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Political and Social Features of the Allegorical Short Story *Little Black Fish* Written by Iranian Writer, Samad Behrangi

Azam Jahangiri

English Language and Literature, Department of Humanities, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran
E-mail: minajahangiri@gmail.com

Abstract

Allegory is a device in which characters or events represent or symbolize ideas and concepts. Allegory has been used widely throughout the history of literature, and in all forms of artwork. A reason for this is that allegory has an immense power of illustrating complex ideas and concepts in a digestible, concrete way. Therefore, in allegory a message is communicated by means of symbolic figures, actions or symbolic representation. One of the contemporary Iranian authors who wrote stories benefited allegorical structure was Samad Behrangi. Although his stories seemingly suit for children, they are in fact deep in thematic meaning in a sense that makes them interesting for adults. As a writer sensitive to social, political and cultural situations, he used animals as the characters of some stories. One of the most eminent short stories written by him is Little Black Fish. This article attempted to demonstrate that this short story was a social and political allegory by focusing on its potential allegorical features.

Keywords: *Allegory, Extended metaphor, implied layer, Littlle Black Fish, Sammad Behrangi, Surface layer.*

1 Introduction

As a literary device, an allegory in its most general sense is an extended metaphor. First attested in English 1382, the word allegory comes from Latin allegoria, the latinisation of the allegoria, "veiled language, figurative Allegory" is generally treated as a figure of rhetoric; a rhetorical allegory is a demonstrative form of

representation conveying meaning other than the words that are spoken. As a literary means, allegory intensifies the effect of meaning conveyed on the reader (Liddell et al., 1940).

Plato wrote an allegory called "The Cave Allegory", and as literary allegories go, possibly none have been more influential on Western philosophy. A group of men are chained up in a cave, facing the wall, unable to turn around and look behind them. Behind them, in the middle of the cave, is a roaring fire, and when things move in front of the fire shadows are projected onto the wall in front of their faces, and the men see these shadows, but, ignorant as they are, take the shadows for reality, and go about their lives in a fool's paradise. But one day, one of the men frees himself from his chains, and sees that the shadows are not real but are only substanceless representations of the real things. The cave is ignorance, the shadows are the world that "ordinary men" perceive, and the free-man is the philosopher who has found true knowledge by seeing the fire and by stepping into the light outside (Watt, 1997: xiv–xvi). Plato has used allegory to illustrate a very complex philosophical idea. All one needs to do is take one more step, and this allegory becomes an explanation of how religions helped people understand life and the afterlife, and such ideas that dominated Western thinking for over a thousand years. Evidently, when done properly allegory is a very powerful tool.

2 Statement of the Problem

Literature is one of many discourses which exist in human life. Other discourses can be mentioned as history, politics, culture and other social forces. These discourses have interaction with on another and influence on each other. They give shape to human beings' understanding of the concept of reality, truth, judgment and other crucial abstract terms dominated in human's life. Sensitive people like authors are affected more drastically by social and political uproars, injustice, and turmoil (Foucault, 1970). Although social and political coerce imposed on people especially author and artist for being more decisive and protestant people is more, some of the find artistic ways to hide their meaning under the surface and lead the readers to use potential implications while reading a literary text. One of the most useful literary means used by writers to hide their meaning is allegory. Allegory is a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. The principal technique of allegory is personification, whereby abstract qualities are given human shape- as in public statues of Liberty or Justice. An allegory may be conceived as a metaphor that is extended into a structured system. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale. This article tries to

demonstrate some of the literary devices used in this short story that make it a social and political allegory.

3 Research Questions

- Is little Black Fish an allegorical short story?
- What are the building blocks that help making Little Black fish an allegory?
- What political and social implications can be traced down into the implied layer of Little Black fish as an allegory?

4 Significance of the Study

Behrangi, in his home country is a national phenomenon and is affectionately and popularly known as “Moalleme todeha”- the teacher of the masses. In literary circles, he is recognized and honored as the Maxim Gorky of Iran. On the international level he is recognized in many countries for his story the ***Little Black Fish***. The awards were given to this story can be mentioned as: Hans Christian Andersen award for illustrations by Farshid Mesghali (1974), First Graphic Prize, Sixth International Children Books’ Fair in Bologna for illustrations by Farshid Mesghali (1968) and Honorary Diploma, Bratislava Biannual, Czechoslovakia, for illustrations by Farshid Mesghali (1968). Behrangi's works have been translated and distributed in many languages.

Samad Behrangi filled his writings with hope, sensitivity and passion. Using everyday familiar characters to portray stories with dialogue imbued with truths, sensibilities and wisdom that only the down trodden can utter. He expressed his passion for the people and the heroic characters that fight for justice. In fact, he created stories in which the readers seldom see themselves apart from the stories' suffocated environment characterized by their high discrimination. In this regard, he had no choice except for forming stories to impose the class struggle and palpitation. Scorning with deep hatred the exploiters and their injustice in his works, he never neglected the possible opportunities to create vicissitude in hope to develop the realization of social justice. His heroes are active agents in bringing awareness to the masses. In addition to posing political and social injustice, *The little Black Fish*'s inquires for understanding the social situation begot a story questioning the accepted cultural traditions of the community, too. Although Behrangi had a short life but the wealth of writings he left behind is read, studied and discussed more today than ever before. His children's stories rank amongst the best of children's literature.

These stories are read and re-read to children every night, stirring their imagination, informing them of the realities of life, strengthening their faith in a

brighter future and cultivating humanity, passion and affection for good and lightness against evil and darkness.
Besides his children's stories, Behranghi wrote many significant essays on history, education and social criticism. *Analysis of problems of education in Iran* is a collection of articles on education published as a book. His other articles and essays have been also published as a collection. He also tried tirelessly to gather the oral history of people of Azarbaijan. These are published in three volumes and are known as *Notes on Folklore*.
Samad also translated works of many contemporary persian speaking poets into Azeri language, demonstrating a rare command of his mother tongue. The language of Azeri was banned from education and use in publications during the rule of the Shah and continues to be denied to its people by the present rulers of Iran. Azeri's constitute a nation of about 26 million in Iran.
All of the above-mentioned reasons emphasize on the importance of focusing more deeply on different aspect of his work.

5 Historical Background

In classical literature two of the best-known allegories are the cave in Plato's *Republic* (Book VII) and the story of the stomach and its members in the speech of Menenius Agrippa (Livy ii. 32). In Late Antiquity Martianus Capella organized all the information a fifth-century upper-class male needed to know into an allegory of the wedding of Mercury and *Philologia*, with the seven liberal arts as guests; Capella's allegory was widely read through the Middle Ages(Henry George Liddell et al.,1940).
Other early allegories are found in the Hebrew Bible, for instance "When Pharaoh in the Bible, has a dream in which seven fat kine are devoured by seven lean kine, the story does not really become significant until Joseph interprets its allegorical meaning."(Perrine, 1992:636)
Medieval thinking accepted allegory as having a reality underlying any rhetorical or fictional uses. The allegory was as true as the facts of surface appearances. Allegory is less popular in modern literature than it was in medieval and renaissance writing. Langland's dream-vision, *Piers Plowman*, or Bunyan's prose-work, *The Pilgrim's Progress* are all examples of allegory.
Since meaningful stories are nearly always applicable to larger issues, allegories may be read into many stories, sometimes distorting their author's overt meaning. For instance, many people have suggested that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for the World Wars, in spite of J. R. R. Tolkien's emphatic statement in the introduction to the second edition, "It is neither allegorical nor topical.... I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence." Where some requirements of "realism", in its flexible meanings, are set aside, allegory can come more strongly

to the surface. Emerson has stated that "good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories."(qtd. Horne, 1973:17)
Northrop Frye discussed what he termed a "continuum of allegory," ranging from what he termed the "naive allegory" of *The Faerie Queene*, to the more private allegories of modern paradox literature. In this perspective, the characters in a "naive" allegory are not fully three-dimensional, for each aspect of their individual personalities and the events that befall them embodies some moral quality or other abstraction; the allegory has been selected first, and the details merely flesh it out.
Two of the most famous allegories of the twentieth centuries are *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding dealing with metamorphosis and transformation in the human nature and the other is *Animal Farm* by George Orwell that is a political allegory.

6 Methodology

An extended metaphor in which a person, abstract idea, or event stands for itself and for something else. "Allegory is that has a second meaning beneath the surface one. Although the surface story or description may have its own interest, the author's major interest is in the ulterior meaning."(Perrine, 1992:636) It is a narrative or description usually involved with moral or spiritual concepts which are more significant than the actual narrative. Allegory is a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. "It is distinguished from metaphor by being longer sustained and more fully carried out in its details. It is distinguished from analogy by the fact that the latter appeals to reason, and the former to the imagination. Fables and parables are short allegories with one moral"(Sokhanvar, 1996: 68). The principal technique of allegory is personification, whereby abstract qualities are given human shape—as in public statues of Liberty or Justice. An allegory may be conceived as a metaphor that is extended into a structured system. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale: each character and episode in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), for example, embodies an idea within a pre-existing Puritan doctrine of salvation. Allegorical thinking permeated the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, flourishing in the morality plays and in the dream visions of Dante and Langland. Some later allegorists like Dryden and Orwell used allegory as a method of satire; their hidden meanings are political rather than religious. In the medieval discipline of biblical exegesis, allegory became an important method of interpretation, a habit of seeking correspondences between different realms of meaning (e.g. physical and spiritual) or between the Old Testament and the New (see typology). It can be argued that modern critical interpretation continues this allegorizing tradition. See also anagogical, emblem,

exemplum, fable, parable, and symbol. For a fuller account, consult Angus Fletcher, *Allegory* (1964).
One of the most famous allegories is Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which the animal revolution on the farm is an allegorical critique of the political situations of capitalism and communism.
It is a narrative that serves as an extended metaphor. Allegories are written in the form of fables, parables, poems, stories, and almost any other style or genre. The main purpose of an allegory is to tell a story that has characters, a setting, as well as other types of symbols that have both literal and figurative meanings.

7 Samad Behrangi (Life and Literary Works)

Samad Behrangi (June 24, 1939 - August 31, 1967) was an Iranian teacher, social critic, folklorist, translator, and short story writer of Azeri extraction. He is famous for his children's book, *The Little Black Fish*. He was born in Tabriz to a lower-class Azerbaijani family. He finished elementary school and three years of secondary school before enrolling in a teacher training school, finishing the program in 1957. In the next eleven years, while teaching Persian in rural Azerbaijani schools, he attained a B.A. degree in English from Tabriz University (Michael Hillmann).
Apart from Children's Stories, he wrote many pedagogical essays and collected and published several samples of oral Azerbaijani literature. His folklore studies had usually been done with the help of his colleague Behrooz Dehghani, who helped publish some of Behrangi's works after his early death. Behrangi also had a few Azerbaijani translations from Persian poems by Ahmad Shamlou, Forough Farrokhzad, and Mehdi Akhavan. Some of his works can be mentioned as; *The Little Black Fish*, *Investigations into the Educational Problems of Iran*, *Oldooz and the talking doll*, *Oldooz and the crows*, *Talkhoon*, *one peach and 1000 peach*, 24 hours, in Sleep and Awakening, *The Myth of Affection*, *Koroglu and the Bold Hamzeh*, *The Beetroot Seller Boy*.
Behrangi drowned in the Aras river and his death was blamed on the Pahlavi regime(Iran Chamber Society).

8 Summary of *The Little Black Fish*

The Little Black Fish is a well known children's book written by Samad Behrangi. The story is told through the voice of an old fish speaking to her 12,000 children and grandchildren. She describes the journey of a small black fish that leaves the safety of the local stream to venture into the world. The path of the little fish leads down a waterfall and along the length of the river to the sea. Along the way the fish meets several interesting characters, including a helpful lizard and the dreaded pelican, swordfish and heron. With both wisdom and courage, the fish

travels far indeed, and the tale ends with the little black fish as an example for others.

9 Discussion and Result

The Little Black Fish is assumed as an allegorical story. It has two levels, one is the world of stream, lake, sea, sea animals, fish and the other that is the correspondent layer deals with Iran's small cities, Tehran, Iran, the author himself in one sense or in a more general sense a representative of the revolutionists who bear a widespread range of changes in their mind, the one or ones that dare not to be conformist to the dominant ideology of the ruling class and undergo dangerous consequences of an adventure to knowledge by leaving the realm of ignorance, negligence and oppression.

From another view point, The *Little Black Fish* can be considered as the representative of young persons resisting against old social and cultural customs and traditional controversies that stands rigidly against changes in be half of creating more improved and liberalistic condition. In this case swordfish, Pelican, and heron symbolize the ruling power, oppressors, and brutal forces that swallow all the energy and capabilities of the multitudes through imposing coarse living situations by controlling their body and mind by their power and ideology regardless of their wants, needs, and beliefs.

One delicate point is to focus on the nature of the authors and artist rule in a society. At the beginning of this story 12000 little fish are listening to their grandmother's story. These 12000 fish all belong to the same generation; though, what is astonishing is that at the very end of the story just one of them stays awake all night and can't sleep since he is thinking to *The Little Black Fish* and the dream of reaching to the sea. This Little fish stands for the idealist nature of the authors and artist, the small but resistant group with their differences to ignorant multitude, although small in number can have hazardous and enduring effect in creating social metamorphosis through not to be deceived by the ruling class deceptions.

To answer the article's second question, it should be noticed that this story has benefited two layers of meaning, each of which is totally meaningful by itself. The meaning of the surface level of this allegorical work is fortified by using simple dictions understandable for all social strata, concrete images, proverbs, similes, metaphorical expressions, satirical statement, conversational tone and symbolism in using the words like cloud, moon, darkness, stream versus sea and so forth. Such literary devices, though belong to the surface layer have an intense effect on the deep layer to create its corresponding meaning. Some of them are as follow:

- Darkness represents the gloomy atmosphere of the society of pre-revolution Iran. "The night became dark again, and the black fish

was alone. The fish looked at the darkness in surprise and amazement for several seconds…" (*The Little Black Fish*)

- Moon symbolizes justice, liberty, equality, peace, welfare, knowledge, light, social prosperity and so on. "I'd like to stay with you till morning," said the moon, "but a big black cloud is coming toward me to block out my light." "Beautiful moon! I like your light so much. I wish you'd always shine on me." (ibid)

- In this way, clouds that hide the moon demonstrate not still gained aims and temporally social victories that still is not strong enough to dominate. "I'd like to stay with you till morning," said the moon, "but a big black cloud is coming toward me to block out my light."(ibid)

- Swordfish, pelican, and heron represent ruling class and powers strong enough to impose their force by their right of control and their dominant ideology.
- Lizard that gives the black fish an instrument to conquer with his enemy stand for non conformist powers that provide revolutionist, and fighters with outfits in their movement. "

> Then the lizard crawled into a crack in the rock and returned wit a very sharp dagger. The little fish took the dagger and said:
> "Dear lizard, you are so kind! I don't know how to thank you."
> "It's not necessary to thank me, my dear. I have many of these daggers. When I have nothing to do, I sit down and make daggers from blades of grass and give them to smart fish like you."
> "What?" asked the fish "Have other fish passed here before me?"
> "Many have passed by," the lizard replied. "They've formed themselves into a school and they give the fisherman a hard time."(ibid)

- Sea can be considered as the symbol of a liberal society with unlimited view points that all citizen regardless of their cultural, religious and racial differences can live freely in it.
- Grandmother stands for the memory of generations that recount history for the next generations and;
- The red fish at the end of the story symbolizes the authors, artists, and probable leaders that bears and lives among multitudes with a potential power to bring changes. "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 ....."(ibid). These mentioned symbolic and literal figures fortifies have corresponding effect on the deep layer in the same way as they affect on the surface layer.

Answering the third research question, one can notice that using non-human character speaking about elevated goals and thought on the one hand and obstacles imposed by family, relatives, friends, and groups in which one is living foster this idea that this story tries to convey whatever is not pleasant to the doctrine and discipline of the ruling class and dominant ideology. Being in the dark and limited surrounding and tendency top see moon and moon light helps to create depressed social and political conditions. And finally, the political and social implications embedded in the implied or deep layer of this allegory can be best suited to the suffocated situations of Iran's pre-revolution 1978 that was an atmosphere of subjection and fear and.

10 Conclusion

It can be concluded that literary authors apply different literary devices to gain their aim in achieving their intended aims. Some of these devices subtly hide the meaning beneath the surface. Among such devices is allegory that is an exposition or figurative representation of a subject that in addition to its literal meaning has an ulterior level of meaning not overtly mentioned or which purport to have a different or separate meaning other than that which is apparent. Especially in the case of political and social matters that impose different kinds of restraints on the authors, there is a tendency to conceal meaning rather than reveal them. In the case of *The Little Black Fish*, too, the author applied such literal strategy to disguise such matters under the mask of allegory. It is worth mentioning that the reader is gratified both by the artistic capabilities of the two levels and by their interesting interrelatedness.

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