

“Rebellious bodies: their destruction, and the influence of their lives and deaths”

Antonis Danos

“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...”

... ..

“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.” ...

“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.”

... ..

“Strangle that meddlesome fish, and then you’ll get your freedom.”

... ..

Calm and happy, the fish was swimming on the surface of the sea and thinking, ***“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...”***

[Excerpts from, Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish*. English translation copyright © 2001-1010 Iran Chamber Society www.iranchamber.com]

- They’re scared, man.
- They’re not scared of you. They’re scared of what you represent to them.
- Hey man, all we represent to them is somebody who needs a haircut.
- Oh, no. What you represent to them...is freedom.
- What the hell it’s wrong with freedom man, that’s what it’s all about.
- Oh yeah, that’s right. That’s what it’s all about. But talking about it and being it...that’s two different things. [...] **Don’t ever tell anybody that they’re not free, because they’re gonna get real busy...killing and maiming to prove to you that they are.** They’re going to talk to you and talk to you...about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it’s going to scare them.
- Well, it don’t make them running scared. No, **it makes them dangerous.**

[From the film *Easy Rider* [1969], written by Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper and Terry Southern]

Following the scene of the above dialogue in the 1969 US film *Easy Rider*, George, one of the characters engaged in it, and one of the three protagonists, is murdered by the people who got “busy...killing and maiming” in order to destroy the different individual, whose very existence exposed their own lack of freedom. By the end of the film, the other two protagonists, Wyatt and Billy, are also murdered.

In Samad Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish*, written only a year earlier (1968), the little fish-central character of the story, comes against frustration, outrage and hostility by her mother, relatives and other members of her little community, when she expresses the desire to leave the small pool where she has been living, in order to explore what is beyond it. As the argument between her and the other fishes develops, we learn that they killed a snail, who had befriended the little black fish and had told her of a world beyond their own. Unlike the tragic fate of the characters in *Easy Rider*, the little black fish succeeds in surpassing a series of obstacles in her journey onto the greater world – we are only left uncertain as to her eventual fate. She manages to kill the heron that has captured her and another tiny fish, thus saving the latter's life. In the tale, that tiny fish is now an old one, recounting the story of the little black fish to her 12000 children and grandchildren. We never learn if the little black fish managed to escape as well, but after all, what matters is the influence that her life and death “will have on the life of others...”

Indeed, despite Behrangi's untimely (and suspect) death in 1968, at the young age of 29, his work with Azeri folktales, his essays on education, and especially, his socially and politically minded children stories – most of which were published posthumously – have been highly influential among other writers in Iran, and have assured him acclaim and popularity in various countries of the Middle East, but also internationally.

Beyond the particular ideological structures of *Easy Rider* and *The Little Black Fish*, a common image that arises out of both is that of the individual who detaches oneself from a communal identity, ideology or way of life, and who wishes to establish an identity for oneself – not so much as a (another) well-defined persona, as much as one that refuses to be defined in any certain way. It is the image of the free-roaming, free-spirit individual, who wishes to detach oneself from collective bonds – whether filiation, communal, “ethnic” or national.

The process of such a detachment, however, is not an easy one – not only on the level of the very individual’s struggle to free oneself from deeply engrained beliefs (due to family upbringing, education, and daily reinforcement of collectiveness notions). What is of greater urgency – and of relevance to both the film and the literary piece, above – is the refusal of the community to allow the individual to pursue this process of differentiation. The group reacts against what it perceives to be a threat to its norms, and to the possible unmasking of collective fears and of their lack of freedom. The reaction is often in the form of physical violence: in *Easy Rider* George, Wyatt and Billy are killed; the little black fish finds herself physically threatened by her neighbours [“let’s do to the little fish what we did to the old snail before it gets into trouble”], only to be rescued by some of her friends that carry her away, but do not dare to follow her on the great journey.

However, more common and more brutal than the collective, lynching-mob type violence against the non-conformist member, is the violence by the forces exercising control over the society. It is directed against whoever threatens to expose the mechanisms of control, and the corruption of those in power. The destruction of the rebellious body aims at silencing its voice and at killing its spirit. Italian film director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini was murdered by the political and religious establishment, for constantly

exposing its hypocrisy, corruption and connections to organised crime. Samad Behrangi's highly suspicious death, during the Shah's rule in Iran, most possibly aimed at silencing his harsh criticism of the regime. The State's violence is, of course, 'blind': it does not 'see' that corporeal death does not entail silence – rather, the contrary. Pasolini's death continues to signify the constant threat of official authority's lurking fascism, while his films and writings speak as loud as ever! Samad Behrangi's ideals, theories and texts continue to inspire and influence the actions and lives of many. Indeed, what ultimately does matter is the influence that their lives and deaths have had on our lives...

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