

Individuation in Nnedi-Okorafor Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the idea of individuation as conceptualized by C.G.Jung and the archetypes associated with it in *Zahrah the Windseeker*. Individuation, according to Jung, is a natural process of transformation that takes place in the life of an individual, and each stage of individuation is associated with an archetype that is characterized by specific features. The archetypes of individuation as identified by Jung are as follows: the shadow, the anima and the animus, the wise old man and the wise old woman, and the Self. The investigation will interrogate certain aspects of the novel to determine to what extent it conforms to Jung's theory of individuation. The paper concludes that Nnedi-Okorafor Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker* is not only a speculative fiction but a textual paradigm of Jung's psychotherapeutic theory of individuation.

Keywords: *Archetype, Individuation, Shadow, C.G. Jung, Nnedi Okorafor - Mbachu.*

INTRODUCTION

The word individuation relates to selfhood or self-realisation. It is an idea that occurs in Western philosophical tradition as 'principium individuationis'; that is, the principle of individuation. This idea goes back to Socrates in his famous dictum 'man know thyself; an unexamined life is not worth living'. Apart from Socrates, the idea is found in the works of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Pythagoras. Perhaps one of recent records on the importance of self-knowledge is found in the works of Richard de Saint Victor, a Catholic Scottish monk of the Victorian period. In this document he emphasises on the importance of self-knowledge as follows:

The first and fundamental task of the mind, which strives to climb the summit of Knowledge, must be to know itself. It is the summit of knowledge to know that One knows oneself completely. The complete knowledge of the reasonable mind Is a great and high mountain. It is higher than the peaks of all worldly knowledge, It looks down from above on all the wisdom of the world and on all the Knowledge in the world (qtd in Barbara Hannah 18).

In the twentieth century the idea of self-realisation is enunciated in works of Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Rogers, and Abraham Maslow to mention just a few. The problem with these great thinkers is that their theorizing focused only on the conscious aspect of the process of individuation. But Jung in his theorization conceives of individuation as a natural process that takes place in man and nature. Furthermore, individuation means becoming one homogenous being. This homogeneity embraces the innermost psyche of our being which unites the conscious and the unconscious. This union of opposites is what he technically calls 'coincidentia oppositorum'. In other words, selfhood is not self-fragmentation

but the totality of the conscious and the unconscious. This experience of totality is what he further defines as individuation. This we read as follows:

Consciousness and the unconscious do not make a whole when either is suppressed or damaged by the other. If they must contend, let it be a fair fight with equal right on both sides. Both are aspects of life. Let consciousness defend its reason and its self-protective ways, and let the chaotic life of the unconscious be given a fair chance to have its own way, as much of it as we can stand. This means at once open conflict and open collaboration. Yet, paradoxically, this is presumably what human life should be. It is the old play of hammer and anvil: the suffering between them will in the end be shaped into an unbreakable whole, the individual. This experience is what is called... the process of individuation (*The Integration* 13).

Jung's individuation is an encounter of the conscious ego with the psychic forces of the unconscious. According to Sigmund Freud, Jung's erstwhile friend and mentor, the content of the unconscious is filled with repressed memories and sexual drives. By this affirmation Freud relates the content of the unconscious to individual experience. Jung, on the other hand, differs from Freud on the content of the unconscious. Jung divides the unconscious into two, personal and collective.

According to Jung's description the personal unconscious 'is made up essentially of contents that have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed' (*Archetypes* 42). On the other hand is the collective unconscious which is related to the deeper layers of the unconscious. According to Jung the collective unconscious is made up of archetypes with 'determining influences which, independently from tradition, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and a sameness of experience and also of the way it is represented imaginatively' (*Archetypes* 58). It is within the unconscious that Jung discovers the Self, which forms the constellation of the union of conscious and unconsciousness.

However, the steps that lead to individuation are associated with certain numbers of archetypes, according to Jacobi, who outlined four processes of individuation. Some other Jungian scholars like Edward C. Whitmont, and Edward F. Edinger recognize three stages of individuation, and Marie-L. Von Franz recognizes five steps of individuation. In this work, I will adopt the four processes of individuation outlined by Jacobi which include the archetype of shadow, anima/animus archetype, the sage archetype, and the Self archetype. In this paper, I intend to investigate Zahrah's individuation in terms of the archetypal patterns outlined.

Descent into the Unconscious

The plot of *Zahrah the Windseeker* centres on Zahrah's journey into the forbidden greeny jungle to find the egg of an elgort which has the potency to cure her friend, Dari, who has been bitten by a war snake. This journey 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' (qtd in Dieke 125).

In this world of the unconscious, Zahrah has to confront the chthonic forces of the unconscious as an unpleasant part of herself which she must accept as part of her individuation process. The first archetype that is encountered in 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. In most cases these are dark impulses in a personality which Goethe calls 'earthly remnant, painful to bear' (cited in Mario Jacoby 153). Jung writes thus:

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 (*Archetypes* 285).

In *Zahrah the Windseeker* the shadow archetype is constituted at two levels of representation, at personal and communal level. The forbidden greeny jungle symbolises the iconographic imagery of the shadow which is repressed, the existence of which is denied by the people of Ooni kingdom.

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 is such that the citizens of Ooni cannot even discuss it freely among themselves. At the Ooni public library, the librarian tried 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. To the librarian at Ooni, the place is not to be mentioned at all. 'I don't even want to think about that place!' the librarian said with a shiver as she scanned the book' (*Zahrah* 62).

This same attitude of denial and repression of the forbidden greeny jungle is represented even at government level; first they built 'a nine-foot-tall cement wall to shield Kirki from the jungle. But the root of nearby trees grew under it, and eventually the whole thing just fell apart!' (*Zahrah* 77).

The forbidden greeny jungle, as stated, symbolises the unconscious aspect of the psyche which is repressed. In Zahrah's journey into the unconscious she encounters the forbidden greeny jungle as part of the Self. This discovery of the shadow as part of the Self surprises Zahrah. 'It was amazing how the people of Kirki pretended that the jungle wasn't there. I felt a little ashamed that I'd done the same only two weeks ago' (*Zahrah* 104). Zahrah's encounter and acceptance of her shadow represented by the forbidden greeny jungle leads her to the next archetype of individuation.

The second stage of individuation involves the contra sexual archetype which Jung termed 'syzygy' to show the archetypal pairing of contra sexual opposites, which symbolizes the union of the conscious and the unconscious. The syzygy configuration portrays the inner union of the anima and animus. The anima is the female aspect of a man which is related to eros: relatedness, submissiveness, and emotion, while animus is the male aspect of a female character which is noted for logos, rationality, logic and intellectual feat.

According to Jung:

Every man carries within him the eternal image of the woman, not the image of this or that woman, but a definite image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved on the living organic system of the man, an imprint or archetype of all the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by women... Since this image is unconscious, it is always unconsciously projected upon the person of the beloved, and is one of the chief reasons for passionate attraction or aversion (*Archetypes* 338).

For Jung, even though there is a clear distinction in terms of gender differentiation between man and woman, yet at the level of the unconscious there operates an autonomous entity which operates in every man and woman as contra sexual partner. This contra sexual reality is what Andrew Samuel calls 'inner personality or soul-image' (175).

Contra-sexual archetypes perform the function of soul guide, or psychopomp, as Jung enunciated it. In this context the anima or animus heals the rupture between the ego consciousness and the Self. In *Zahrah the Windseeker* what is represented as the animus, that is the male unconscious archetype of Zahrah, is Dari.

As Zahrah says, 'Dari loved me in the way only a best friend could love a best friend. It was as if I were his other half. We completed each other' (*Zahrah* 49). This underscores the gender relationship between Zahrah and Dari which is further enhanced by Zahrah's determination to find a cure for Dari's problem.

The moment the door shut, I leaned close to Dari's ear and whispered, 'I'm planning something. I glanced behind me. 'Don't worry. Maybe I'm too afraid to fly, but I'm brave enough to save your life' (*Zahrah* 118).

Zahrah's determination is a secret she did not share with anyone except Dari. There in the forbidden jungle the thought of Dari occupies her consciousness. When Nsibidi discourages her from going on the quest she refuses.

'Zahrah, please. Your family needs you. I can get you there. This is my fault, that's the least I can do for you. You have such potential, I can't let you commit suicide', Nsibidi said. 'But Dari! He needs-' 'He needs you at his side,' Nsibidi said. 'Not here' (*Zahrah* 243).

In the dialogue between Nsibidi and Zahrah, the two participants cannot reach an understanding of the issue at stake. Nsibidi considers the quest a fruitless undertaking; which might mean death. On the other hand, Zahrah looks beyond the immediate danger associated with her quest. All she desires is inner union with Dari. This inner longing for Dari makes her to wear his shirt as a constant reminder of him. Finally Zahrah gets the unfertilized egg of an elgort which cures her friend of the snake venom. The successful quest of Zahrah marks her reunion with Dari, her animus.

This moment is well captured by the narrator as follows:

Dari and I sat close together; basking in the sunlight like lizards. Dari glanced over at me. I was staring at the sky and could see him with my peripheral vision. He looked at my hand and slowly grasped it. I turned to him with a questioning look. He took a deep breath and spoke. 'You're...you're the best friend I've ever had', Dari said quietly.' I...well, I want to thank you for saving my life'. 'Oh Dari, you don't have to thank me, it's a given', I said, squeezing his hand.' But I want to say it any way', he said. 'Well, you're very welcome, then,' I said. We stared into each other's eyes for a long time. My belly fluttered, and Dari's hand felt very warm over my hand. Then a shadow fell over us and we quickly let go(*Zahrah* 302).

As earlier stated, the relationship between Zahrah and Dari appears deeper than a mere childish (or children's) friendship. The tone of the quoted passage elevates it to a near-marital relationship. In physical terms, or in relation to their ages, such a relationship is rather precocious, since they are in their early teens. But in archetypal terms it becomes comprehensible if situated in the anima-animus context.

As George Lord notes, 'the ordeal of individuation may entail the hero's encounter with and integration of his anima, the feminine shadow aspect of his personality in what Jung calls syzgy(6). This archetype of sexual completeness leads Zahrah to the next stage of individuation.

As the archetypal hero moves closer to the Self in his or her quest for individuation, he is not usually alone and unaccompanied. He 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 it appears as the wise old man and that of a woman as the chthonic mother. 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:

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).

This archetype is a common figure in folk legends, myths and dreams. Describing this archetype, Northrop Frye posits that 'the divine or spiritual figures are usually parental, a wise old man, a friendly guardian spirit' (*Anatomy of Criticism* 151).

According to Ikenna Dieke, 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' (228).

Here, the wise old man ‘represents the factor of intelligence and knowledge’ (Jung, *Memories* 206) which emanates from its close association with the Self archetype. In terms of representation, 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. Sometimes, this archetype may not be represented as a human figure. It may be represented in form of animal characters ‘in a situation where insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning’ are required (*Archetypes* 216). Apart from the patronymic archetype which is solely concerned with spiritual and moral contentment, we have the primordial feminine which is concerned with physical and material contentment of the archetypal hero. Usually, the maternal archetype of the old wise woman is characterized by such qualities as maternal care and protection, compassion, fertility and fruitfulness. These qualities associated with the primordial feminine are articulated by Jung 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 (*Archetypes* 82).

According to Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian scholar, the wise old woman ‘is usually personified as a superior female figure—a priestess, sorceress, earth mother, or goddess of nature or love’ (196). The wise old woman is usually associated with life principles, warmth, nourishment and growth. This archetype is represented in classical mythology as Demeter or Ceres, the great goddess of grain, the earth mother. In *Zahrah the Windseeker* the archetype of the wise old man is represented by Papa Grip, the village chief of Kirki town. Within the context of the text he is ‘the reason Kirki didn’t have any armed robbers, murders, or untidy streets. Papa Grip knew how to mediate between groups. He knew how to organize and make sure everyone was happy. He wore peace and understanding with his bare hands’ (*Zahrah* 3). 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 greeny jungle. Papa Grip speaks to his people thus:

‘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).

This project of erecting a wall against the jungle has been carried out on three consecutive occasions; the first attempt was the use of cement wall to shield Kirki from the jungle. But the roots of nearby trees grew under it and the walls collapsed. The second attempt of walling off the jungle was the use of wood, which was eaten by voracious termites, and lastly, the use of metal, which insects with no scientific names dissolved with acid produced in their thoraxes. Papa Grip’s ability to expand on the meaning of this event sets him apart from the people of Kirki as a character with an exceptional insight. Zahrah use to be a shy girl who 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). This taunting has such a psychologically negative effect on Zahrah that her parent has to call Papa Grip to counsel her.

‘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).

This encounter between Papa Grip and Zahrah marks a decisive point in her life. As a matter of fact Zahrah has come to a point she considers her existence worthless because of the special circumstance surrounding her birth. To the society around her, especially among her peers, she is an object of dread and ridicule. 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 has a tremendous effect on Zahrah’s quest for individuation.

Zahrah used to be a very shy and timid girl that was afraid to enter the forbidden jungle with Dari. Following her encounter with Papa Grip she sees herself in a unique way she never thought of before. She enters the forbidden jungle alone where she encounters the chthonic forces of the unconscious represented by the animal figures such as giant lizards, lethal whip scorpion, wood wit, carnigourd, wild dog and, finally, the elgort, from which she takes its unfertilized egg, the object of her quest. If not for Papa Grip’s counselling at the appropriate moment the story of Zahrah would be a different narrative. On the other hand, the feminine principle is constellated in Mixty, an old woman with thick fur and the oldest gorilla in the village, whom other gorillas seek counsel from especially when it comes to village governance. According to Zahrah, Misty’s maternal solicitude is evident in her surroundings.

‘I noticed that many different types of leafy plants, small trees, and colourful flowers surrounding her house, unlike others. Bees, butterflies, and beetles buzzed and crawled from flower to flower, and the air smelled sweet, bitter, and oily (Zahrah 214).

This setting surrounding Mixty suggests a natural potency of mother figure especially the bee imagery, which Jakob Bachofen comments as follows:

This makes the beehive a perfect prototype of the first human society, based on the gynocracy of motherhood, as we find it among the peoples named Aristotle goes so far as to place the bees higher than the man of that period, because in them the great law of nature is expressed far more perfectly and firmly than among men. The bee was rightly looked upon as a symbol of the feminine potency of nature. It was associated above all with Demeter, Artemis, and Persephone. Here it symbolized the earth, its motherliness, its never resting, artfully formative busy-ness, and reflect the Demetrian earth soul in its supreme purity (Dieke, *The Primordial*, 17).

The bee iconography underscores the two fundamental aspects of the feminine principle that is the maternal solicitude and that of the terrible female. The terrible aspect of the feminine archetype is evident in Soyinka's *The Interpreters* where Simi is the feminine constellation of the terrible female that lures and seduces the men to destruction. In *Zahrah the Windseeker* what is represented is the positive aspect of the mother principle. After Zahrah's encounter with a pack of wild dogs, she sustained an injury. Later Zahrah was brought to Mixty who nursed her back to good health. Apart from nursing care, Mixty brings her new clothes to change the dirty one she has. More so, her food according to Zahrah 'smelled delicious' (*Zahrah* 223). To Zahrah, Mixty 'had been like a second mother in so many ways. She was sometimes gruff but deep down really nice' (*Zahrah* 230). In terms of Zahrah's quest for individuation, Mixty encouraged her to explore her ability to fly, which helped in the quest. 'If I were you, no matter how scared I was, I'd keep trying', she said. She walked over, took my hands, and sternly looked me in the eye. What a gift you have. Why not unwrap it!' (*Zahrah* 230). Actually, Zahrah utilized this gift by outwitting the elgort when she got the unfertilized egg and flew in the air. The elgort can run on the land but it cannot fly. Here, one sees the usefulness of the maternal principle in terms of moral, physical and material contentment.

The Self archetype is not always presented as the wise old man or the wise old woman, but is symbolized in mandala form which is 'a quaternity or a multiple of four, in the form of a cross, a star, a square, an octagon, etc, a motif that in alchemy is referred to as the 'quadratura circuli' (Jung, *Archetypes* 387)). Mandala symbols can be represented in various forms such as circular, spherical, or egg-shaped formations, flower (rose or lotus), the sun or the star, snake coiled about a centre, either ring-shaped (uroboros) or spiral (Orphic egg), and the eye (pupil and iris). These are various symbolic representations of the Self, which is the integration of the various elements of the psyche. This integration is the goal of individuation, that is, 'the process by which a person becomes a psychological individual, that is, a separate, indivisible unity or whole' (*Archetypes* 275).

According to Jung, the Self 'is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and the unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness' (*Archetypes* 422). Self archetype aims at the integration of 'man's real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites—day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil' (Jung, 'Approaching' 75). In the novel *Zahrah* achieves a sense of wholeness by not fighting the opposing elements that operate within but integrates it to her psyche to attain individuation. In Ooni kingdom the forbidden greeny jungle is an opposing symbol that the people resist at all cost to accept as part of their individual and collective psyche. As a result of their refusal to accept the forbidden jungle (the unconscious), they were not able to attain inner transformation which Zahrah experienced, that is, her conscious union of the opposite represented by the elgort egg. This joy of inner most transformation experienced by Zahrah is close to what some psychologists like Matton calls 'peak experience' (194) and Bateson designates as 'joyous shock' (4). Zahrah expresses the joy of numinous illumination of the Self as follows:

I was no longer the Zahrah who was afraid of the world around her, who kept her head down, afraid of confrontation. I could almost see my old self coming out the door, my chin to my chest, ashamed of what I was, all too concerned with my clothes being civilized and making my hair less noticeable. The old me would never be out this late, I thought (*Zahrah* 273).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined the psychological theory of individuation as proposed by C.G.Jung; the four stages, each of which is associated with a particular archetype, leads to that individuation forms a cardinal aspect of literary representation in *Zahrah the Windseeker*. The entire narrative structure of the novel may be likened to one long theme of individuation where each segment of the narrative corresponds to one aspect of the individuation process. In view of this, one may posit that Jung's theory of individuation is not only a major aspect of analytic psychology but a major channel for literary theory and interpretation.

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