

# THE ESOTERIC IN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD* AND OKORAFOR-MBACHU'S *ZAHRAH THE* *WINDSEEKER*: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Benjamin Nwabuisi Abia

Anya Ude Egwu

&

Mary J. N. Okolie

## Abstract

This paper is a review of literature on the representation of the esoteric category in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Nnedi Okorafor Mbach'u's *Zahrah the Windseeker*. It reinforces the argument that the esoteric, as the inner core that is not open to all adherents, is one of the archetypes that have featured in literature from time immemorial. It further reveals that although scholars have done enormous critical work on the two novels, there is still much to explore in the texts by critics: *The Famished Road* and *Zahrah the Windseeker* have been discussed from the magical realist, mystical realist, and other postcolonial and modern critical perspectives but none, to our knowledge, has approached these texts from the perspective of the esoteric contents. It is a significant finding in the novels that power as esoteric element could be either changed towards positive ends for the good of man or towards negative ends for the destruction of lives. For instance, while the herbalists used their secret powers to heal patients, people like Madame Koto use their own power to bewitch people and exploit her customers. It is also seen that ritual as a component of the esoteric is crucial in invoking power for either positive or negative ends. To this end, the paper concludes by calling on future critics and researchers to further explore the esoteric elements in these and other Nigerian literary works, to popularize this critical perspective, since the

esoteric experience, being an existential reality, can always provoke literary creativity.

**Key Words:** Archetypes, Esotericism, Literature, Structuralism.

## Introduction

Many critics have examined the novels from different critical perspectives. It is still an ongoing scholarly debate as to whether magical realism or mystical realism is the right description of the mysteries in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. As for *Zarah the Windseeker*, it is held by some schools of thought that, because of its mixture of humans, super humans, and strange beings in its characterization, it is neither a fable nor fiction but rather a new strand of narrative. This is, essentially, the state of scholarship with regards to the criticism of these texts. This literature review, therefore, aims at exposing the lacuna that justifies the esoteric archetypal perspective taken in the study of the texts. For purposes of clarity and concentration, the two novels are dealt with one after the other and according to the perspectives of the individual critics.

## *The Famished Road* and the Critical Trajectories of Realism and Folklore

*The Famished Road* has been severally described as a perfect example of animist realism. In this regard critics argue that the roots of success of this novel lie in the central theme, which is connected to the age-old culture and traditional practices of African society. Raynaud (2012: 331-346), for instance, asserts that the novel affords a view of the world through a perception of reality that is intrinsically African. She further argues that the text rests on a system of beliefs, references to myths and rituals of the cult of the ancestors that inform its very nature. These features, she avers, are concurrently embedded in an Africa that is resolutely contemporary and modern. She reasserts the text's African

nature by postulating that it derives from the form of oral tradition like folktales, legends, among others. However, she notes that with the disappearance of the gateway between the spiritual and physical realms, Azaro exists in an inter-space, frequenting both realms of existence with no power to choose where he would want to be. The observations by Raynaud aptly touch on the African cosmogony as depicted in the text but do not proffer reasons why Azaro frequents the two realms of existence with no power to choose where he would be at any given time.

However, it is Teimouri (2012:11-14), in his criticism of *The Famished Road*, who comes closer to the esoteric mooring in the text. He posits that his reading is with a view to the issues often least touched upon in magic realist works, adding that the idea of his work is to provide a liberal humanistic reading of the novel. He, therefore, argues that 'time', as a major preoccupation of the novel, explicitly and implicitly affects major characters. He further argues that, entwined with 'time' in the novel is the concept of vision and that the connection between time and vision is among the crux of the matter in his article. He, therefore, focuses on the transformations that two major characters, that is, the spirit-child and his father undergo and demonstrates how these changes are a function of temporality. He buttresses his argument by invoking Hausheer's assertion that, if nothing were passing, there would be no past; if nothing were to come, there would be no future and if nothing would exist, there would be no present. Teimouri applies the above Hausheerian postulation to the transitory life of Azoro, the spirit-child and implies that by communing between the world of the living and the spirit, the child intersects the boundaries of the past, present and the future. He observes that at the beginning of the story, the spirit-child has made up his mind to end this repetitious birth and death and stay in the world of the Living. He enumerates different reasons for this decision, such as being fed up with the coming and going, the wish to savour this world, to enjoy "the

sublime mood of eternity” and, finally, the face of his mother: “I wanted to make happy the bruised face of that woman who would become my mother” (Okri 1990, p. 5). All these factors boarder on the esoteric nuances which have not been explored by earlier critics and this makes Teimouri’s position very instructive to this review. It greatly aligns with the esoteric mooring which has not been explored by earlier critics.

Furthermore, Teimouri identifies two textual regimes in *The Famished Road* as: the real (the physical, the phenomenal world) and the supernatural (the strange, the fantastic, the marvellous, or the otherworldly). Significantly, esotericism is a discourse on the rampart of the second regime (the otherworldly) because it connects with the inner or secret dimensions that are not available to all the characters in *The Famished Road*. For Teimouri, there is something which urges the protagonist of the story to demote himself so as, “to have the sublime mood of eternity” in him as he lives “the life to come” (Okri 1990, p. 5). That “something” is what the archetypal critic describes as the esoteric part identifiable in the life of the protagonist, Azaro and a few other characters.

But Ogunsanwo (2016:19) refutes the theme of magic realism in his critique of Brenda Cooper’s analysis of the novel, calling it a “misnomer”. Quoting some scholars to buttress his point, he argues that the literary aesthetics of *The Famished Road* would be resting on “spiritual realism” or “animist realism” (as in Quayson 1997) or “sacred realism” (as in Mathuray 2009) or “shamanic realism”. These critics cited by Ogunsanwo serve as points of departure for the critical perspective of this study because they emphasize the importance of spirituality and the power of the imagination, which, to a large extent, are in tune with the esoteric dimensions.

Similarly, Obumselu (2011:1) argues that Okri’s brief residence in Lagos from about 1976 to 1978 and his use of Yoruba folk characters are sufficient reasons to place him firmly in the Yoruba tradition. He

cites Douglas McCabe's "Higher realities: New age spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" as a welcome statement of support. He further refers to McCabe as postulating that the tradition in which the novel operates is to be found in the very heart of London counterculture. He buttresses with the following words of McCabe,

[...] that New Age spirituality – not postmodernism or post colonialism – is the most noticed important cultural vector shaping *The Famished Road* [...]; that the features often noticed by critics as distinguishing Okri's *abiku* novel – the adoption and deployment of "African" narrative modes and ways of seeing the world, which exist side by side with "Western" modes and ways; the continual references to nationhood, elections, and the colonial period, the narrative's main motifs (e.g., roads and rivers, hunger and eating) [...] – are all importantly determined by and subsumed within, New Age spiritual discourse and its attendant politics, so much so that *The Famished Road* verges on being a New Age allegory. (Obumselu, 2011:1)

Based on the above conclusion by McCabe, it is instructive that Warnes (2009:124-149), while engaging in a chronological reading of Okri's oeuvre also locates *The Famished Road* in a trajectory that leads from an "African" perspective to the utopian and allegorical slant of the writer's later works. Though Warnes retains the term magic realism elaborated by Cooper and Aizenberg, he qualifies it. He avers that in his work, he offers to: "allow a particular brand of magic realism to emerge from within the novel itself and to avoid distorting comparisons with the strand of magical realism which favours metaphor and irreverence over myth and faith". Thus, this brand of magical realism, as advanced by Warnes and the New Age Spiritualism, as advanced by McCabe, align with the effort to shift from the stereotyped critical approaches, by exploring the esoteric dimensions as archetypes in the text.

### ***The Famished Road*, the Postcolonial and the Modernist Critics**

Various analyses of *The Famished Road* can be seen as rehearsing of the quarrel between postmodernism and post colonialism and their possible overlap. Okri himself, in an interview with Ainehi (2021:7), makes the following remarks which vindicate this proposition:

In the last thirty years, I have watched a literature rise from protest and self-definition, from anti-colonial, Africanist dimensions to satires and cries against the failures of independence, from prison writings and social realisms into something altogether different but into which all that has gone before has played a part. Now the literature is international. Now all genres are tackled. Detective, sci fi, afrofuturistic, polyglot, spirit inflected, epic poems, memoirs, autobiographies, travel writing, hybrid forms, experimental – you name it and the literature bears the imprint of it. The literature has become confident and successful (2021:7).

Guignery (2021:15) aligns with the above view by asserting that *The Famished Road* is the, “outcome of a decade of experimentation with form, tone and tincture.” She posits that the text is born out of dissatisfaction with the limitation of realism and that the text creates a third way by weaving together, the realistic and the esoteric, thereby showing that both the spirit and the dead are an integral part of the physical world. Consequently, she describes the movement within the different realms as fluidity. Guignery’s position appreciates the obvious duality but does not address the esoteric dimensions in the text.

In line with the above thought, Mahmutovic (2010:10) locates the novel within the literature of protest or disillusionment against Nigerian political history that has been replete with violence, leading to identity crises and existential anxiety. Mahmutovic asserts that the conflicts and metamorphoses in the lives of the characters are responsible for, “an anguished concern with existence and a desire for articulation of singular freedom.” The conflicts and the resultant

existential anxiety make it clear to the characters that the social system is highly defective and endlessly capable of depriving them of their freedom.

Similarly, Quayson (1998:38) tows the same line with Mahmutovic, in his political interpretation of the text. For him, the “quasi-mythical standing of Azaro is like the role of myth and folktale in modern day Africa. He argues that the heroism of the folktale and myth is not just adequate to the present condition of the society but also appropriate to the condition of the Nigeria of the author’s time. Quayson casts Azaro as a character living “between and betwixt thirty-odd years after independence, unable to unravel the formula for the solution of debilitating economic and political crises. In other words, Azoro’s puzzling ontological status signifies the post-colonial nation in its chaotic passage from colonialism to independence. Mahmutovic’s location of abuse of power as a cause of violence in the text and Quayson’s identification of power and postcolonial disillusionment are apt, but they do not address the esoteric power that people like Madame Koto and other politicians use to manipulate the ordinary people.

It is, therefore, instructive, that, leaning on socio-economic and political standpoint, Whyte (2013:4) posits that a literary work is often influenced by the artist’s perception of the world around him no matter how much he tries to avoid it. His emphasis that the novel embraces political criticism is purely axiomatic. One good instance is the plot on the disenfranchised generation, who yet receive the rotten milk shared by the political parties. With further instances from the text, Whyte postulates that the text portrays attacks on African elite, betrayal of the ideals of independence and the horrors of discrimination in South Africa and American Deep South. Although Whyte’s postulations underscore the corruption inherent in political power, they do not unravel the mystery of power as an esoteric element.

To this end, Mathuray (2015:21) observes that making the case for *The Famished Road* as a modernist text and insisting on the crucial significance of modernism to post colonialism in general are controversial theoretical gestures. He aligns with Neil Lazarus' view that the postcolonial perspective has come to dominate postcolonial literary studies since its inception and that among its norms and suppositions are: "a constitutive anti-Marxism; an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturality...and refusal of an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics." Thus, Mathuray argues that, in *The Famished Road*, we see numerous examples of both the processes of modernization and its technological products (e.g., the Photographer's camera, Madame Koto's car, electricity, etc.) being incorporated seamlessly within the animistic framework of the text. Mathuray opines that technological modernization leads less to the disenchantments of a Western modernity, but to further re-enchantments of an African modernity. He insists that their reaction was two-fold: directed against both the form and content of these novels. This, he says, is a sort of what Lukács had called a "critical realism" which had dominated the anti-colonial and postcolonial novel in most decolonizing and decolonized African countries. He further avers that, despite subverting some of the tenets of the European model (e.g. the idea of the hero-as-protagonist, with its individualistic inclinations, which often tend towards heteronormative and triumphalist closures) Okri's realism was used effectively as a vehicle for the nationalist, and sometimes Marxist, demands of the decolonizing agenda.

In conclusion, Mathuray asserts that in Okri's novel, and in African fiction in general, we note the imperative of what Appia calls "ethical universalism" or, what Brown has described in his discourse of European modernism and African letters, as "meta-narratives". For

Mathuray, these terms suggest something of the embattled and ambivalent relation between an irreducible African modernity and a Western capitalist modernity: “meta-narratives” which, he says, are essential to counter the deleterious effects of the latter. He posits that a consideration of African modernism, as of all genres of fiction, needs to consider both formal principles and content, and the way in which form (as all good Marxists argue) reflects, interrogates, and sediments the content. Mathuray’s conclusion is insightful in the political analysis of the text, but it still does not unravel the spiritual undercurrents that propel some political power.

However, there is an aspect of Mathuray insight which Teimouri (2012) corroborates when he observes that Okri’s subjective approach, which entails abandoning the objectivity of former modes of writing, involves a crucial shift from time on the clock to the time in the mind. He states that, in the discourse, attention is given to the relationship between time and mind, arguing that this approach is not peculiar to Okri, since there are thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Henry Bergson, among others, who are the earliest examples.

Thus, Teimouri explains that while Freud shed light on the dark and unknown side of consciousness, that is, the unconscious which brought into light the importance of memory, dream and psychological time, Bergson emphasized the overriding importance of the mind in giving us access to the real. He notes that Bergson’s speculations bear resemblance to various aspects of modernist fiction which, he says, are characterized by shallowness and superficiality of vision in realistic art - - evident in limiting itself to the externals. He notes further that one of the cores of Bergson’s thinking is its resistance, like modernist writers, to the conception of time, adding that Bergson coined the term “Psychological time,” for time in the mind which could not be measured by regular beats of clock-time that measure all experience. Such shift from the ordinary understanding of time to the notion of

psychological time or time in the mind, is closer to the esoteric dimensions of the novel.

However, Compton (2017:171) explores the postcolonial contents in line with the traditional and religious elements in the novel. He posits that, in postcolonialism, there is often not just recognition of the messiness of meaning, but also an embracing and employment of that messiness. Compton further notes that, in her criticism of the novel, Esther De Bruijn explains that Okri consciously creates a history in which “traditional animist belief systems mingle together with Christianity, Muslim faith, secularism, and other imported ontological systems” (Compton, 171). Thus, Compton observes that even though McCabe argues that the prominent belief system and ideology of *The Famished Road* is New Ageism, he (McCabe) also asserts that the novel’s heterogeneity frustrates any attempt to unify it around a single ideological vector.

Therefore, Compton’s assumption is apt when he asserts that *The Famished Road* is Okri’s appeal to, “a more enchanted way of viewing the world in order to access those things that have been lost in a move toward modernity, urbanity, and enlightenment and away from myths” (172). He buttresses this assumption by quoting Okri himself as saying that,

Myth is not something in the past. It is a living river. A living under-river that touches every single person’s life” and that [s]omething has been lost... when we stepped away from a spiritual understanding of the world that allowed for myth and ritual: the ability to see the world as Azaro does and as West Africans did in the past, with “otherworldliness as a palpable, vital reality that is interwoven with the present.... The ancestors are integrated into the present. . . through rituals, incantations, or through a symbolic transference” (171).

The above quote substantially validates the effort directed towards unravelling the esoteric features in *The Famished Road*.

Interestingly, the works so far referred to have shown that the esoteric nuances in the text have not been fully explored by previous critics, thereby justifying the need to critically look in that direction.

### **Critical Reception of *Zahrah the Windseeker***

There used to be paucity of critical opinions on Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker* but from the rise of ecocriticism and investigation of science fiction, a lot of criticisms and reviews have been done on the novel. Below are some of them.

The first critical opinion enlisted about this text is this anonymous *Amazon* critic, who avers that the novel is, “a refreshingly different take on the cultural conventions of science fiction and fantasy” (amazon, 2021). This opinion is further buttressed as follows:

Zahrah's coming-of-age story introduces readers to a vibrant new world. Interestingly, it is not the computerized jungle guide that ensures Zahrah's success but her tenacious faith in braving the impossible. That it is only the elgort which can save Dari from his critical condition is the significant propellant to Zahrah's quest and the search for it led to the deeper revelations of the esoteric contents of the Greeny jungle (amazon, 2021).

To corroborate the above postulation, Malgas (2022, web), opines that both science fiction and magical realism are complex narrative forms, on which numerous full-scale treatments have been published. He cites Chris Baldick as defining science fiction as follows:

A popular modern branch of prose fiction that explores the probable consequences of some improbable or impossible transformation of the basic conditions of human (or intelligent non-human) existence. This transformation need not be brought about by a technological invention but may involve some mutation of known biological or physical reality (Malgas, 2022, web).

So far, the opinions expressed about the novel aligns with the “extraordinary”, which is also a characteristic of the esoteric. However,

Chukwuma (2015, web) observes that Nigerian literary critical practice and tradition are yet to get to the level of recognizing literature for what it is: art and nothing more. And so, by way of example, of how to critically recognize literature for what it is, Chukwuma examines “The Fulani Creation story,” *The Famished Road*, *Sundjata*, *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Things Fall Apart*, comparing them with *Oedipus the King*. According to him, a first-time reader of “The Fulani Creation Story” is confronted with a semblance of unity of meaning by the title of the poem, that is, the story about creation to the Fulani. However, he argues, if the structure of “The Fulani Creation Story” is of any thematic contributive importance, the motif of return, almost of incarnation can be provisionally found in it, as well as the structure of overcoming a ravaging monster and taking up leadership over the redeemed. Although *Sundjata* has several versions, Chukwuma echoes Okpewho’s view that there is a core that serves as a rallying point for these variants, which shows that literary meaning is as chaotic as the representation of myths whose autochthonous abode is the oral domain.

Chukwuma, however, doubts the instructional capability of *Zahrah the Windseeker*, wondering whether it is to the plants in the Forbidden Greeny Jungle that the instructions are directed, even though they are like humans, possessing intelligence and, without following a script of genetic engineering, can alter genetic compositions. He suggests that the work is positing, in a half-awake manner, incidents of a dream or nightmarish world and that this might have accounted for why it is provenly difficult for any reader to make any tangible meaning out of it, although every major action is quest-poised and quest-directed. In view of this, Chukwuma avers that Mbachu’s in-betweenness shows forth as she rides on the shoulders of new vocabulary to denote the un-encountered and strange, so that whatever has semblances of the already known is hugely mutated, making the world she creates all the more strange and rattling our perceptions. But

in spite of this difficulty, Chukwuma avers that “very few things exist in the world of *Zahrah the Wind seeker* that we can connect with our familiar one, like newspapers, mentorship, heroic welcome attending Zahrah’s arrival, and so on” (2015, web). He argues that the artist’s language in this work is at pains to communicate the universe clearly, presenting one of the most hypothetical worlds of the agric-science fiction of our wildest dreams or nightmare in modern Nigerian literature.

And so, considering the apparent ambiguities in the narrative, Chukwuma queries: “in what ways, then, is such an arid and elusive work supposed to teach readers, keep mores, and salvage a grim, decrepit image and stereotypic representation of the African?” (Chukwuka, 2015, web). He thus concludes that we cannot attempt to visualize our world in terms of the world of *Zahrah the Wind seeker* since it is remote from it. But by comparing Zahrah with Okonkwo, it appears Chukwuma has contradicted the above conclusion, for he has asserted: “Zahrah quests and realizes it, whereas Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, fails ultimately in doing so” (Chukwuka, 2015, web). This, we think, is enough lesson.

In any case, other critics have looked at *Zahrah the Windseeker* from the perspective of gothic imagination and science fiction. For instance, Sum (2023:38-213) explores “Gothic Imagination and Construction of Monstrous Bodies in Selected Fictional Works of Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu”. In that dissertation, she argues that an in-depth study of Nnedi Okorafor’s selected novels has revealed her remarkable appropriation of Gothic motifs and themes. He cites Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu’s article, *Organic Fantasy* (2009) and avers that the work not only outlines the guiding vision behind Okorafor-Mbachu’s imaginative works but also affirms that fiction writers often infuse their life narratives, aspirations, and perspectives into their works. He states that in the text, Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu admits that her literary

imagination is influenced by two things: her complex African (Nigerian) and American heritage and her magical view of the world.

Among many examples cited to buttress his point, Sum illustrates with the scientists in Okorafor-Mbachu's other works, who were apparently more interested in results than screams of pain from Phoenix. They believe that "nothing great comes without pain". They, therefore, have no qualms about subjecting the inmates to the worst imaginable sufferings if it would lead to the achievement of their objectives. This is like the pains Zahrah had to undergo in order to get the solution to her friend's problem. This, for Sum, is another dimension of violence and a significant process of dehumanization, which makes it easy for oppressors to inflict more damage on fellow humans by allowing them to exclude a group or an individual from moral consideration. Although Sum portrays the characters as exercising power in different ways, especially as an instrument of exploitation, he does not explore power as an exclusive possession of specially gifted individuals.

Nevertheless, Okoro (2023:133-156) quotes John Mbiti as stating that, "the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in ... mystical power". He then avers that the claim by Mbiti is evident in the narratives by many African fiction writers whose stories incorporate characters and traits found in science fiction or fantasy fiction, two genres that explore the supernatural, myths, magic and mystery. Okoro remarks that, over the years, works of fiction by distinguished authors born in Africa and those with parental links to Africa have embodied features that resonate with Science Fiction and fantasy fiction. He cites the example of Ben Okri, whom he quotes as admitting that "*The Famished Road* is ... a perpetual story into which flowed the great seas of African dreams, myths and fables of the world, known and unknown" (Okoro,133-135). He further illustrates with Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, noting that Alexandra Alter describes her

novels in these words: “Magic, ritual and secrecy are threads that run through ... a head-spinning menagerie of otherworldly spirits and deities drawn from Nigerian myths and legends” (Okoro, 140). This aspect of secrecy attributed to Alexandra Alter is very close to the esoteric perspective, which earlier critics have explored.

However, corroborating Okoro, Grimbeek (2023:133-156) argues that Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu’s work is distinctly and unapologetically Afrocentric and refuses to conform to generic expectations. Here, she further argues, science and magic exuberantly coexist, and although important non-English words or ideas are usually explained, the Western reader is not necessarily accommodated through the choice of setting, plot, or character names. The author herself, she posits, prefers the descriptor Africanfuturism to the more established Afrofuturism and prefers Africanjujuism to fantasy. This preference, says Grimbeek, is precisely because Okorafor-Mbachu’s fiction, “is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West” (Grimbeek, 140), as Afrofuturism inevitably does, in Okorafor-Mbachu’s opinion.

Grimbeek further remarks that, although the future African cultures depicted by Okorafor-Mbachu are highly sophisticated, they often remain steeped in tradition, both to the benefit and detriment of the various protagonists; family ties, genealogies and tribal allegiances are frequently shown to be key to individual identities in Okorafor-Mbachu’s fiction. Although Grimbeek illustrates her claims not with *Zahrah the Windseeker*, but *Binti*, a 2015 novel also by Okorafor-Mbachu, what is said of one wholly applies to the other. This plot summary of *Binti* by Grimbeek shows striking similarity with *Zahrah the Windseeker*:

At the start of *Binti*, for example, the eponymous sixteen-year-old protagonist is the first member of the Himba tribe to be admitted to the intergalactic Oomza University. Against her family’s wishes, she

leaves home in the dead of night to travel there by an organic Miri spaceship. During the journey, the ship is violently attacked by the alien jellyfish-like Meduse and she is the only surviving passenger. Binti's edan, an obsolete and otherwise useless technological object, enables her to resist the Meduse attack and communicate with them. On landing, she negotiates the safe return of the Meduse chief's stinger, captured in a war and kept as a museum specimen by the university, thus laying the foundation for renewed peace between the Meduse and humanity. Binti undergoes a partial physical transformation as her tribal braids morph into blue Meduse-like tentacles. Okwa, one of the Meduse, decides to stay at the university, and by the end of the trilogy, after an eventful journey back to Binti's homeland and their subsequent return to Oomza, both Okwu and the Miri spaceship New Fish are bound to Binti. As a doctor explains to her: "You're paired with New Fish and Okwu, each of whom has a family. Your family is bigger than any Himba girls ever was. (Grimbeek, 150).

There is little or no difference between the above plot summary and that of *Zarah the Windseeker*. Both Zahrah and the sixteen-year-old protagonist of *Binti*, also known as Binti, share the quality of daring the unimaginable. Just as Binti leaves home, in the dead of night against her family's wishes to travel to the intergalactic Oomza University, by an organic Miri spaceship, so does Zahrah travel to the dreaded jungle using mysterious computer as a guide. Both revolt against the accepted standard of the society, which we have seen as characteristic of the science fiction. This comparison of the roles of Zahrah and Binti because of their daring achievements is in tandem with the esoteric endowment in their lives which have not been critically explored.

However, Onunkwo (2019:179), explores the concept of individuation in the novel from the Western philosophical tradition where self-realization is seen as 'principium individuationis'; that is, the principle of individuation. Onunkwo avers that the idea goes back to

Socrates in his famous dictum ‘man know thyself; an unexamined life is not worth living’. He also cites Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Pythagoras, as ancient writers whose works were precursor to the concept of individuation. To this end, Onunkwo argues that in the twentieth century the idea of self-realization is enunciated in the works of Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Rogers, and Abraham Maslow among others whose problem, he argues, was that their theorizing focused only on the conscious aspect of the process of individuation, while Jung in his theorization conceives of individuation as a natural process that takes place in man and nature. Furthermore, Onunkwo posits, individuation means becoming one homogenous being and avers that this homogeneity embraces the innermost psyche of the human being which unites the conscious and the unconscious. According to Onunkwo, it is this union of opposites that Jung technically calls ‘coincidentia oppositorum.’ And so, Onunkwo explains that, here, selfhood does not mean self-fragmentation but the totality of the conscious and the unconscious.

This Jungian individuation, which is an encounter of the conscious ego with the psychic forces of the unconscious, Onunkwo argues, is at the core of *Zahrah the Windseeker*. He avers that the steps that lead to individuation are associated with certain numbers of archetypes, which some Jungian scholars recognize as four, three or five processes or stages of individuation. In his article, however, Onunkwo adopts the four processes of individuation outlined by Jacobi which include the archetype of shadow, anima/animus archetype, the sage archetype, and the Self archetype. By so doing, Onunkwo investigates Zahrah’s individuation in terms of the archetypal patterns outlined.

50 The Esoteric in Okri’s *The Famished Road* and ...

B.N. Abia, A.U. Egwu & M.J.N. Okolie

Zahrah’s journey into the forbidden greeny jungle to find the egg of an ergot potent for the cure of her friend, Dari, who has been bitten by a war snake, actually, is not an external journey but a voyage of self-

discovery, or what Arnold Stein describes as the 'exploration of the dark depth of the soul'. In this world of the unconscious, Onunkwo argues, Zahrah must confront the chthonic forces of the unconscious as an unpleasant part of herself which she must accept as part of her individuation process. For Onunkwo, the first archetype that is encountered in Zahrah's personal unconscious is what Jung calls the shadow, which represents those tendencies in a personality which the conscious ego is unable to accept as a part of the Self. He explains that in most cases these are dark impulses in a personality which Goethe calls 'earthly remnant, painful to bear'. Onunkwo quotes Jung as follows, to buttress: "The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly-for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies" ( Onunkwo, 279).

Thus, Onunkwo argues, in *Zahrah the Windseeker* the shadow archetype is constituted at two levels of representation, at personal and communal levels. He asserts that the forbidden greeny jungle symbolizes the iconographic imagery of the shadow which is repressed, the existence of which is denied by the people of Ooni kingdom. He further posits that the forbidden greeny jungle which is described as 'a vast untamed wilderness'(Zahrah xii) captures the fears of the people of Ooni kingdom, who believe that whoever goes into the forbidden jungle will not come out alive. This fear of the forbidden greeny jungle, Onunkwo observes, is such that the citizens of Ooni cannot even discuss it freely among themselves. He notes, for instance that at the Ooni public library, the librarian tries to prevent Zahrah and Dari from reading the book entitled *The Forbidden Greeny Field Guide*, which contains information about the forbidden greeny jungle, which, to her, contains information on a taboo topic and therefore should not be mentioned at all.

This archetype of sexual completeness, says Onunkwo, leads Zahrah to the next stage of individuation. He explains that as the archetypal hero moves closer to the Self in his or her quest for individuation, he is not usually a lone and unaccompanied. He avers that the archetypal hero is usually accompanied by an unconscious manifestation of the psyche which is usually personified by a figure of the same sex. In the case of a man, Onunkwo posits, it appears as the wise old man and that of a woman as the chthonic mother. He further avers that in Jung's theory of the unconscious, the archetype of the wise old man is typically characterized as a man with a long white beard, wearing sweeping robes, which he buttresses as follows:

The archetypal image of the wise man, the saviour or redeemer, lies buried and dormant in man's unconscious since the dawn of culture; it is awakened whenever the times are out of joint and human society is committed to serious error. When people go astray, they feel the need for a guide or mentor or even the physician (qtd in Lodge 187).

Furthermore, Onunkwo argues that this archetype which is a common figure in folk legends, myths, and dreams, is described by Northrop Frye in these words: 'the divine or spiritual figures are usually parental, a wise old man, a friendly guardian spirit' (279). He also quotes Ikenna Dieke as averring that the main preoccupation of this archetype 'is the distilling of the symbolic function of the wise old man within the context of the hero's search for moral truth' (280), while for Jung, the wise old man 'represents the factor of intelligence and knowledge' (280), which emanates from its close association with the Self archetype. In terms of representation, Onunkwo continues, it is seen as patronymic iconology of a teacher, a priest, a doctor, a magician, a seer, or any character that occupies a position of authority. Onunkwo opines that sometimes, this archetype may not be represented as a human figure but in form of animal characters 'in a situation where

insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning' (281) are required.

Apart from the patronymic archetype, which is solely concerned with spiritual and moral contentment, Onunkwo states that there are the primordial feminine which is concerned with physical and material contentment of the archetypal hero. According to him, the maternal archetype of the old wise woman is usually characterized by such qualities as maternal care and protection, compassion, fertility, and fruitfulness. He quotes Jung as articulating these qualities associated with the primordial feminine as follows: "The qualities associated with it [the mother archetype] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulses; all that is benign; all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility" (281). He further quotes Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian scholar, as averring that the wise old woman 'is usually personified as a superior female figure—a priestess, sorceress, earth mother, or goddess of nature or love' (282), who is usually associated with life principles, warmth, nourishment, and growth. He cites example of this archetype in classical mythology with Demeter or Ceres, the great goddess of grain, the earth mother.

Interestingly, Onunkwo avers that in *Zahrah the Windseeker* the archetype of the wise old man is represented by Papa Grip, the village chief of Kirki town, arguing that within the context of the text he is the reason Kirki did not have any armed robbers, murders, or untidy streets, because he knew how to mediate between groups and how to organize and make sure everyone was happy; wearing peace and understanding with his bare hands. Onunkwo notes that this aspect of his profound understanding is demonstrated when he stopped the people of Kirki from erecting a wall between the outskirts of Kirki and the forbidden green jungle; his argument being that: 'it's not the Ooni

way to do battle with nature,' he said that year during his annual address to the town.' If the jungle doesn't want us to put a wall, then we must listen to it, for it's our neighbour and one must respect his or her neighbour (*Zahrah* 78).

Onunkwo further notes that Papa Grip also demonstrates wealth of knowledge in helping Zahrah, a shy girl that cannot endure the teasing and the taunting of her classmates. To her classmates she is a harbinger of bad luck, which accounts for the various names they call her, like 'vine head, snake lady, swamp witch, and freak' (*Zahrah* 3). Onunkwo notes that when this taunting begins to have psychologically negative effect on Zahrah her parents must call Papa Grip to counsel her as depicted in the following conversation:

'You were born dada. Embrace it', he said. There aren't many of you in Ooni. You're the first ever born in this town! Be proud. Didn't your parents tell you that anyone born Dada is destined to be a wise man or woman?' 'People say that I make things go wrong.' 'Nonsense!' he said. 'Silly superstition. There's nothing wrong with you. Wisdom is sprouting in your heart. That's obvious. You have lots to look forward to, young woman (*Zahrah* 5).

And so, Onunkwo avers that this encounter between Papa Grip and Zahrah marks a decisive point in her life. He emphasizes that Zahrah has already come to a point she considers her existence worthless because of the special circumstance surrounding her birth, when she has become an object of dread and ridicule to the society around her, especially among her peers. But with Papa Grip's intervention in her life, she now sees herself no longer as the snake girl that makes things go wrong. This change of attitude, which is fostered by Papa Grip, Onunkwo argues, has a tremendous effect on Zahrah's quest for individuation. Onunkwo avers that it makes her overcome her timidity and fear of entering the forbidden jungle with Dari and makes her see herself in a unique way she never thought of before. If

not for Papa Grip's counselling at the appropriate moment, Onunkwo argues, the story of Zahrah would be a different narrative.

Onunkwo's critical perspective is instructive. His Jungian notion of the archetypes is in tandem with the esoteric archetypes which this study has identified as the vacuum that needs to be filled. Although his emphasis is on character archetypes, the fact that there is a pattern that connects the past with the present, as is always the case in archetypal criticism, makes his findings very crucial and significant to this review.

### Conclusion

We have made an expose on the extant literature that will justify a study on the representation of the esoteric category in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Nnedi Okorafor Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker*. It has been revealed that although the two texts are rich with esoteric contents, from all possible indications, no critical attention has been given to this esoteric perspective. Most critical perspectives, which are basically from the magical realist, mystical realist, and other postcolonial and modern critical perspectives, are insightful but they do not satisfy the curiosity to study the texts from the perspective of their esoteric contents. To this end, the paper concludes by justifying the need to explore the esoteric elements in these and other Nigerian literary works, to popularize this critical perspective because the esoteric experience is always with us and can always provoke literary creativity.

### References

- Ainehi, E (2020). "Giving the World a New Kind of Literature": Interview with Ben Okri. *European Journal of Molecular & Clinical Medicine*.. <https://brittlepaper.com>
- Baldick, C (1999). *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press.

- Chukwuma, I. “Zahrah the Windseeker: A New Form of Narrative in the Nigerian Literary Tradition”. <https://www.academia.edu/zahrah...>
- Chukwuma, I (2015). “The African Literary Artist and the Question of Function”, <https://doi.org/10.500/F382025977>.
- Compton, M.D (2017) “The Living River: Ritual and Reconciliation in *The Famished Road*” in ScholarsArchive, [scholarsarchiv.byu.edu](http://scholarsarchiv.byu.edu)
- Grimbeek, M. (2023) “Girls Making Families: Agential Assemblage in Nnedi Okorafor’s Speculative Fiction”. Britt Johanne Farstad (ed.), *Populating the Future: Families and Reproduction in Speculative Fiction* Gävle, Sweden: Kriterium <https://doi.org/10.59682/kriterium.52.f>  
<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva->
- Guignery, V (2021) “The In-Between World: On the Mythology of *The Famished Road* and the Literary Scaffolding of Ben Okri” Everyman's Library.
- Jung, C.G (1967) *Symbols of Transformation: The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton: University Press..
- Mahmutovic, A (2010). “History as the Road of Existential Struggle in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*”. Academia.edu.
- Malgas, L (2022). “Science Fiction and Magical Realism: African Environmentalism in the Organic Fantasy of Nnedi Okorafor” Thesis · September DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.22215.57769 CITATIONS 0 READS 830 1
- Mathuray, M (2015). “*The Famished Road* after Postmodernism: African Modernism and the Politics of Subalternity”. *Collaloo*, vol.38.
- Obumselu, B (2011). “Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*: A Re-evaluation”. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* Feb Edition 48.

- Ogunsanwo, O (2016). "Intertextuality and Postcolonial Literature in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*". *Art Research in African Literature*. schola.google.com.
- Okoro, D (2021). "Futuristic Themes and Science Fiction in Modern African Literature", in *Futurism and the African imagination*. Routledge.
- Onunkwo, C (2019). "Individuation in Nnedi-Okoraforbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker*", in *Critical Engagements on African Literature*, Cambridge Scholars.
- Quayson, A (1998). "The paradoxes of Narration in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*". <https://journals.openedition.org/ces>
- Raynaud, C (2012). 'The Text as a Riddle and Death's many ways: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*' DANS ETUDES ANGLAISES. vol.65.. <https://journals.openedition.org/ces>
- Sum, R.K (2023). "Gothic Imagination and Construction of Monstrous Bodies in Selected Fictional Works of Nnedi Okorafor" Kenyatta University, <https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/>...
- Teimouri, M (2012) "Time and Vision in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*". SSRN Electronic Journal, <https://www.researchgate.com.net/2560>.
- Warnes, C (2009). The African World view in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*". *Magical Realism and the Post Colonial Novel*. <https://brittlepaper.com>