money he realized from sales, including his tins of oil in his bid to render an assistance to a seemingly helpless young man who later turned out to be a member of a gang of robbers. Having been so economically and psychologically wrecked, Jeri could not contemplate how to face Oganabo, the bicycle repairer, from whom he had hired the bicycle and Mr. Brown, from whom he had borrowed twenty pounds. And, how was he to meet the school requirements of his beloved children? All these left him mentally unstable, and then, resulted in his tragic death, leaving behind six young helpless orphans. Through the tragic death of Jeri, Munonye portrays life as absolutely absurd and meaningless.

Indeed, Jeri worked very hard, and legitimately, too, in his desire to attain success, but all to no avail, and for no serious fault of his. His is the case of an unfortunate man who shouted 'yes', but his 'chi' (personal god) kept silent. This can be seen in Mr. Brown's tribute to Jeri by his grave side: "His life was a whole planting season. It is a pity he died so early, before the fruits of his labour began to appear" (*Oil Man*

238). It is clear, then, that Jeri's tragedy substantially comes from the whims and caprices of fate; for he tried so much to succeed, but his chi said "no".

As earlier stated, Munonye's concept of tragedy significantly differs from both those of Aristotle and Shakespeare, for in Aristotelian and Shakespearean models of tragedy, it is the hero's weakness in character that solely leads to his tragic fall; whereas in Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange*, the protagonist, a common man, is a mere toy in the hands of fate. Again, in the former, the hero is usually an eminent person; whereas in Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange*, the protagonist is a common man, a poor trader struggling for survival. Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe's hero in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) perfectly fits into the Aristotelian definition of the tragic hero, for he was a highly placed man and well-respected leader in Umuofia. He was also a wealthy and famous wrestling champion, who also had various titles, but was eventually ruined by his hot-temper and pride, which constitute his tragic flaws. Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) also fits into the Aristotelian definition of a tragic hero, for he was a man of power and influence. Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu's tragic flaw is arrant arrogance/pride. On the contrary, Jeri Oko, the protagonist in Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange*, is a humble and honest poor business man who struggled for survival, but could not succeed because of bad luck.

Apart from the hands of fate, the society of Jeri's time also contributed to his tragedy. His loneliness and poor beginning in life were the consequences of the land dispute between his family and Ikedu's family. Sadly, the community could not stand by him to reclaim his land from the Ikedus, the usurpers. This loss of his land left Jeri quite deprived early in life and precipitated his series of sufferings later. Jeri's fellow oil men also contributed to his tragedy by conspiring to sell off his bicycle and wares after he had the ghastly accident during a business trip. Adebayo submits that:

*It can be seen from all these that  
Munonye is eminently aware of the*

*explosive contradictions of the  
emergent society, whether as seen  
in the inevitable ganging up of other  
oil-merchants which leads to Jeri,  
the oil man of Obange's premature  
death.... (13).*

Similarly, the harsh conditions imposed on Jeri by Oganabo, the bicycle repairer, coupled with Mr. Brown's loan with a string attached, kept Jeri in fear and anxiety in his bid to meet up. When, therefore, the bicycle and money were stolen, he could not contemplate facing these two members of the society. Indeed, society generally failed Jeri. It could not help him in his attempt to recover his stolen property. Worse still, all the organs of the society were ineffective and disappointed Jeri – the administrative officer, the Chief, the police and the church, none could come to the rescue of Jeri in his moment of need. In sum, it must be admitted that Jeri was not a bad man; his was a poor beginning, he worked hard to deserve success, and for a time he had hopes and nearly succeeded, but fate and society worked in concert to bring his tragic end.

## 2. Conclusion

From the discussions above, it has been established that in *Oil Man of Obange*, John Munonye successfully projects an Igbo-centric concept of tragedy built around Jeri Oko, a common trader, who attempted to overcome various challenges of life which, unfortunately, eventually swallowed him up. *Oil Man of Obange* is, indeed, John Munonye's *tour de force* – a novel in which he treated a very serious subject matter in a tantalizing manner. In this novel, Munonye successfully projects a pessimistic vision of life, akin to that of Elechi Amadi in *The Concubine* (1966), in which the protagonist, Jeri, is inescapably caught up in the spider-web of life and where he is further assailed by the soldier ants of life (*Oil Man* 231). Finally, it is interesting to note that Munonye aptly captured the tragic vision in *Oil Man of Obange* in the highly philosophical song Jeri heard from some children during his peregrination after being robbed:

*While I sing my song  
Somebody is about to die*

*While I laugh with joy  
Somebody is full of tears  
While the moon is shining  
Rain is falling elsewhere*

*That is the world in which we live  
That's the way we live and die.  
(Oil Man 234)*

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