Countering mind-forg'd manacles in Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist* (2019)

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Summary

This article seeks to unveil Ben Okri's antidote to the proposition that the 'normal' world is an asylum for mind control. Acknowledging its rich literary undercurrent, I posit that *The Freedom Artist*, countering Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles' in "London", is a culmination of *Mental Fight* (1999); the novel is a linear progression of the anthology's subtitle: "an anti-spell for the 21st century". Although aligning my reading with the view that Okri's eleventh novel is a penetrating exploration of how our freedom is being eroded by today's post-truth society, I argue against the grain of organized religions' promise of redemption, exploring the possibility of mental and emotional freedom via high order thinking/[HOT] consciousness. The novel's double narrative provides interlocking blueprints for ontopoiesis/heightened consciousness. The initiation of the young male protagonist, Mirababa, runs parallel to that of Karnak, whose lover, Amalantis, is arrested and spirited away by the thought police for voicing the forbidden question: "Who is the prisoner?" The discussion is perforce limited to the "initiations" – one a spiritual immersion, the other a transformation to intuitive logic for the *Bildungsreisende*. Both re-awakenings are made manifest by masterfully embedding the major arcana of Tarot wisdom within the distinctly dystopian storylines for the enhancement of consciousness.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is bedoel as 'n blootstelling van Ben Okri se teenspraak teen die stelling dat die "normale" wêreld 'n toevlugsoord vir gedagtebeheer is. Met erkenning aan die ryk literêre onderstroming, voer ek aan dat *The Freedom Artist* (2019) teen Blake se "selfgemaakte boeie" in "Londen", 'n kulminasie van *Mental Fight* (1999) is. Die roman toon 'n lineêre progressie

van die subtitel van die bundel: "'n teenbetowering vir die 21ste eeu". Hoewel ek my vertolking in ooreenstemming bring met die siening dat Okri se elfde roman 'n deurdringende ondersoek is van hoe ons vryheid afgetakel word deur vandag se post-waarheid-samelewing, argumenteer ek teen die idee van ge- organiseerde religie se belofte van verlossing, terwyl ek die moontlikheid van geestelike en emosionele vryheid deur middel van hoërordedenke/-bewustheid ver- ken. Die roman se dubbelnarratief bied ineenskakelende ontwerpe vir ontopoiëse/ verhoogde bewustheid. Die inisiasie van die jong manlike protagonis, Mirababa, loop parallel met dié van Karnak, wie se geliefde, Amalantis, deur die denkepolisie gearresteer en weggevoer word vir die opper van die verbode vraag: "Wie is die gevangene?" Die bespreking is noodgedwonge beperk tot die "inisiasies", waarvan die een 'n spirituele dompeling is, en die ander 'n transformasie tot intuïtiewe logika vir die *Bildungsreisende*. Beide herontwakings word geopenbaar deur die Major Arcana van Tarot-wysheid meesterlik in die duidelik distopiese storielyne vas te lê vir die versterking van bewustheid.

Introduction

Firmly grounded in the tradition of literary forebears, such as James Joyce [*Ulysses* 1922], T.S. Eliot [*The Waste Land* 1922], Thomas Mann [*The Magic Mountain* 1924] and William Blake, while redolent with the classic African theme of "ukuthwasa" [initiation], Okri fuses sometimes opposing and even antagonistic traditions: dystopian and spiritual, horror and revelation, European and African aspects rarely, if ever, brought together as they are in *The Freedom Artist*. Okri takes the external world, wrings its neck, distorts it, and breaks it into pieces (Wilson 1922: 237). In reassembling its fragments, however, whereas Eliot revivifies the external world, Okri helps the "slow" reader to make sense of what both external and internal world really mean to us.

Okri's poetic-prose encompasses fields that impinge on the classical tradition of Homer, but also on folk culture: myth, the customs, rituals, legends, fables and other structures of human society. This is literature that attempts to peer deeply into what it means to be human, partaking in visible and invisible traditions. But literature is nothing if not a making visible. The appeal lies in the mystery of the creative impulse, the secret workings of the artistic mind, the withdrawal from the world into the inner sanctum of creativity that serves to counter the Hierarchy's "mind-forg'd manacles" ("London" 1789-1794).

Aligning the novelistic mood with Blake, Joyce, and Eliot, on the one hand, and Mutwa and Ntuli, on the other, Okri prefaces *The Freedom Artist* (2019: 3-9) with a Wagnerian "Overture" that introduces the dark age of degradation of an all-but post-apocalyptic existence. In this dystopian milieu, city dwellers

are oppressed by an invisible "Hierarchy", prefiguring the shocking revelation that we ourselves are the hierarchy. Ordinary citizens become cannibalistic predators symbolizing the voracious appetites reflected in the insatiable greed of our avaricious, capitalistic society. Here, civilization has been abandoned and nothing counts but outward show. Okri yokes together paradoxical traditions: dystopian and transcendent, horrific and revelatory, western and African. Put simply, the narrative reveals that this is an age in which material wealth is a sham; value has departed; lies are common currency; and truth and love have all but disappeared (Ions 1997: 178). Yet, Amalantis – perhaps a mythic conflation of the Greek *Amaranth* [Immortality, associated with the moon, an initial allusion to Tarot arcana] and the fabled lost city of Atlantis – symbolizes cyclical change, wishing for an end to this age (*TFA*:56).[1] Early in the narrative, not only is she given to regular disappearances and reappearances [indicative of the waning and waxing moon], but she is also snatched from her young lover, Karnak, and spirited away by the thought police for voicing the forbidden question: "Who is the prisoner?" (18 and 19)

Alluding to the loss of freedom and a need to understand and order our world through new myth: "a traditional story dealing with the supernatural or the marvellous" (Cueva 2007: 13), a fragment from *A Time for New Dreams* adumbrates the cautionary underpinning *The Freedom Artist*:

> All our myths: they should be reunited in the knowledge that unless we return to the unfragmented truth of the family of humanity, unless we return love back to the centre of our ways, unless the colours return home *to* light, we will be trapped in our myths, which will then become our prisons. Then eventually will follow our doom, and the twilight of all our stories.
>
> (Okri 2011: 121 no. 25)

The tension between the novel's underlying themes of incarceration and enlightenment, dystopian and utopian obliquely invokes Blake's prophetic books.[2] For Okri, myth can be redefined as "a sacred narrative with a moral message … connected with ritual even if it is not scripture" (Ions 1997: 6). Cueva (2007: 12) notes that "[t]he easiest way to integrate religion, whether or not the author is religious, into the novels was through the use of myth". Book-ended by a "founding" myth that "all are born in prison" (2019: 4, 3, 26 and 347), and undergirded by Blake's woeful depiction of city life and hierarchical exploitation during the Industrial Revolution in "London"[3] from *Songs of Experience*, this article seeks to unveil Okri's antidote to the proposition that the "normal" world is an asylum for mind control, coupled with endemic violence.

Interviewed by Robert Wood (2019: n.p.), Okri first explains the paradox of the novel's Blakean epigraph, recast by Léopold Senghor: "Everything sacred, that intends to remain so, must cover itself in mystery",[4] saying, "I will speak obliquely because if I speak obliquely I will speak more clearly". Elaborating on the illusion of freedom – a much vaunted contemporary propagandistic myth – he ventured: "Society is a circle of prisons that we

inhabit and which inhabit us." Masking the gnostic view that "earthly existence is a sphere of grim exile" and Paracelsus's belief that "it is even the place to which Lucifer was banished …" (Roob 2014: 38), deduced from an allusion to Paracellsus' *Tria Prima* [salt, mercury and sulphur] metaphorized as mass arrests, fear and cannibalism, Okri elucidates on the complex contemporary connotations of that which incarcerates us: "The prisons could be policies, perceptions, cultural mores, state sanctioned ideas of the human, class, gender, race, religion, etc." (Wood 2019: n.p.). This resonates with Deepak Chopra's claim that "[w]hat imprisons us in our old identity is an old kind of logic, a logic founded on superstition and materialism" (1999: 8). Chopra explains the benefits of modern science as pertaining to the redemptive choices given to Tarot Fools, Mirababa and Karnak in this novel (167 and 200): "We are on the threshold of a new era, and we stand equipped with a new kind of knowledge, a knowledge that could either be our saviour or our destroyer. We have the choice to either jump into the abyss of illusion and ignorance or soar into the experience of a new reality and enlightenment." (Chopra 8) Chopra articulates the "cost" of "anti-spell" transformation: "But to experience the new reality we must first encounter the death of our old identity as skin-encapsulated egos enmeshed in a bag of flesh and bones, confined to a prison of space, time and causation, squeezed into the volume of a body and the span of a lifetime" (1999: 7-8). The excerpts encapsulate the story-within-the-story in *The Freedom Artist*. Situating the novel in quotidian reality and pointing to the catalytic urgency of his own mythmaking, Okri stated:

> Something about the air suddenly made this book right to compose. Something about freedom being threatened, the distortion of truth, something about the violence that has been inflicted on "the human" and the way that violence has been normalized by politics, the normalization of profound violence against the human … something fundamental about the human is undergoing a deep compression. Certain things you could talk about ten years ago, that you cannot talk about now. The novel has come out of that, a toxic air. (Okri in Wood 2019: n.p.)

Evidently, little has changed over two millennia for, in his study of the canonical Greek novel, Cueva (2007: 6) asserts that the earliest novel provided a complex example of reprehensible behaviour intertwined with ethical codes, past, present and future, varied characters, well known stories or myths, and so on. In the context of the Roman conquest of Greece in the 3rd century BCE, he suggests that "the looking back to the past was meant to alleviate the demoralization caused by living in a society in which the polis had lost its autonomy". Reflecting Okri's hyperconsciousness of a new silencing in the past decade, Cueva adds that "no real, meaningful public debate was allowed" (ibid.) at that time.

The "deep fracture" and the "howl in that fracture" manifests, respectively, in the narrative as "a constant state of fear" (*TFA* 20) and incessant normalized night-time screaming (22, 29, 60 etc.), which are readily understandable in

our psyche-conscious age. Little wonder then that the omniscient narrator states that "[a]nomie had spread across the world" (9).[5] The exploration of *anomie* in Eliot is this very sense of false freedom: an exposé of the outer veneer that masquerades as truth and reality. This is the "age of disquiet" (*TFA* 5), "the age of anxiety" (7), exacerbated by the "mind-forg'd manacles" of the thought police, metonymic of the invisible "Hierarchy". In this age of degeneration, arrests become the order of the day and "[s]oon there were more people in prison than outside it" (8). Rustlana – preserver of "the lost art of reading" (110) – quips satirically that ours is "[t]he age of equality" where "ignorance is genius" (99). The authority's book-burning orgies have resulted in the near extinction of books, language is reduced to "grunts" (9) and "[a] strange silence spread across the land" (20) as the Hierarchy tightens its stranglehold on the voice of the people, normalizing the ancient founding myth of imprisonment.

The narrative voice expounds on actuality and illusion:

> Every now and then a philosopher, poring over the ancient legends, would come upon a fragment of the founding myth. One such philosopher, sharing his discovery, wrote:
>
> "Humans are born in prison, and everywhere think they are free." (4)[6]

Interesting is the inversion that speaks not only to the postmodern condition but also to Eliot's parody of freedom in *The Waste Land*, while Rousseau's "Man is born free but everywhere is in chains" becomes "Humans are born in prison, and everywhere think they are free" (Okri 2019: 4). In illustration, the narrator evokes folktales highlighting correlative paradoxes: for instance, imaginative escapes in "Jack and the Beanstalk" or Gulliver's from Lilliput and that of mind-contolled perception in Hans Christiaan Andersen's "The King's New Clothes", then alludes to the classical myth of homecoming in Homer's *Odyssey*, an allegory of failure to "return to the unfragmented truth of the family of humanity" (Okri 2011: 121). On his return to Ithaca, Odysseus becomes entrapped in his own myth-within-the-myth [supposition of the Queen's infidelity], signifying self-imprisonment: "Remember the tale I read to you about the hero who was trying to get back home," the grandfather reminds his grandson [*TFA* 14]. Predictably, all such cautionary legends, including universal imprisonment, with their subtly embedded morals, are detailed for rewriting by the mind-forging authorities!

Early Greek novelists situated their novels within a historical background, "not just to appeal to nostalgia" but to demonstrate that "the narrative plot was at least plausibly realistic, and thereby helped the reader suspend disbelief" (Morgan 1982: 222), just as Okri does. Peter Munz reminds us that when "history is telescoped into myth, the mythmaker always has the object of bringing out certain features deeply characteristic of human behaviour"

(1956: 7). This begs the question of the literary function of myth in *The Freedom Artist.*

The Literary Function of Myth in *The Freedom Artist*

The Freedom Artist – countering Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" in the poem "London" – is a novelistic culmination of Okri's millennial poetry book; the novel represents a progression of his "anti-spell for the 21st century" in *Mental Fight* (1999), a title that resuscitates Blake's visionary building of "The New Jerusalem" "on England's green and pleasant land" (1983: 247). Okri envisions the dawn of a new age to counter the "wonders and terrors" that "flow beneath the age/ Like subterranean rivers" (*Mental Fight* 1999: 47). Stanza 1 of Canto ll of "Hold on to your sanity" continues:

> Never before has humanity,
> In such full *consciousness,*
> Drifted towards so momentous
> A moment in measured time.

Stanza 2 explicitly implores high order thinking/[HOT] consciousness:

> And so hold on to the best
> Things of the awakened mind.
> Only the most solid and intangible
> Aspects of the human spirit
> Can save us from succumbing
> To the waves of panic
> That engulf us temporarily.
>
> (1999: 47)

Although aligning my reading with the view that Okri's eleventh novel is a penetrating exploration of how our freedom is being eroded by today's post-truth society (Apostolides 2019), I argue against the grain of organized religions' promise of redemption from suffering, exploring instead the possible development of mental and emotional freedom ("the awakened mind"), via [HOT] consciousness, a notion akin to Blake's search for fourfold vision/Eternity in *The Four Zoas* that Okri envisages. The novel's double narrative provides interlocking blueprints for ontopoiesis or heightened consciousness through initiation.

The discussion is limited to the parallel "initiations" – one traditional, the other the *Bildungsreisende*'s growth of consciousness. The gruelling initiation of the young male protagonist, Mirababa – be it Shamanistic, Masonic or Messianic – runs parallel to the "upwaking" of entropic Karnak, whose lover, Amalantis, is arrested for daring to ask the prohibited question: "Who is the prisoner?" Both re-awakenings are made manifest by masterfully embedding

the mythology of the major arcana of pictorial Tarot wisdom within the distinctly dystopian storylines for transformed consciousness.

Tarot features too in Eliot's *The Waste Land* but is often misinterpreted, especially the verse referring to Madam Sosostris (ll.43-59). A customary reading is that modern society steers away from traditional religious belief to seek truth in "charlatans" and magicians. However, if informed by a knowledge of Tarot, the verse reveals the opposite. The fact that the seer is forbidden to see the "Hanged Man – Ultimate surrender" (ll. 53-54) card, an image that recurs at the close of Okri's novel, can be read as an allusion to the "The Fool"/ "new beginnings" as in *The Freedom Artist.* Both works thus advocate freedom as opposed to the reality of imprisonment, signified here in Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles", and countered by new beginnings in Mirababa and Karnak's initiations.

Mirababa's Initiation

Early on, we are introduced to the myth-within-the-myth, tellingly situated in "a yellow house" (*TFA* 11), symbolizing the sun or elemental life power: "*a living, conscious Intelligence"* (Case 1989: 42). This myth is that of the quest[7] allotted to the child, Mirababa, by his dying grandfather, a figure akin to the mythical alchemist or Magician in the Tarot arcana, who represents *cosmic consciousness*, but also embodying the customary African calling [*ubizo*] to undergo *Ukuthwasa* [initiation]. This African calling is gifted by the ancestors or deceased healers (Cf. Mutwa and Ntuli). Likewise drawing his power from "beyond", the Magician "transforms consciousness through concentration, attention, a limiting of the field of activity" (Case 24). Shortly before passing away with his book on his lap and a smile on his face, the traditional healer listens "to what the eagle's wings say" (15) – an allusion to *sublimation* or attainment in the spirit (Waite 1979: 72) – and implores his grandson to "[f]ind the elixir of freedom, and bring it back to the people, that we may all be free. If not, we will perish. We will perish of hopelessness" (*TFA* 16). The injunction counters Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles", while echoing "the dykes of the mind [that] have been broken and are flooded by a furious sea" (Wilson 1922: 237) in *The Waste Land*, metonymic for post-World War 1 London, in which order and harmony "which so many centuries have labored to impose on human thought," and "which uncounted hands have molded for the imagination, are awash as dishonored fragments among the ordures and detritus of the world" (ibid.). As if reflecting on such travesties, in a near whisper and sensing that he "won't live to see the face of the moon" (*TFA* 15), Granddad invokes ancient oral wisdom ("handed down to me by the heroes of old") in the axiom: "Everything we need to know is concealed in what we most take for granted" (ibid.).

The Tarot Moon Key permeates both initiation sagas, reflecting the signification of the name, Amalantis, and indicative that "the way of attainment is the way of return" or that the "stage of *unfoldment* is *Organization*" (Case 42). Amalantis's wish for the age to end signifies the soul's desire to escape from the Wheel of life. In Tarot mysticism, Death "does not represent the end"; death "transforms our consciousness and releases it from the trammels and limitations that now hamper free expression" (Case 1989: 37), a notion of cyclicity implied in Amalantis's moon-phase disappearances. Interpreting the Death card in contradistinction to Eliot's hooded figure, Arthur Waite (1978: 120) corroborates: in contrast to "the crude notion of the reaping skeleton", death signifies "the whole world of ascent in the spirit". He clarifies: "The mysterious horseman moves slowly, bearing a black banner with the Mystic Rose, which signifies life. Between the two pillars on the verge of the horizon there shines the sun of immortality": the promise of Eternal Life.[8]

More importantly, the Grandfather, "one of the secret heroes of the land" (*TFA* 27), had not only bequeathed to his grandson "*The Legend of the Prison*" (26) but, invoking the Tarot "Fool" [new beginnings], had also said: "One day, my boy, you must take a leap into the unknown and discover what has been hidden from us …" (13).[9] Case (1989:22-23) reveals the Eternal Youth connotation: the word "fool" is derived from the Latin *follis* – "a bag of wind" and so "that which contains air, or Breath". Thus, the Fool represents Eternal Youth: "the spirit in search of experience"; "He signifies the journey outward, the first state of emanation, the graces and passivity of the spirit" (Waite 1978:155 and 161) or the process undergone by someone who experiences *ubizo* [calling]. The twenty-two Major arcana in Tarot packs[10] allocate the numeral zero to the depiction of a young man, with head held high, stepping off a precipice, a bounding dog at his heels [nature], a rose [life] in one hand and an embroidered purse [*sub-conscious memories*] at the end of a costly wand over his right shoulder. The zero symbolizes "all the potencies of growth and development" (ibid.) and is, not coincidentally, that of the cosmic egg in the World Key or the auras encasing all life.

This is not to suggest that Okri slavishly incorporates the Tarot arcana. With an undertow of Eliot, Blake's and an African belief in "salvation", Okri subtly interlaces traditional initiation practices with that of Tarot myth. In a novel that foregrounds "a planet in crisis", "a dystopian nightmare playing out in a police state", Charl Blignaut (1919: n.p.) insightfully detects "magic amid the chaos", in the form of Mirababa's initiation, which he compares to that of a sangoma's search for the "ancient myths and mysteries". "It's through anguish, hardship and deprivation that one becomes a seer, that you learn to see differently," he states in conversation with Okri (*City Press*). Okri acknowledges this second "more difficult" strand to his "story of capitalism, of departure from the prisons that we find ourselves in" (ibid.).

Following Grandfather's funeral, the bards lead Mirababa deep into the forest where his initiation as an adept begins. The purpose, which follows four interrelated phases in four locations,[11] is an expanded state of consciousness

as implied, for instance, in the compass points, to enable Mirababa, a Tarot Fool, "to understand the spiritual meaning and significance of his experience and environment and its relation to himself as an Eternal Being" (Case 1989: 8). The compass points mirror the layout of a Tarot four-card spread (North – the wisdom that needs to be acquired; South – that which needs to be shed; West – that which needs to die, old stories that need to be let go of; East – the new dawn, way forward). At the centre of this spread is "The Fool" or awakened beginning. The linear thread unifying Mirababa's experiences in the forest, in a stone coffin, on the mountaintop, and in a windowless white room is the recollection of Granddad's exhortation "to go in … go beyond" (*TFA* 46).

Intuitions and perception-enhancing epiphanies percolate the growth of Mirababa's consciousness. Early in the initiation process, for instance, alone at night in the forest, soaked through after diving into an imaginary lake "lit by the glimmer of the false moon" (46), evocative of specific mystical intellectual and emotional responses from the Inner Consciousness of the querent, Mirababa paid attention "to what he felt, what he sensed" (46) gaining "a new sense of awareness" (47), of heightened self-apprehension. The Moon indicates that illumination is dependent upon bodily consciousness" (Case 41). An early double epiphany that has the young aspirant weeping "with happiness" accrues from an out-of-body emergence into an Edenic garden (*TFA* 101) and then being transported by a colossus to witness our disc world hovering in space as a reward for asking the right question: "Who are you?" (106). On his "return" to the forest, an epiphany that "changes his life forever" (118) is the psychic ability of see auras, the "blur around the edges of things" (116). This foreshadows the transportation of his now limp body by the three bards to the second initiation site: burial in a mountaintop shrine-house sarcophagus.

To accommodate to the darkness and panic of being buried alive, Mirababa abandons rational thought: "without thinking, he rose out of himself" (127). This altered state of consciousness leads to ambivalent feelings of "exhilaration and terror" (129). He instinctively "turned his thoughts inwards, and went in" (145), an introspection leading to another epiphanic moment, a mythic melding of identity and freedom, as he ponders: "If I know who I am, I will know how to be free. Who am I?" (ibid.) Imaginary voices [a struggle between his *ego* and his *id*] first persist in the Neoplatonist maxim that "[d]eath is all there is. The rest is illusion. And, life is the biggest illusion of all" (155); then suggest that, through conscious free will, he can choose "[w]hether to wake up or remain asleep" (167). In an astute conjoining of the two initiation strands – Mirababa's and Karnak's – the voices convey what is meant by "upwaking" in a typically African aphorism: "You must realise what you are. The sea must find its source. The great in you must find the great that it comes from." (166) Illustrative of "upwaking", the neologism evoking an urgent wake-up call, Mirababa has a "sudden desire to see the stars" (170), to escape from life's prison. The eight-star Star Key implies meditation, a quest

for *inner consciousness*" (Case 40),[12] symbolized by water [reflecting the African evolutionary "sea" axiom]. A multiplicity of revelations accrues from his guided astral travelling, including reading "the great book of destiny" and witnessing a conflation of time, engendering "a state of bliss bordering on madness" (*TFA* 171). Thereafter, a deep sleep of oblivion prefigures his release from the sarcophagus onto the mountain top where he and the three bards witness the predawn glory of the world, and a feeling of "pure happiness … that radiated from everything" (182), followed by an "intolerable paradox, something like pain that was also like bliss, something that was like death but also like life" (183). It remains only for "the magical disc of the sun" (*conscious Intelligence*" [Case 42]) to reveal "the tiniest bit of itself in the east" (*TFA* 183).

The initiation all-but complete, the four descend the mountain for a ritual welcoming into the fold of bards at the shrine. The rite of passage, performed by the oldest bard, the third in the guise of Hierophant ("he wore a crown of pentagrams" [189]), symbolizes channelled grace and "all things that are righteous and sacred on the manifest side" (Waite 91). As "his destiny is not here" (*TFA* 189), Mirababa is instructed to memorize his Grandfather's "book of the original myth" that must then be buried deep beneath the earth for at least the next millennium (ibid.), a ritual adumbrating a new beginning.

This brings Mirababa to his fourth and final initiation location. Alexander Roob (2014: 30) avers that in Pythagorean law, "quadernity defines the spectrum of all earthly possibilities", as alluded to in the four-card Tarot spread. In a windowless room, lit by a mysterious light, the newest member of the brotherhood sees a pictorial representation of alchemical symbols on the ceiling, replicated on the floor: "a heptagon within a heptagon" [7-sided] with "the signs of the planets, the zodiac, the elements, and the magic alphabet" that "formed the twenty-two petals" of its central rose (193), alluding to the twenty-two Yodhs in the Tower Key. In a willing suspension of disbelief, the reader learns of the appearance of a heptagonal altar that moves on touch to reveal, in a white sarcophagus, "the miraculously preserved form of the great bard of the race", who had purportedly written "the original myth under divine inspiration" (ibid.). With Mirababa's instinctive recitation of words from the original myth, the walls transmute into seven, each in one of the seven colours [of the rainbow], illustrating the "conjuring power of the word" (194).[13]

As Mirababa completes his initiation, Karnak begins his.

Karnak's "Upwaking" into HOT Consciousness

Articulating the dual thrust of his works, Okri discloses the paradoxical forces of chaos and magic that underpin his writings: "entropy and the transformation" (Blignaut 2019: n.p.), typified by Karnak and Mirababa. In keeping with their correlative initiations, both have transformed mythological names. Suggestive of entropy, in Iranian mythology, *Kamak* was a vast bird,

"whose huge wings had covered the sky and thus prevented the fertilizing rain from reaching the earth" (Cotterell and Storm 2005:291).[14] Epitomizing transformation, Mirababa "was not the boy that he had been" having "seen something that he should not have seen" (118); and having discovered, "the conjuring power of the word" (194). Transliterated, *Kubaba* was an ancient love-goddess of Asia Minor (Dunwich 1997: 184).

Protagonist and his foil are Arthurian querents. "The Quester of the Grail legend, at the beginning of his wanderings, is often called a fool, a great fool, a guileless fool" (Mann 1953: 728). These Tarot sobriquets define both young questers, reflecting esoteric links between the two characters, and creating a wormhole between the two "time-space" dimensions of the novel. In contradistinction to the child, Mirababa, whose quest was bequeathed by his dying grandfather, that of the young lover, Karnak, accrues from the loss of the love of his life; and his initiation is conveyed largely through ten stream-of-consciousness interludes, giving access to the inner consciousness of his subjective life. His helpless paralysis (28) as Amalantis is taken away compels a search for answers. Of the Young Lovers Key, Waite (1993: 92, 95) says: "The figures suggest youth, virginity, innocence and love"; "She is the working of the Secret Law of Providence". Not only is this the 7th Tarot Key, but her providential nature is revealed obliquely. In the first interlude, Karnak reflects on Amalantis's "frightening beauty", her extraordinary compassion, and consciousness-raising experiences she generates for him. Suggestive of fourth dimension consciousness, the first reminiscence tells of a fleeting evening vision of frolicking horses on "the far fields at the edge of the city" (24), where Amalantis had led Karnak. Waite explains the Tarot allusion: "It is through her imputed lapse that man shall rise ultimately, and only by her can he complete himself" (100). This recollection presupposes Karnak's "completion" through Amalantis and foreshadows their reunion at the close of the novel.

The second stream-of-consciousness interlude is a meditation on love: Amalantis tells Karnak that "when you really love you know that you can never lose that person" (*TFA* 58); but Karnak needs external answers. In *The Symbolism of Tarot*, Ouspensky illuminates:

> "Yes", said the Voice, "this is true. The everlasting mistake with men is that they see the fall in love. But Love is not a fall, it is a soaring above an abyss. And the higher the flight, the more beautiful and alluring appears the earth. But that wisdom, which crawls on earth, advises belief in the earth and in the present. This is the Temptation. And the man and woman yielded to it. They dropped from the eternal realms and submitted to time and death. The balance was disturbed. The fairyland was closed upon them …." (1913: 41)

Karnak's initial awakening occurs after his failure to gain understanding in either church or art museums. He falls asleep in church and becomes disillusioned after encountering an Andy Warhol type, modern money artist "impregnable … in his fortress of fame" (78).

The third stream-of-consciousness interlude precedes Karnak's being taken by the curator, Rustlana, whose father had been taken away for preserving forbidden books holographically, into the concealed scriptorium of "the only bookshop left in the world" (94). His reminiscence is of Amalantis's love of children and her indictment of modern pedagogy, "designed to kill the souls of children, designed to keep them stupid before they had begun to live" (102). Indicative of Okri's structural artistry, the scriptorium has an altar bedecked with candles and a silver goblet, anticipating Mirababa's fourth initiation experience, as discussed. There is a sword on the wall and, in parallel, an elliptical word on the ceiling. These Tarot accoutrements "awoke in him a feeling of expansion" (103). Karnak's epiphany climaxes with the sight of three skeletal scribes: "the last of the writers … the last dreamers" (109), keepers, one assumes from their incessant recording of everything, of Akashic Records. Rustlana's mission is to preserve reading to honour her papa, "the last guardian of the tribe of writers" (110). She warns Karnak of the danger of questions.

Book 2 opens with reference to the mind games/manacles imposed by the Hierarchy: returning to the bookshop, Karnak finds only a flower shop selling potted flowers for the dead. Predictably, the fourth stream-of-consciousness interlude flows towards death. Karnak recollects Amalantis's nursing a dying stranger, arranging his funeral and thereafter visiting his grave. Karnak's memory of her linking death and love (the dead and the living needing our love) heralds his bewildered sense of having strayed into 'the land of the dead' (140) and his heightened awareness of a spate of suicides, unexplained grieving, rampant madness and cannibalism. These strengthen his quest (146), culminating in assisting in the release of a trapped woman in the wheelchair and getting her into a hospice for the dying, where the wards are filled with hilarity, pamphlets about "upwaking" and questions of imprisonment, inciting his intuition that "[t]he living are miserable but the dying are happy" (168). This insight provokes action. By threatening the flower-seller with a knife, Karnak learns that the Hierarchy moves into "houses taken over from trouble-makers" (172), exemplifying "mind-forg'd manacles". Before "he had looked without seeing"; now he "looked differently" (176).

Given that death and love are the two fundamental yet incomprehensible laws of existence (Ouspensky 1970: 154-155), the fifth episodic memory occurs in the Temple of Love. The young lovers' mystical celebration of the mysteries of love follows an argument over Karnak's naïve belief in what the authorities tell him; not fretting about his parents' disappearance; and remaining "asleep". Amalantis informs Karnak that, paradoxically, arguments between lovers lead to "self-knowledge" and "knowing others" (162), an "upwaking" consciousness.

These quasi-philosophical ponderings on the twin forces of love and death set the scene for Karnak's initiation proper spearheaded by his finding a rose in his hand and rushing after the girl with the enigmatic smile. She eludes Karnak, who sits on the roots of the tree and falls asleep, echoing Mirababa's *ukuthwasa*. When he awakens, Karnak is no longer under the tree but lying

on “a cubic stone” (188) in the darkness, in a state of consciousness bound up with knowledge received under conditions of expanded “receptivity” (Ouspensky 1970: 251), with the rose – symbol of love and life – still in his hand. The symbolism of the stone cube, duplicating Mirababa’s, is complicated. But, says Case, “we may say that STONE is an esoteric word representing Union, Life and Wisdom” (1989: 26), thus “upwakening”, moving beyond the physical to a conscious liberation. This implies that escape from “anomie”/“blindness” is not through organized religion but in looking beyond the visible to the invisible. Truth, conquering one’s fears, rests not in the seen, but in unseen potential.

Karnak’s initiation spans four closely linked episodes, paralleling the four locations of Mirababa’s. In his second-phase initiation, mirroring the format of Tarot readings, invisible voices in the noumenal world ask: “What do you seek?” informing Karnak that “[w]e can do nothing for you till you know what you are seeking here” (101). Without knowing what you seek, the cards cannot be read. Karnak’s “upwakening” emulates Mirababa’s initiation, but whereas Mirababa’s is esoteric, Karnak’s is psychological, an awakening consciousness perhaps parodying a secularization of mystical knowledge.

In the third-phase initiation, Karnak acknowledges his inner trauma: he “talked into the darkness. He spoke about the greatest loss in his life, how it happened one day right before his eyes, and how he had been powerless to do anything and how he despised himself for it” (105). Self-apprehension dawns in the fourth-stage initiation. Karnak intuits: “I know something is terribly wrong in this world, but I don’t know what it is” (200). Justifying my parallel initiations argument, occult voices entreat Karnak to “pay attention to everything” for “Your *initiation* will be concealed in seemingly ordinary things” and “If you sustain your course, if you keep your faith, then you might find, in one way or another, that which you have lost” (201; emphasis added). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James throws light on expanded consciousness, saying that “[m]ystical states give *knowledge* WHICH NOTHING ELSE CAN” giving “knowledge of the *real world* with all its signs and characteristics” (cited in Ouspensky 1970: 251; original emphases).

In an allusive literary heritage nugget, Karnak reincarnates Thomas Mann’s Hans Castorp, “a simple minded hero, in conflict between bourgeois decorum and macabre adventure” in *The Magic Mountain* ([1922]1953: 722). Both seek a holy Grail: what Mann defines as “the knowledge and the wisdom, the consecration, the highest reward for which not only the foolish hero but the book itself is seeking” (1953: 729). In Okri’s novel, Amalantis and Rustlana symbolize Karnak’s Grail guides. In the ten stream-of-consciousness interludes, Karnak’s reflections reveal Amalantis’s pivotal role in his gradual “upwaking” that climaxes in his [tenth] recollection: Amalantis’s taking him to the top of a high hill in the centre of the city [an a*xis mundi*] where she weeps for wasted potential: “‘This world could be so beautiful,’ she said.” (344) Early on, Karnak sensed Rustlana’s worldly knowledge (110) and,

ultimately, it is she who leads him and the awakening community through the dark night to the top of the mountain and then to the storming of the Hierarchy's prison Tower that has been struck by lightning. Both the World and the Tower are Major Tarot arcana.

The World Key is "the state of the soul in the consciousness of Divine Vision, reflected from the self-knowing spirit" (Waite 1978: 156), echoing Amalantis's claim for the benefits of arguing within a love relationship. The World Key, endorsed by the implied *axis mundi*, "represents also the perfection and end of the Cosmos, the secret that is within it, the rapture of the universe when it understands itself in God" (ibid.). Okri describes precisely the depicted bodies falling headlong out of the three burning windows (*TFA* 285). The Tower Key is "the ruin of the House of Life, when evil has prevailed therein … it is the rending of a House of Doctrine" (Waite 1978: 32). The falling figures "are the two modes of personal consciousness … self-consciousness and subconsciousness. The flash of *Super-consciousness* [sic] turns all our conceptions of personal consciousness upside down and utterly destroys these false conceptions". The Tower, with its twenty-two Yodhs [the tenth and smallest letter of the Hebrew "Aleph Bet" symbolizing humility],[15] replicates the 22 Major arcana or "*Awakening*" (Case 39-40). The interlaced HOT consciousness syntheses match the narrative strategy in *The Freedom Artist.*

The Significance of Karnak, Mirababa and the Tarot Tapestry

Paul Case explains that Tarot has two main purposes. Principally, "it preserves and transmits an *Esoteric teaching*"; secondly, "it evokes specific mystical, intellectual and emotional responses from the *Inner Consciousness*" (1989: 6). Karnak's initiation encapsulates the latter; Mirababa's is a simulacrum for esotericism.

Karnak's inner consciousness manifests when he and his community are pictured staring upward after he glimpses 'a word flashing across the sky' (*TFA* 261) from his window. Rushing out he finds himself outside Amalantis's widowed mother's blue house and is caught fleeing when her mother calls out to him. Once inside, they share their mutual loss and he confesses to having loved Amalantis "like life itself" (268). Citing a central Tarot Key [The Sun], he elaborates as he "struggles against unconsciousness" (269): "To me she was like the sun in the heavens. I am in darkness without her" (ibid.), indicating a poetics of dawning self-apprehension. Representing the *Life Power*, the sun is an objective correlative for "a *living conscious Intelligence*" (Case 42), evidenced in Amalantis's extraordinary love for Karnak, whom she believed was "a chariot rider [inner consciousness], a prince" (278), an Orpheus whose love would compel him to search the underworld for his Euridice. Revealing supernal foresight to her mother, she

had predicted that "when all the towers are tumbling down and everyone is losing it then [Karnak's] star will still be shining" (ibid.). Amalantis's prophecy prefigures their final reunion when "the love of his life" (346) emerges "thin and serene and beautiful" (ibid.) from the Tower prison.

The sixth and seventh stream-of-consciousness interludes highlight Amalantis's extraordinariness. Paralleling the eight-stars Star Key, the eighth is a flashback to her having secreted rose seeds in a pot in her cupboard, later inviting a shocked Karnak not only to "see" but also to "smell" (281) the resultant blooming roses, symbol of love and life. This heralds a veritable parade of the Tarot arcana in the last two Books in the novel. First, there are rumours of lightning striking the Tower with "members of the Hierarchy … falling upside down from the tower" (285) already mentioned – linked to the Devil Key: "the fall into the material and animal state", signifying "the destruction of false interpretation and the literal word made void" (Waite 153). This is followed by sightings of "a boy seen walking in the air … from the summit of the highest hill in the city" (*TFA* 285) – a mythic conjunction of Amalantis and Karnak's earlier climb to this same *axis mundi* and Mirababa, as the questing Fool, with a rose in his left hand. The next sighting is of "a boy driving a chariot … careering down the high street … pulled by two sphinxes" [the senses] (286). Case (31) explains that this Key represents the *Conquest of Illusion*, endorsed by the omniscient narrator's observation: "But for the first time in generations, like bats flitting at night, there were doubts in the secret chambers of the general mind" (*TFA* 287).

The ninth episodic memory recalls Amalantis's regular disappearances and Karnak's inability to understand the riddle of her going "Nowhere" (298) – an allusion to the meaning of "Utopia" [no place] – but returning with a special "glow" (299). Again, we witness the metaphysical tendency of blending contrary experiences; we are abruptly brought back to the horror of daily disappearances in a detailed description of the terror of being pursued by jackal-headed predators devouring their fellow citizens, coupled with rampant rumours of marvellous sightings of "the boy king" (286) [Mirababa]. The jackal is an ambiguous symbol: "an embodiment of evil" in Indian mythology, transformed into the "underworld deity, Anubis, charged with care of the dead and responsible for ushering souls to judgement" in Egyptian myth (Tresidder 2002: 10). This alludes to the Judgement Key (*TFA* 331), foreshadowing Rustlana, disguised in a jackal mask (317) to lead the community safely to the mountain top where they sight the Hermit (pp. 322-323). Embodying the consciousness of the "ONE who has attained *Enlightenment*" (Case 33), the Hermit carries "the golden six-ray light, symbolizing cosmic principles and laws" (ibid.). Significantly, Karnak "felt like those seekers of old who beheld, in a golden breath of a moment, the mysterious image of initiation" (*TFA* 323).

The dual connotations of the jackal symbol dovetail with Mirababa's transformations from Fool, to Charioteer, to Hanged Man (340) signifying "*Suspended Mind* … in which exalted mental sate the aspirant reaches the

Divine Consciousness of Pure Being" (Case 36). Mirababa is found in the Tower's dungeon, hanging upside down "with a roseate fire all around him shining through the prison" (*TFA* 341). All allusions conjoin to convey inner potential, the divine alchemical spark within. The intrusive authorial voice sums up the transliterations suggestive of our transformed identities, acknowledging the oneness of humanity: "There are moments in history that cannot be explained by the normal modes of explanation. They are causes of wonder and border on the miraculous" (330).

Conclusion

The intention of this article has been to reveal Okri's antidote to the proposition that the "normal" world is an asylum for mind control, coupled with violence. I posited that *The Freedom Artist* counteracts Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" in "London". The novel's "Coda" revises the prison myth declaring that "[i]n the new reality, all are born into a story. It is a story which everyone creates and which everyone lives, with darkness or with light, in freedom" (347). Okri exposes human precarity but proffers solace in a transcendent awareness of self, in heightened consciousness. His quest-legend uses Tarot myth as an analogue to support, explain or enhance meaning in *The Freedom Artist* that foregrounds the multifaceted complexity of human experience, building its ontology on lived life potentialities while highlighting human vulnerability. Okri combats the creation of our death-world not only through his belief in our ability to transcend the contemporary moment and go beyond the spectacle, but also by challenging the enslaved negation of lived life. In her study of Blake's prophetic books, Margaret Rudd writes of the import of the poet's vision, a vision that pertains to my reading of Okri's novel: "We are shown the way out of this nightmare world, not through being told to let go completely on the analyst's couch, but in an example of human courage and valiantly maintained *love* that seems to triumph like the dawn after seemingly endless night" (1956: 19).

Notes

1. In Hindu creation myth, there is a perpetual cycle of creation, destruction and renewal. One of three principal gods, Shiva's function as destroyer at the end of each age "is ultimately creative, clearing the way for a better creation" (Ions 1997: 28).

   In African cosmogony, horses symbolize the afterlife with it promise of new life.

   In the second stream-of-consciousness interlude, Amalantis equates "being ordinary" rather than beautiful, and loving simply "like a child" with "[s]omeone who wants this world to end" (58). Elsewhere, she talks of the birth of a new age evocative of Hindu mythology's belief that creation and

destruction occur repeatedly "in a cyclic pattern to which there is no end" (Ions 1997:178).

2. *Vala, or, The Four Zoas*; *Milton*; and *Jerusalem.*

3. Stanza 3 of "London" reads: "In every cry of every man,/ In every infant's cry of fear,/ On every voice, in every ban, / The mind-forg'd manacles I hear."

4. An echo perhaps of Blake's statement concerning the meaning of his prophetic books: "That which can be made explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care … The wisest of the Ancients considered what was not too explicit as the fittest for Instruction" (Rudd 1956: 51).

5. This aphorism is as potent as it is seemingly innocuous. "Anomie" is "a state of no moral or social principles in a person or in society" *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

6. P.D. Ouspensky (1970) invokes Plato's cave and his shadow watchers in explication of "the real" and the "really real":

   > Behold! Human beings living in a sort of underground den; they have been there from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained – the chains are arranged in such a manner as to prevent them from turning round their heads. At a distance above and behind them the light of a fire is blazing, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see … a low wall built along the way, like a screen which marionette players have before them, over which they show the puppets. Imagine men passing along the wall carrying vessels, which appear over the wall; … they see only their shadow, or the shadows of one another, when the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

   The extract proceeds to suggest listening to the echo in the cave as they converse. Once released, they would assume that the shadowed illusions were the real! ("The Dialogues of Plato" 1911: 341-3455).

7. Cf. The Quest for the Holy Grail

8. My claim for the undertow of Tarot mythology circumvents further justification of my reading of *The Freedom Artist*. Glenn Most defines myth as "a transmitted body of stories, often poetic and individual, always at least in part invented and usually localizable in a particular historical context, or … as *the mythic*, vanished luminous quality attributed to a lost people's religious sense, entirely unfree (… seen as the immediate expression of a whole people's identity, not just an individual's) and necessarily prehistoric (for otherwise it would seem locally conditioned and arbitrary)" (1999: 44),

   Ironically, by consensus, it is also a myth that 14th century Tarot mythology derived from Egypt.

9. Case (1989: 22) provides further insight into The Fool Key in association with the Hebrew letter Aleph (an ox):

   > Oxen symbolize the motive power in agriculture … Agriculture is the basic form of civilization. Thus the letter Aleph symbolized Cultural Power,

> Creative Energy, Life-Power, the vital principle of plants, animals, and Men which comes to us in physical form as the energy of the Sun.

Cf. Greek *Pnuema*, Sanskrit *Prana*, Latin *Spiritus.*

In *The Symbolism of the Tarot,* P. D. Ouspensky notes:

> The Tarot represents a summary of the Hermetic Sciences – the Qabalah, Alchemy, Astrology and magic with their different divisions. All these sciences really represent *one system* of a very broad and deep psychological investigation of the nature of man (1913: 10).

10. The number 22 is called the Master Number in numerology, which has an extraordinarily powerful vibration.

11. Cf. the four compass points; the four seasons; the four basic elements.

12. The seven smaller stars in the Star Key "refer to seven centers [sic] of force in the human organism, called *interior stars* in western occultism and Chakras by the Hindus"; "seven represents the end of a cycle and the beginning of the next" (Case 40-41; 45); cf. the seven planets of astrology.

13. A combination of the Mystic Rose symbolizing life and the numbers 7 and 22. See notes 10 and 12.

14. Indicative of blinkered thinking, Amalantis asks her star-crossed lover, Karnak, "Are you afraid of the truth too?" as he shuts the door quickly in response to her reckless question: "Who is the prisoner?" (18) Her instant arrest initiates his quest.

15. http://www.hebrew4chritains.com/Grammar/unit-one/Aleph-bet/Yod//yod.html (accessed 27 November 2019).

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