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# A Study on Surrealism in the Short Story *Oldooz and the Crows* Written by Iranian Writer Samad Behrangi

Aazam Jahangiri

English Literature, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran.

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### ABSTRACT

This study attempts to analyze Surrealism in *Oldooz and the Crows*, a short story written by the Iranian author Samad Behrangi. Surrealism is a cultural movement founded in 1920s by the French poet and critic Andre Breton. The surrealists favored in the function of the world of unconscious mind in integrating fancies and dreams to the phenomenal world in order to elaborate a higher reality. They also were interested in Freud's theories about unconscious mind and the power of free imagination especially in Children. Moreover, they insisted on the automatic writing avoiding regular artistic conventions and restrictive rule. In this regard, the researcher tries to discuss the imaginative freedom and childhood dreams propounded in Behrangi's short story *Oldooz and the Crows* to consider whether this literary work can be considered as a surrealist work or not.

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### Introduction

The word Surrealism was coined by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire and benefitted by the French poet and critic Andre Breton in 1920s, but the origin of Surrealism traced back to the French poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and to the Italian painter, Giorgio de Chirico. According to Breton in his Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, Surrealism is defined as follows:

Surrealism. Noun. Pure psychic automatism by which one tries to express verbally, in writing, or by any other method, the actual process of thinking. Thought-dictation without any control exercised by reason, beyond any aesthetic or ethical consideration.

Encyclopedia. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain heretofore neglected forms of associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the free-wheeling play of thought. It wants to bring about the ultimate destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and put itself in their place in order to solve the primary problems of life (qtd. Shneede 1973, 21).

Balakian states that Surrealism is originally conceived as a literary movement. The Surrealists proposed exploring the unconscious via the written or spoken words. By systematically violating linguistic rules, they tried to increase our ability to describe irrational experiences and illogical events. By approximating language to the edge of intelligibility, the Surrealists created a strong instrument for exploring the unconscious. They no longer considered words as passive objects but rather as autonomous entities. Breton proclaimed that "Words have discovered how to make love". Among the leading surrealist writers were Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, and Robert Desnos (1986, 286).

In art, the movement becomes dominant in the 1920s and 30s and is internationally practiced in many different forms of expression. For instance, Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy used dreamlike perception of space and dream-inspired symbols such as melting watches and huge metronomes (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2013). While most of surrealist artists considered their art as the expression of philosophical movement, Breton

asserted that it was a revolutionary movement. Though surrealism grows out of Dada which reflects nihilistic protest against all aspects of western culture, Surrealism takes a step beyond nihilistic self-destruction of Dada. The similarity of these two mentioned schools is mainly in that both are reactions against the destruction caused by rationalism (Yeganeh 2010, 535).

Surrealists believe that since the world of unconscious mind integrates the reality of the phenomenal world to that of dreams and desires, it has a superior reality in comparison to the reality of the sole material world. The aim was to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality" (Brahman 2001, 7). In this regard, they attack the cultural and aesthetic conventions and predetermined values and believe in these values as restrictions. Being influenced by symbolism, surrealists uses art as an instrument against the restriction of the society (Haghighi 2002, 248).

They also favored in recording the free operation of the deep mind by devising a method of writing called "automatic writing" or writing under the influence of the prompting of the unconscious mind (ibid. 247). Their aim was to awaken the sense of inner truth. They reject the conformity that modern life imposes on man in the way that takes away his humanity. So, they juxtapose images and objects that have no relationship in the normal life. Likewise, they focused on childhood as a haunting model free of suppression and burden of adult's life with imaginative freedom (Yeganeh, ibid. 537). In this sense, they supported the theories of free association technique of Sigmund Freud to justify their methods. Moreover, they admitted that a magical world can be created both in Literature and art with more beautiful characteristics than the real world (Barnes 2001,).

Like most western artistic trends in literature, surrealism affects eastern literature, too. The Iranian writer Samad Behrangi (1939-1968) who was a teacher, social critic, folklorist, translator, and short story writer is a writer whose writings, though in appearance simple, were rich in many aspects. Behrangi is famous in writing children's stories, but his stories are interesting for the adults, too. He is famous for his

Tele:

E-mail addresses: [a.jahangiri2003@gmail.com](mailto:a.jahangiri2003@gmail.com)

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children's book, *The Little Black Fish*. He was born in Tabriz to a lower-class Azerbaijani family and 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 (Hillmann 1980, 198). Behrangi is said to be a model teacher because of his dedicated and indefatigable advocate of radical reforms. His encouragement of the youth of Azerbaijan to educate themselves into equality with Persian-speaking Iranians, his passionate criticism of the wholesale adoption of American educational ideas and values, and his willingness to confront the governmental power structure through his writing and teaching creates a place in Iranian intellectual and social history for him.

Behrangi's severe critique of educational methods and textbooks called *Kand o kāv dar masā'el-e tarbiātī-e Īrān* made a social critic out of him (Şabrī-Tabrīzī 1970, 411). He deliberately chose a simple language to be attractive both for children and the adults as the potential reader of his works. Although, he selected a simple language for his writings, his narratives have some unique and specific stylistic features not to be discussed in this article. In addition to *Children's Stories*, he wrote many pedagogical essays and collected several samples of oral Azerbaijani literature.

Behrangi also has a few Azerbaijani translations from Persian poems by Ahmad Shamlou, Forough Farrokhzad, and Mehdi Akhavan-Sales. Some of his works are *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 peaches*, *24 hours*, *in Sleep and Awakening*, *The Myth of Affection*, *Koroglu and the Bold Hamzeh*, *The Beetroot Seller Boy*. He was drowned in Aras River -a far-away region in a sudden death that some called bizarre. Since his death coincides with his growing reputation as a social critic and the concerns on the part of government authorities with his writing, his advocates believe that his death is not accidental and it was blamed on the Pahlavi regime (Milani 2008, 838).

The researcher of the present paper intends to discuss one of his short stories based on surrealism. In this regard, a summary of this short story will be presented and then its surrealist elements are to be exposed and discussed.

#### **Oldooz and the Crows**

This story is narrated from the view point of a little girl who is 5-6 years old, living with her stern inattentive father and her nagging step-mother. The girl started to narrate her story some years later to her teacher Mr. Behrang who promises her to narrate her story to poor children not upper-class ones. So, after a few lines, the story flashes back to the past when she is bored because of her step-mother's cruel act that threw away her doll. While her step-mother is bathing, she who is banned to go to the yard sees a crew near their little pond. She starts talking to it and making friends. The crew who is female named herself as Nanne Kalāghe (Mama Crow), offers some deliberate opinion about mans' contradictory beliefs and manners. She is interested in stealing soap for her chickens.

In the next hidden visitings, the thought that Nanne Kalāghe is a crew wiser than human beings grows more intensely in Oldooz's mind. To cherish Oldooz, Nanne Kalāghe brings one of her chicken for her to take care of and play with. Since both her father and her step-mother hate the crews, it creates a heavy though enjoyable duty for Oldooz to take care of little crew. Oldooz hides the chicken called Agha Kalāghe (Mr. Crow) and teaches him how to speak. Moreover, she finds some delicious

spiders for him to eat. Her father borrows her uncle's dog to frighten the crews not to eat fish in the pool and steal soaps. But, Oldooz and her friend who is a boy of 7 years old, named Yāshār killed the dog with some special tricks. Her father, step-mother and the neighbors misleadingly think that it was the deeds of the Genes who haunt the house. Their opinion intensifies when the step-mother's new born baby dies. The step-mother killed both Nanne Kalāghe and Agha Kalāghe and it drastically makes Oldooz and Yāshār unhappy.

After a severe winter, some of the two dead crews' relatives come to find them but Oldooz tells the story of their death. They tell Oldooz she is allowed to go to their land called *The Crews' Land* and live with them in freedom. She accepts joyfully and asks Yāshār to accompany her. Yāshār accepts and the old Granny Crew told them they should knit a net to be carried with. They do it indefatigably and at last they flight to the crews' land by the crows' help. The story ends at this part, although the readers are left alone by lots of unanswered questions. The clear point is that Oldooz gets back and tell her story to Mr. Behrang, but it is unclear the time she gets back, the incidents occurred in *The Crews' Land* and the reason she gets back.

#### **Surrealistic Features of Oldooz and the Crows**

Since the cultural conditions of societies are different from one another, artistic and literary movements occur in some time intervals in different parts of the world. For instance, Surrealism begins in France in 1920s but it takes time to develop to the other parts of Europe and then to the other parts of the globe. As an Iranian writer who mainly wrote in the late 1950s and 1960s, Behrangi who was discontent with the superficial values and restrictive conventions of his society and everyday life, has works with surrealistic characteristics to present man's desires for change and his attempt in creating a new world in which the suppressed aspirations find a medium to be expressed. One of such works is *Oldooz and the Crows* which is an episodic short story in nearly 30 pages. In this story reality and dream intermingled in a way that it is impossible for the reader to separate their borderlines. In this sense, the only way to diagnose the reality of Oldooz's existence, joy and mental sanity is to accept her living with a stream of continuous dreams. It is even a state more intense than day-dreaming, for her dreams are not in the form of a passive repetition. In contrast, they are strongly connected to each other based on the rules of unconscious mind, i.e. free association of images, events, and action. For example, she related the adults' beliefs in the crows as thieves to the dream that Nanne Kalāghe told her that the crows forced to do rubbery in order to feed their chickens, therefore it is not a sin and consequently, they should not be reproached. In this way, Oldooz casts away the conventional beliefs by internally rejecting the long-term opinions of adults in a new sense.

As a 6 years old child, she likes to play with her doll and her friend Yāshār but her step-mother prohibits her by throwing it away and imprisoning her at home by saying her don't even move.

In the room Oldooz was sittin. Alone. Lookin out. Her step-mother was bathing. Had lock the door. Told Oldooz don' move freez. Unless she kick her ass. She was sittin. Lookin. Thinkin. Like the adults she was thoughtful. Counted her fingers many times...

(Oldooz and the Crows, 1)

As a result she takes refuge in making a new imaginative world in which a Mama Crow tells her a story of their free land, has sympathy toward her, brings her chicken to play with, and is a medium between her friend Yāshār and her.

Focusing on the structure of this story, the reader notices that its plot is episodic with some main divisions each of which starts with a subtitle like *The Smell of Spring*, *Who knows the language of the Crows*, *The Return of the Crows* and so on. As a matter of fact, such episodic plot intensifies the effect of the story as an adventure from the restrictions of reality to imaginative freedom. Throughout the course of the story, the reader can see the gradual fusion of the dreams into the reality in every further episode. Another point is in using sentences that are short and grammatically simple to show that the narrator is a child to emphasize the childhood period which is not bounded to the value systems, rules and restrictions of living, especially the restrictions of language as the most systematic and complex structure. Its proof is in using some intentional and artistic errors in writing of the words that reflect the little girl's slip of tongue.

Still another factor is that behind the surface of the child's narrative, there is an adult's intonation, a masculine overtone that covers whole the narrative. It can be demonstrated in choosing a high frequency of words, idioms, proverbs and expression using in colloquial language which are not common for a child to apply and these words demonstrate the interference of a developed mind that intrudes in the story and is something further than behind the reflections and mentality of the little girl. It can be interpreted as the psychic activities of Behrangi's mind as the writer who choose this story to outpour his aspirations and desires. This point can be explained more by propounding satires on the adults' beliefs in superstitions, common and middlebrow way of life generated by their shortcomings, conventions and superficialities.

Another characteristic of Surrealism that can be regarded in this story is automatic writing. The narrative as a sample of automatic writing is very fluent, extraordinarily simple and free from restrictive rules. Colloquial language, simple and mostly short sentences, and other features present that there is no barrier for flowing the little child's imaginative feelings. Even choosing a 6 year old child emphasizes psychologically on irrational and illogical events and the process of automatic and without restraint writing.

### Conclusion

Surrealism is a literary and art movement influenced by Freudianism and dedicated to the expression of imagination as revealed in dreams which are free of the conscious control of reason and convention. The movement was founded in 1924 in Paris by André Breton. Many of its adherents had belonged to the Dada movement. Surrealist writers were interested in the associations and implications of words. Absolute surrealism depends upon images derived from psychic automatism, the subconscious or spontaneous thought.

As a prominent modern Iranian writer, Samad Behrangi in his work, *Oldooz* and the *Crows* apply the most fundamental surrealistic elements like free imagination in the form of prompting feelings, combination of dream and reality, automatic writing to present childish aspiration of her main character and in a higher level his dissatisfaction of the misleading conventions and restrictive normative values which violate the psychic sanity of sensitive individuals.

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### Vitae

Azam Jahangiri is a Ph.D. Student of English Language and Literature at Tehran University, International Campus of Kish, Kish, Iran. She is also teaching English at Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran. She published some article on literary texts, emphasizing on the dominant critical approaches in them.