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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Is Geography Destiny? A Deleuzoguattarian Reading of *The Little Black Fish*

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| ABSTRACT

Samad Behrangī, who is known as one of the most significant revolutionary writers of modern literature in Iran, wrote *The Little Black Fish* in 1968. It is a world-famous children's story that has been translated into many languages. The story is considered to be a political allegory that traces the adventures of a little black fish that seeks liberty. The fish decides to leave his homeland in order to find an alternative geography that will bestow him freedom. However, the act of migration from a tiny pool to a vast sea is not an easy task. The fish faces many hardships, including his family's resistance and the various difficulties on his way. Samad Behrangī's story profoundly shows the road to freedom is full of obstacles. In this perspective, it is possible to argue that the fish's desire to reach the sea is a symbolic endeavor to create a new perception of a place that allows him to decentralize the sharp borders of his constructed identity. The journey provides the fish with an opportunity to interact with external milieus and to reinforce certain aspects of his life that help him to build a multidimensional identity. The fish does not fall into the stable and the assigned categories of individuality, but rather he is a multiple and always-in-process character. Within this framework, the fish's journey aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "becoming" process. Behrangī shows how the fish breaks away from the normative codes of his society and transforms into a boundless and free individual. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the multiplicity of becoming is always "dwelling within us" (1980, p.240). Therefore, as we see in the character of the fish, the process of becoming is a continual transformation, and it creates a permanent desire for change.

| KEYWORDS

Deleuze and Guattari, Samad Behrangī, *The Little Black Fish*, becoming

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### 1. Introduction

Samad Behrangī is one of the prolific writers of modern Iranian literature who was born in 1939 to a lower-class family in Tabriz and suspiciously drowned in the Aras river in 1967. As a leftist activist, a rural teacher with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature, and a keen social critic, Behrangī, through his works, criticizes the dominant power structure for the inequalities and injustices in society. Behrangī is well known for his children's stories, especially his prolific work, *The Little Black Fish* (1968). He also contributed to Iranian children's literature through other works like *Ulduz and the talking doll* (1967), *One Peach, A Thousand Peaches* (1968), and *24 Restless Hours* (1969). In *The Little Black Fish*, Behrangī inspires the readers to resist oppressive power relations by empowering themselves with the weapon of knowledge. He defies the form of ideology that attempts to subjugate people by practicing dishonest promises and hypocritical attitudes. Furthermore, he questions the abusive power structures which aim to silence people by spreading the culture of fear. The story is marked as a revolutionary work that encourages people to be courageous in the restricted environment of pre-revolutionary Iran. The tale begins when a grandmother fish has gathered with twelve thousand of her grandchildren to tell them the story of "The Little Black Fish" on the longest night of the year, which is winter solstice and refers to a famous Iranian cultural celebration that is called Yalda night<sup>1</sup>. The story primarily revolves around

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<sup>1</sup> December 21st or Yalda night is the longest night of the year that has a cultural significance for Iranian families. According to Persian mythology, the night signifies the birth of "Mitra," the goddess of light. In Iran, families come together with friends and relatives to celebrate the night by **Copyright:** © 2022 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

the continuous movements of the protagonist, the fish. Behrangi utilizes shifting places such as ponds, lakes, rivers and the sea to demonstrate the crucial role of space in the construction of resistance and transformation.

## 2. Becoming Revolutionary, Becoming Resistance

The initial step of the fish is to engage himself in the process of “becoming,” empowering him to subvert all the inflexible and static ideologies in his life. As far as the idea of becoming is considered, in Deleuzoguattarian perspective, while “being” is a static concept, becoming involves a process of endless fluidity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p.99). Early in the story, the reader is introduced to the fish that faces the objection of his mother and neighbors when he reveals his intention to leave his house to see where the stream ends and “what’s happening in the world” (Behrangi, 1978, p.2). The family and friends attempt to convince him that “there is no other world” and he should stay in the pond (Behrangi, 1978, p.4). In this vein, the fish’s mother and neighbors signify “sedentary” characters who occupy mainly hegemonic positions in every society. Conversely, “nomadic” individuals, like the fish, are characterized by mobility which facilitates the possibility of revolutionary acts. Nomadic individuals are the production of becoming process. As Deleuze and Guattari underline:

Becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone. Nor is it to proportion formal relations. Neither of these two figures of analogy is applicable to becoming: neither the imitation of a subject nor the proportionality of a form. Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfils, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire. (1980, p.272)

The fish’s decision to travel to the end of the stream is an example of “nomadic” desire, which is characterized by resistance to the channelled desire imposed by the environment. In his nomadic departure from the pond, the fish highlights the fact that the possibility for change only comes from the power of detachment from the pre-established and already defined framework of thought. Thus, the fish “does not just challenge oppressors; he also defies the everydayness and averageness of fellow ‘citizens’ in his community and throughout his saga” (Vahabzadeh, 2022, p.250). In Deleuzoguattarian terms, the fish generates a subject that is a “deterritorialized variable of the majority” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 292). Among all the population of the pond, the fish is the only candidate that wishes to reach the sea. This deterritorialization from the majority is what Deleuze and Guattari call a “molecular” identity. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish molar and molecular identities. Unlike molar identity, which is fixed and can be grasped within the current social formation, molecular identity is always in flux, refusing to follow fixed channels (1980, p.237).

As the fish continues his journey, he encounters the arrogant “tadpoles” that consider themselves the prettiest species in the world and insult the fish for being “shapeless and ugly-faced” (Behrangi, 1978, p.5). However, in response, the fish answers: “That’s all right. I’ll forgive you since you’re speaking out of ignorance.” (p.5). These tadpoles reside in the space of hegemony which is characterized by the “transcendent” ideology that is highly hierarchical and presents the state of being rather than becoming. However, the fish acts “immanently,”<sup>2</sup> a form of resistance which cannot be organized according to the existing higher principles. Deleuze and Guattari encourage an “immanent” relationship between all the entities in the world. The plane of immanence establishes an alternative possibility that is in contrast to the conventional concept of transcendence. Unlike the transcendence that is defined by a top to down philosophy of thought, immanence embodies a rhizomatic plane with the potential to generate creative concepts. In Deleuzoguattarian sense, a plane of immanence is defined as:

Univocality and composition, upon which everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance that are distinguished from one another only by their speed and that enter into this or that individuated assemblage depending on their connections, their relations of movement. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p.255)

For Deleuze and Guattari, nature is the “immanent plane” within which all living things have their own “compositions” or are “interconnected with other compositions” (1980, p.254). In this perspective, the fish’s reaction to the tadpoles’ disrespect is a clear example of immanent interaction that promotes harmonious co-existence in nature.

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eating nuts and fruits including pomegranate, watermelon and grapes. The red color of the fruits symbolizes health and abundance in winter. Another significant ritual of this night that is highlighted by Behrangi in this story is visiting elderlies and listening to their folktales and poetry readings.

<sup>2</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari’s co-authored book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) in which they define the plane of immanence as a counter-concept to transcendence. In the plane of immanence, there is no top-down hierarchical structure. Hence, in immanent philosophy, the concepts do not fall from outside rather they sprout from inside.

The presence of hegemonic figures is not limited to the tadpoles. On his way, the fish comes across a crab that is nice to him, but he sees the fish as prey and actually attempts to deceive him to eat. Crab's hypocrisy is precisely understandable through his lies and his violent attitude towards other creatures like frogs. Through the character of the crab, Behrangi exposes the reality and the depth of corruption in the power system that runs society with dishonesty and tricks. In the same vein, he underlines the function of society and the subjectified individuals in empowering hegemony. People in hegemonic societies submit to ruling codes, and by doing this, they allow the ruler to increase his domination. Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of a "nomadic war machine" that is a powerful assemblage against the "State apparatus." A nomadic war machine is a molecular system that operates against the molar mechanism of the dominant state structure. The nomadic identity has the potential to flee from the constructed transcendent schemas of State apparatus and, thus, create what Deleuze and Guattari call as nomadic space, which is filled with multiplicity and diversity (1980, p. 399). In Behrangi's story, the crab presents the state character whose aim is to conserve his power by treating the other animals in an abusive and hypocrite manner. With his revolutionary nomadic power, the fish escapes from the crab's deceitful plans.

Behrangi is optimistic in his attitude towards the oppressive forces of society and offers a way out by focusing on the ability of every individual to create changes through knowledge and commitment to humanitarian values. He presents the wise "lizard" and the kind "moon" that help the fish on his way to reach the sea. The lizard is a wise character that warns the fish about some dangerous species, including "the pelican", "the swordfish", and "the heron", and gives the fish a dagger to tear apart the pelican's pouch if he gets caught by him: "I'm going to give you a dagger so that if you get caught by the pelican, you can do just that" (Behrangi, 1978, p.5). In the Deleuzoguattarian perspective, unlike the pelican, the swordfish, and the heron that reside in "striated" space, the lizard belongs to "smooth" space. Emerging from the State and the nomad ideas, the striated space is homogeneous, and thus, it is filled with tyrannical practices; however, smooth space is full of diversity and plurality. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari maintain:

[t]he striated is that which intertwines fixed, and variable elements produces an order and succession of distinct forms  
[...] The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the production of properly rhythmic values. (1980, p. 478)

The lizard's function in the story resonates with the act of deterritorialization through which the fish becomes aware of the potential threats and risks. The fish understands the existence of the striated characters that could possibly close off the opportunities for his future change. As the journey progresses, the fish meets the moon and talks to her: "Hello, Little Black Fish. What brings you here? ... I'm traveling around the world" (Behrangi, 1978, p.9). The moon explains humans are going to land on the moon soon. However, the fish cannot believe in the human's ability to do so, but the moon replies although, "it's a difficult task", human beings can fulfill "whatever they want" (p.9). To put the character of the moon in the Deleuzoguattarian context, it can be argued that this character triggers the sense of "desire" that the fish already possesses to reach his goal. According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire is the core component of becoming. Unlike Lacan's definition of desire as an outcome of lack, Deleuze and Guattari claim that "desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object" (1980, p.28). Instead, it is an immanent force which activates the "process of production" (1980, pp. 170-171). In this perspective, the fish's desire to see the end of the stream facilitates the production of new possibilities for him and, at the same time, provides an opportunity for him to subvert the pervasive confinements of his environment.

The process of becoming takes on a different significance as the fish eventually reaches the end of stream, but without realizing it, he finds himself together with some tiny fish in the pelican's pouch. The pouch resembles a panopticon<sup>3</sup> where the prisoners, the black fish and the tiny fish, are under the constant surveillance of the pelican. Foucault believes that the aim of the panopticon is for "creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). The black and tiny fish will wait in the pouch until the pelican gets hungry and swallows all of them. Unlike the tiny fish who starts pleading the pelican to free them, the fish does not believe in the pelican's trustworthiness: "Cowards! exclaimed the little black fish, are you crying like this because you think this dishonest bird is merciful?" (Behrangi, 1978, p.10). Therefore, instead of waiting for his death to come, the fish makes a plan to create a destiny of his own. After a long argument, the fish persuades the tiny fish to follow his plan. They will lie to the pelican that they have throttled the fish, and meanwhile, he will tear apart his pouch with his dagger. As soon as they tell pelican the fish is dead, he swallows all the tiny fish, but the little fish manages to rip the pelican's pouch and escapes into water: "The tiny fish never had a chance. Quick as lightening, they passed through the pelican's throat and were gone. But, at that very instant, the black fish drew the dagger, split open the wall of the pouch with one blow and fled. The pelican cried out in pain and smashed his head on the water, but he could not follow after the little fish" (p.12). In Deleuzoguattarian sense, the little fish presents the characteristics of a "schizo" subject and all the tiny fish present "rational" subjects who are entrapped in the

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<sup>3</sup> In the late 18th century, the English social theorist, Jeremy Bentham introduced the idea of panoptic prison. The structure is a circular atrium in which the watchman can observe prisoners without being observed.

state of unproductivity. The schizo little fish depicts revolutionary traits in that he has the ability to comprehend his situation and transforms the existing threats into an opportunity that can lead to successful action. However, the rational tiny fish fail to realize the hostile intensity of their condition, and instead of claiming their own power, they naively rely on the external forces, the pelican, to give them the chance of living.

Ultimately, the fish finds himself in the sea, the utopia that he has dreamt of it all the way. The fish's perception of utopia is different from the common understanding of the utopian places that denote a place of happiness and well-being, but instead, in his view, happiness comes from "the free expression of man's personality and must not be sacrificed to an arbitrary moral code or to the interests of the state" (Berneri, 1950, p.2). In this vein, although the little fish is aware of the dangers of living in the sea, he is ready to welcome any challenge that would bring him freedom. As he states: "death could come upon me very easily now. But as long as I'm able to live, I shouldn't go out to meet death. Of course, if someday I should be forced to face death-as, I shall-it doesn't matter. What does matter is the influence that my life or death will have on the lives of others" (Behrangi, 1978, pp.12-13). Therefore, within the nomadic frame of thought, the fish defies any type of utopia that "does not allow its citizens to fight or even to dream of a better utopia" (Berneri, 1950, p.7). In this perspective, the fish achieves the ultimate state of nomadic becoming insofar as he welcomes any dangers and embraces the possible death instead of subjugating himself to the perfection of utopia.

In the concluding parts of the story, the fish suddenly finds himself caught in the beak of the heron. Using his wisdom, he convinces the heron that his body becomes poisonous after death, so it is better for the heron to eat him alive: "I know you want to take me to your children, said the fish, but by the time we reach land, I'll be dead, and my body will become a sack full of poison. Why don't you have pity for your children?" (Behrangi, 1978, p.13). As soon as the persuaded heron opens his, the fish jumps into the water. But the heron catches him again and, this time, swallows the fish immediately. The fish finds himself with a crying tiny fish in a dark place, in the heron's stomach. He soon makes a plan and explains to the tiny fish that he is going to kill the heron by tearing apart his stomach to keep all the fish safe, but first, the tiny fish should jump out of his mouth to allow him to focus on his plan. The fish moves back and forth in the heron's stomach to make him laugh. As soon as he laughs, the tiny fish jumps out into the sea. After a while, the heron falls into the sea and dies, but the tiny fish cannot see the black fish: "there was no sign of Little Black Fish, and since that time, nothing has been heard." (Behrangi, 1978 p.13). The fish's courage to kill the heron depicts his resistance as he sees no choice other than removing the violent source of power. On the other hand, through saving the tiny fish, the little fish assigns him the role of a witness that as a survivor of a historical fight between the powerful heron and the Little Black Fish, will recount the unfathomable moment of victory in his testimony to everyone and probably to the next generations. Behrangi uses an open ending form; the little fish disappears to inspire the readers to engage in the eternal movement of becoming and being a part of change in their society. He highlights the significance of searching for knowledge and being brave to be able to detach from the confinements of authoritarian systems.

At the end of the story, the grandmother says goodnight to her twelve thousand grandchildren who were listening to the story of Little Black Fish. However, "eleven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine little fish ... went to sleep", but one "little red fish" cannot sleep as she was thinking of the sea (Behrangi, 1978, p.14). Behrangi offers a bright vision for the future with the symbolic presence of a little red fish who strives to reach the sea, a utopic place for freedom. Thus, Behrangi's story opens up spaces for life, for perpetual movement, and for creating revolutionary thoughts that would demolish all totalitarian systems. Behrangi profoundly shows that the Little Black Fish's death is not the termination of his life but, rather, a potentially productive inspiration for creating the new. The existence of the little red fish who is dreaming of the sea is a trigger for a new becoming process, a never-ending flow for a new, never before seen, and revolutionary space.

### 3. Conclusion

By pursuing a path of liberty, the little fish involves in the process of becoming revolutionary, which is an act of resistance to state thought<sup>4</sup>. He depicts his resistance through movements and actions. His nomadic journey from the pond to the sea and his fights against the pelican and the heron signify the acts of deterritorialization that provide the possibility for creating an alternative life. Behrangi underlines the fact that freedom is a part of happiness, and acquiring it may cost your life. However, the fear of death should not be an obstacle to seeking to develop new spaces for life.

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<sup>4</sup> The form of thought characterized by normative codes to achieve the levels of surveillance and control.

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