

# “CHILDREN” AND “ANIMALS”

## STRANGE STRANGERS IN REALITY AND LITERATURE

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This article examines the figure of the “stranger” in children’s literature with a focus on the story of *The Little Black Fish* written by the Persian writer Samad Behrangi. The story itself is an example of strangeness since its writer was one of those rare ones who was telling stories about the harsh situation of Iranian society to his child readers. This children’s story with animal characters is expressive of the character of the stranger in different ways. First of all, the “child” him/herself has always been seen as “other” or “stranger” in comparison to the mature members of human society. Children have always been regarded as strangers in the course of history. The only difference is about the way they were strange to adults in each era: what was immodest becomes innocent, and what was neglected becomes an object of amusement. Either this or that, a child is a stranger and an adult has a familiar face. On the other hand, when we have a *child animal* character in a story, this strangeness is emphasised because animals and children are both examples of strangers as they are considered to be inferior to man who has always been the centre of world history. In children’s books or generally in animal stories, animals are even strangers to themselves because they are mostly representatives of human behaviors and human lives rather than representing their own species. Secondly, in contrast to most definitions of the stranger, this story shows that a “stranger” doesn’t always have to be someone coming from outside of a special community. It also could

refer to some particular members of society who have been always within their community and not joining it by way of immigration or otherwise. A good example of this kind of “strangeness” in children’s literature could be this story where the protagonist is a “stranger” for his community in the sense that he is not understood by the other members of his own society.

*The Little Black Fish* (*Mahi Siah-e Kouchouloo*, 1968), a story Samad Behrangi wrote originally as a children’s story, became a political allegory once it was known as a story against the dominant government prior to the 1979 revolution. Niloofar Mahdian in her essay “Revolutionary Literature” indicates that “In the years of censorship when the growth of literature containing the real scenes of people’s life was almost impossible, Behrangi with the creation of *The Little Black Fish* became a leading figure for using symbolism in children’s literature who could express his radical thoughts without a direct encounter with the ruling system”.<sup>1</sup> The most important way in which this work has been read as a political allegory is that there is a protagonist here that rises against the power which limits the freedom and s/he may be successful or killed on their way to the freedom. Although the story is predominantly about freedom seeking, it also contains other symbolic elements: the old fish speaks to her 12,000 children and grandchildren, and describes the journey of a little black fish who was bored of the repetitive life in the river and wanted to go and discover the world which is beyond the river. Although the other fish including his mother think that he is wrong and they try to convince him that there is no other world than the river, the little black fish is so determined to go and he takes the way to the sea and goes through lots of dangers and adventures. Finally, he is caught by a pelican, and in the end, we won’t know if he will survive or not. As the old fish finishes the story, all 11999 fish go to sleep but one little red fish stays awake the whole night and thinks about the little black fish’s adventures. This kind of journey tale exists in different forms around the world, and it is mostly with the same standard motif as the one in folk-tales which is the motif of home/away/home. It is essential to see that Behrangi’s story is, thus, also a tale of a journey, although we can see that his approach to the story is not based on the common motif of home/away/home but the unusual motif of home/away/away. Behrangi makes key choices in picturing the hero as a stranger and a different person in order to best engage his target audience, the children.

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<sup>1</sup> Niloofar Mahdian. “Revolutionary Literature” [Adabiat-e-Enghelabi], *Journal of Children’s Literature [Pazhouheshnameye Koodakan va Nojavanan]*48 (2007): 74, 69-88

I will first consider the decisions that Behrangi made in making this child animal protagonist into a stranger; I will then consider the little black fish's encounter with other characters that troubles the binary distinction between "stranger" and "native" that occurs when strangeness is an issue in a story that thematises brotherhood and the struggle for freedom. Behrangi overlaps fish and snail and lizard in their mutual functioning as bridges between species and, at the same time, challenges the idea of the dangerousness of strangers, as the little black fish and other species take on same traits. Behrangi's strange characters not only share the same traits, but seek to repeat their strangeness by challenging what was originally normal, the kinship itself.

#### DERRIDA'S HOSTIPITALITY: HOSPITALITY AND HOSTILITY

Hospitality, according to Jacques Derrida, is a word which carries its own contradiction. It means that the guest is a welcomed stranger treated as a friend or ally, but the guest may also be a stranger treated as an enemy. Thus, the terms hospitality/hostility and friend/enemy seem to merge into one another. In other words, it is the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory but at the same time the host maintains his/her authority. It means that it is the host who defines the conditions and laws of hospitality, therefore there won't be any unconditional welcome. In this way, there are limitations to the situation of hospitality and the person's reactions to the rules set by the host will determine his identification as an enemy or a friend.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Little Black Fish*, we can perceive very well this condition of hostipitality in different situations of confronting the stranger. The little black fish is well hosted in his own society till he is not questioning the other fish's authority. But after he starts to question the laws of the hosts he is treated as an enemy. Where the little black fish asks "I want to know if life is simply for circling around in a small place until you become old and

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida. "Hostipitality", *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3 (2000): 4, 3-18.

nothing else, or is there another way to live in the world?"<sup>3 4</sup> evoking a particular disassociation between the little black fish and the river's folk, mother's answer appears to be "hostile" in denying any alternatives as she says: "My dear child, are you crazy? World! ... World! What is this other world! The world is right here where we are. Life is just as we have it..."<sup>5</sup> This condition of hostility appears again when the little black fish starts his journey and faces other fish communities. The hosts are not always totally welcoming and even if so, they keep a distance from this stranger. Behrangī narrates the journey of this little stranger from his own community to the other communities with a socialistic focus, which is of his own style, but for a child. We can see Behrangī's effort to bridge between the story world and his target audience's personal experiences, for example, by explaining in the story that a child's idea is usually ignored or denied by adults he puts the child character in the place of a stranger:

"I want to go see where the stream ends. You know, Mother, I've been wondering where the end of the stream is ... I haven't been able to think about anything else. I didn't sleep a wink all night. At last, I decided to go and find where the stream ends. I want to know what's happening in other places."

The mother laughed - "When I was a child, I used to think a lot like that. But, my dear, a stream has no beginning and no end. That's the way it is. The stream just flows and never goes anywhere."

"But mother dear, isn't it true that everything comes to an end? Nights end, days end, weeks, months, years ..."

"Forget this pretentious talk," interrupted the mother - "Let's go swimming. Now is the time to swim, not talk."<sup>6</sup>

While the tale is originally one of rebelling against authority, Behrangī also depicts the process in which the rebellious character becomes a stranger for other characters; however, he suggests some consolation later, as the exiled fish gains the company of other rebellious characters such as snail, lizard and other fish. What is most notable here is that the journey starts with the little black fish's rebellion against the society of normal

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from *The Little Black Fish* are taken from the English translation available on the Iran Chamber Society website at [http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/sbehrangi/works/the\\_little\\_black\\_fish.php#sthash.QuG9dPHI.dpuf](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/sbehrangi/works/the_little_black_fish.php#sthash.QuG9dPHI.dpuf) (16/3/2020)

<sup>4</sup> Samad Behrangī, *The Little Black Fish* (Tehran: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [Kānoon-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-e Koodakān va Nojavānān], 2017), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

fish. the very moment which makes the little black fish a stranger to the neighbors and even to his own mother. Behrangi's little fish is not the only stranger in the story but we also have another stranger character which is the snail; the one who told the little black fish about the sea. Let's keep in mind that when it comes to children and children's literature "stranger" is usually regarded as someone who is dangerous. The very first thing that parents teach their children about the encounter with stranger are these expressions: "Don't talk to strangers!", "Don't accept anything from strangers!". We also have this tradition of "stranger danger" awareness in children's literature. As an example, we can refer to the fairy tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" which is all about the horrible consequences of trusting strangers. Snails and fish also come together in Deborah Freedman's *The Story of Fish and Snail* (2013), as the snail accepts the fish's invitation to leave its tank and join him to explore other places. The snail in this story, also appears to develop a friendship with a creature of another species. The snail is not a stranger here, but in *The Little Black Fish* the friendship between the little black fish and the snail is strange and not acceptable for adults. The snail here is a real stranger both for his place as a different species and his revolutionary and different ideas. Therefore, the other fish use the strangeness of friendship between two different species as an excuse to avoid the strangeness of the snail's thoughts and ideas:

"Sister," said the neighbor to the little fish's mother, "do you remember that twisted-up snail?" "Yes, you're right," said the mother. "He used to push himself on my baby. God knows what I would do to him!"

"That's enough, Mother," said the little fish. "He was my friend."

"Friendship between a fish and a snail," said the mother, "I've never heard of such a thing!"

"And I've never heard of a fish and a snail being enemies," replied the little fish.

"But you all drowned the poor fellow."

"Let's not bring up the past," said the neighbor.

"You brought up the subject yourself," said the little fish.

"It served him right to be killed," said the mother. "Have you forgotten the things he used to say everywhere he went?"

"Then," said the little fish, "kill me too since I'm saying the very same things."<sup>7</sup>

The snail holds a central position in Behrangi's story. While the adult fish see the snail as a danger for the community which represents the stereotype figure of "stranger" in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

view point of adults, the killing of the snail can also be seen as a powerful metaphor for the cross-cultural narrative of ruling powers' control of strangers and the performance of governing them. Women have always been governed by men, children by adults, animals by humans, minorities by majorities and political opponents by governing power. The snail itself can be seen as a stranger who rebels against the governing power. Moreover, snails are traditionally seen as animals associated with slowness and inactivity while Behrangi's narrative depicts it as an active character who also encourages other animals such as the little black fish to move forward and explore the world. The most noticeable thing about the character of the snail is his absence in the story. Both his absence and the brevity of references to him in the story appear as signs of his strangeness, he is first killed for his talks of freedom and then becomes wholly disappeared for his strangeness from the whole story.

#### TRANSFORMING THE NATIVE INTO A STRANGER, AND VICE VERSA

Zygmunt Bauman's explanation of the "other" is that the notion of otherness is central to the way in which societies establish identity categories. He argues that identities are set up as dichotomies: abnormality is the other of the norm, woman the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, them the other of us, and so on. But seeing all these identities as dichotomies could be problematic. For example, the stranger is not necessarily the other of the native. As we mentioned before, the stranger may be a native who is a stranger for other natives. Here comes the feeling of being a stranger in one's own country, for example. As I suggested earlier, the stranger figure can be recognised in two ways: the stranger is a stranger when s/he enters a different society, and also a stranger is a stranger when s/he is excluded from his or her own society. Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish* starts with the second kind of strangeness when the little black fish is rejected by other fish in his own society and continues with the first kind of strangeness when the little black fish meets other communities during his journey. When the little black fish leaves the river to find the sea, he meets the tadpoles:

Thousands of tadpoles were wriggling in the water. They laughed when they saw the little black fish, "What a funny shape! What kind of creature are you?"  
The fish looked them over thoroughly and said, "Please don't insult me. My name is Little Black Fish. Tell me your names so that we'll get acquainted.

"We call one another tadpole," replied one of the tadpoles.

"We come from nobility," said another.

"You can't find anyone prettier than us in the whole world," said another.

"We aren't shapeless and ugly-faced like you," said another one.

The fish said, "I never imagined you would be so conceited. That's all right. I'll forgive you since you're speaking out of ignorance."

In one voice the tadpoles demanded, "Are you saying we're stupid?"

"If you weren't ignorant," replied the fish, "you'd know that there are many others in the world who are pleased with their appearances. You don't even have names of your own."

The tadpoles became very angry. But since they knew the little fish spoke truthfully, they changed their tone and said, "really, you're wasting words! We swim around the world every day from morning till evening, but except for ourselves and our father and mother, we see no one. Of course, there are tiny worms, but they don't count."<sup>8</sup>

Behrangi's representation of the little black fish's encounter with tadpoles as a stranger to their community reverses the understanding of events in this tale: where they proudly call themselves "tadpoles" in recognition of their nobility, the little black fish turns that praise into criticism, insulting them by saying: "You don't even have names of your own." (you are nothing but tadpoles!)

Behrangi's representations of different communities show the complexities of the stranger's reception as a reciprocal enemy/friend relation:

Later on, the fish came upon a school of fish. The little fish had not seen any other fish since leaving home. Several tiny fish surrounded Little Black Fish and said:

"You must be a stranger here!"

"Yes," responded the black fish, "I'm a stranger. I've come from far away."<sup>9</sup>

As we can see here, the little black fish is aware of his otherness and strangeness now and he accepts his place as an outsider of the tiny fish's community. The little black fish continues his journey and on the way he meets a school of fish, thousands and thousands of fish, and this time he introduces himself as a stranger:

"Friend," said the fish to one of them, "I'm a stranger. I've come from far away. Where is this place?"

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

The fish called his friends and said, "Look! Another ..." Then replied to the black fish, "Friend, welcome to the sea."

Another said, "All rivers and streams flow here, except some which flow into swamps." "You can join our group anytime you wish," said one of the fish.<sup>10</sup>

The overall effect of all these encounters for the little black fish is to identify himself as a stranger whether he is treated as an enemy or as a friend. We won't go very far if we call this story the story of a stranger as it begins with the adventures of the little black fish who is different from his society and he also cannot associate himself to the other societies and it also ends with the uprising of a new stranger who is the Little Red Fish:

Eleven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine little fish said goodnight and went to sleep. The grandmother fell asleep too. But try as she might, a little red fish couldn't get to sleep. All night long she thought about the sea...<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In *Fish is People*, Perry Nodelman is particularly criticising the picture books with fish characters, and he points to the damaging consequences of representing animal characters with human behaviors: "In encouraging young readers to think of these creatures as beings like themselves, do such images also encourage a lack of attention to the otherness of creatures of other species?"<sup>12</sup> *Fish* is a particularly humanised character in *The Little Black Fish* too as any other allegorical animal story. In the same way that writers face decisions of humanising and hold a particular notion of animals in mind for which they tailor their work, illustrators of animal stories bring significant notions of animals to their illustrations. Indeed, in our case of study, these two notions differentiate in a way that the illustrations don't have any item of human lives for fish unlike other fish stories in which fish are depicted with human-like faces, clothes and lifestyles. The content of the book however relates closely to the subject of humanised animals in allegorical animal stories in which animals are strangers to themselves because they are not representatives of their own species anymore. Children, like animals, are strangers in children's books too as they are always represented by adults (authors, illustrators, publishers, etc.).

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Perry Nodelman. "Fish is People", *Book bird 2* (2019): 13, 12-21



Most of the books written for children come from adult's imagination of how the child feels and thinks, although some of these imaginations may be close to the reality.

Behrangi's allegorical story elicits feelings of strangeness and freedom; the reader is invited to admire the little black fish's agility and freedom seeking, his ability to confront and overcome his strangeness. It is evident that this narrative allows greater freedom with the ending. The fact that we are able to recognise this story as the beginning of another story and not a recipe, and more specifically a stranger story rather than an animal story, is precisely because the *child animal* character here tries to free himself from any kind of representations enforced by others.

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