

Defamiliarization and Amit Chaudhuri

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Abstract

This paper discusses the literary technique Defamiliarization and its use by Amit Chaudhuri in his novels. Defamiliarization is a literary technique that compels readers to see the commonplace, known things in a weird and unfamiliar way. Indian novelist Amit Chaudhuri makes his novels praiseworthy and attention-grabbing by using the technique of defamiliarization, even when there are no gripping stories to tell, no momentous events to describe and no emotional outbursts. The way he defamiliarizes the ordinary, common and predictable, and brings to the fore his poetic sensibility and acumen stirs the unexciting and snoozing responsiveness of the reader to the beauty of the daily life that surrounds them.

Keywords: Defamiliarization, unfamiliar way, praiseworthy, snoozing

Introduction

Every language has its own literature. The bulk of world's national literature can be mostly divided into Sanskrit, Nepali, Russian, African-American, English, Roman, African, Indian, American, French, Irish, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Greek, Latin, Canadian literature, etc. Literature being the mirror of society, a book written in a meticulous point in time defines the people, their thoughts, culture, and the influences of that era. Thus, literature may be defined as the serious and organized expression of the genuine thoughts about diverse spheres of life, rehabilitated or imagined in the mind of author. It thus follows that literature represents a language or a people: culture and tradition. But, it is more imperative than just a chronological or cultural artifact. It introduces us to innovative worlds of experience. We may find out meaning in literature by means of looking at what the author says and how he/she says it. Usually speaking, the term 'literature' is used to depict not only creative writing, but also scientific or technical works. However, the term is most frequently used to denote works based on artistic imagination, like works of poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction.

The novel is a genre of fiction, which can be defined as the art or craft of contriving, through the printed word, depiction of human life that instruct or distract or both. The popular awareness into novel came towards the end of the 1700s, due to the appearance of middle class with more spare time to understand writing and cash to purchase books. *Pamela*, a series of fictional letters written in 1741 by Samuel Richardson, is considered the first real English novel. Novels differ very much in terms of the issue they deal with and how they cope with it. Here are some forms of novels: Picaresque novel, Psychological novel, Realistic Novel, Regional novel, Gothic novel, Epistolary novel and so on. Writers use various narrative techniques/devices to formulate powerful stories, just as an artist makes use of special paints and brushes to make visual images. Equipments like scene structure, dialogue and description all play an important role in formulating the story consistent and unified. Thus, narrative strategies serve many functions, including supporting in character development, building up plot and conveying the story's world to existence for readers. Narrative literary techniques may also be known

as literary devices. Narrative techniques present deeper sense for the reader and facilitate the reader to employ imagination to visualize situations. Literary techniques include First-Person Narration, Second-Person Narration, Third-Person Narration, Flashback, Flashforward, Foreshadowing, Back story, Narrative Perspective/point of view, Deus ex machine, Frame story or a story within a story, Poetic Justice, Stream of Consciousness, Magical Realism, Defamiliarization, etc.

Writers from different countries, cultures, origins, and languages have always endeavored to maneuver form and content in their writings employing various techniques to make their readers pay more attention to their works and to change their manner of perception of the things around them. One of these techniques which help them in achieving their goal is defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is a literary tool that compels readers to see the commonplace, known things in a weird and unfamiliar way. The term 'Defamiliarization' was first coined by Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky in 1917 in his influential essay 'Art as Device' translated as 'Art as Technique' refers to the potential quality which can cover all the various challenging and unconventional ways of expressing fresh ideas in literature (qtd. in Esmaili and Ebrahimi 165). Shklovsky believes that our lives have become habitual and mechanical since "things get old to us very quickly, as if we are not experiencing anything at all when we are involved in familiar everyday experiences;" hence, they do not induce any fresh response in us (Pourjafari 200). So, people need to look at the world around them and life in general with some freshness. Shkolovsky avers that defamiliarization "is found almost everywhere," and "it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it" (781). It is thus "a tool to revitalize our dull perceptual habits" (Ginzberg 8).

The purpose of defamiliarization or ostranenie is to set the mind in a state of radical unpreparedness; to cultivate the willing suspension of disbelief (Wall and Jones 20). Through 'making strange' – ostranenie -, we force the mind to rethink its situation in the world (Wall and Jones 20). Thus, the aim of art being to convey the awareness of things as they are seen and not as they are known, a writer can realize his/her objective through defamiliarizing readers' expectations.

It follows that defamiliarization is not just an issue of observation; it is the soul of “literariness” (Chapman 17). Defamiliarization makes us look with fresh eyes, to hear with fresh ears, to think with fresh thoughts, to feel with fresh feelings, i.e., to put an end to the process of habitualization and compel us, in fact, to see, to hear, to think about, and to feel in relation to something rather than simply to ignore it. Defamiliarization not only induces a strong degree of attentiveness, but also produces a sense of wonder and exhorts the readers to explore alternative meanings.

Thus, it goes without saying that Defamiliarization or Ostranenie is the artistic technique of presenting to audiences familiar things in a strange way, in order to increase awareness of the known. In order to achieve this objective, that is to make familiar unfamiliar, writers use a number of ways. Sometimes they manipulate the language either by employing stylistic or syntactic or semantic variations. In this regard, foregrounding is considered as an essential dynamic process which aims at defamiliarizing for making the text strange. Foregrounding may be achieved by the use of unusual or ungrammatical constructions. For example, patterns formed by the recurrence of similar things, becomes more common and more noticeable. This is usually made to focus on certain features of the language, to make them more prominent, or highlighted in order to convey certain messages.

Defamiliarization can be also considered as a signal of the intricacy of a text since the reader is unable to recognize the foregrounded patterns easily. According to Victor Shklovsky, “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12). Thus, when a foregrounded pattern is found, defamiliarization occurs, and it takes more than normal effort to understand it.

Some writers employ defamiliarization through simple and domestic words. They do not use awkward and difficult vocabularies to express an idea rather they depend largely on day-to-day vocabulary of the common man. This makes their works understandable to most of the people and created an innovative and specific style for them. Some writers, on the other hand, largely apply semantic defamiliarization.

Now, in the Indian literary scenario, when we go through the literary corpus of Amit Chaudhuri, the recipient of ten prestigious awards, we realize that he is one such gifted writer who paints his world not “by looking at life through tinted glasses but by removing the layer of the dust of desensitized, habitual perception which usually lies over it” (Sheobhushan Shukla 51). Amit Chaudhuri uses the concept of defamiliarization to summon a world that is concerned with the simple and often forgotten moments of present experience. Amit Chaudhuri an internationally acclaimed author was born in Calcutta, in 1962 and was brought up in Bombay. He is a graduate of University College, London; and also studied at Balliol College Oxford. Despite his stay in Bombay and London, he had great fascination for Calcutta since his childhood, which continued throughout his life. He is currently Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia. He has written six novels, some short stories, poems and critical essays in English. His novels have won several major awards and he has received international critical acclaim for *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991); his first novel gave him a huge worldwide

success by winning three Awards. He has also received Betty Trask Prize (1991) and Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book in 1992 for *A Strange and Sublime Address*. His second novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993) won Southern Arts Literature Prize in 1993, K. Bundel Trust Award in 1993 and Encore Best Novel of the Year Award in 1994. *Freedom Song*, his next, got published in 1998. *A New World* (2000) was honored by The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature in 2001. This novel has won 2000 Los Angeles Times Book (Fiction), (US edition), Sahitya Academy Award in 2003. *Real Time* (2002) includes a number of short stories set in Bombay and Calcutta, some of which have been published in the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement and the New Yorker. Chaudhuri is also a critic of distinction; his study of *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (2003), explores Lawrence’s position as a ‘foreigner’ in the English canon. *St. Cyril Road and Other Poems* was published in 2005. His novel, *The Immortals* (2009), was shortlisted for the 2010 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, and for 2011 DSC Prize for South Asian Literatures, and Infosys Prize for Contemporary Literature in 2012. Amit Chaudhuri is also a celebrated Indian Classical Musician and an internationally recognized singer and composer of Indo-Western experimental music, with an album from each of these genres.

Chaudhuri’s debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), discusses his childhood memories and is narrated in third person point of view. Basically, it is the collection of the memories of Calcutta city which make Sandeep, the hero of the novel, to think of this city as ‘strange and sublime’. The novel gives an account of minute details that take place in everyday life.

Afternoon Raag (1993), his second novel delineates the experiences and impressions of a young Indian student of English Literature at the University of Oxford. Chaudhuri reconstructs the state of mind of a young man struggling with loneliness, nostalgia in a unique way. It is a semiautobiographical novel by Amit Chaudhuri. The narrator, when physically situated in Oxford, often returns with his thoughts to his family home in Bombay and later, Calcutta.

Amit Chaudhuri’s next work, *Freedom Song* (1998), is a collection of three novels—reverberates with the pulse of modern India. It was published in the United States in 1999 and was met with unanimous acclaim. An Indian student at an English university ponders over the conflicted relationship between an immigrant and his native land. In *Freedom Song*, the plot is largely ignored whereas the fragile workings of familial relationships take precedence.

A New World (2000), his next publication, is written with the same luxuriance of language we first come across in *Freedom Song*. Chaudhuri depicts an extraordinary suggestive picture of the emotional and physical intricacies of marriage and its failure. With unusual dexterity, the author describes the details of these entangled lives of the elderly couple greatly dependent on the comfortable patterns of their days and the binding roles conferred on them by their traditions; and of the younger, modern couple, pulled in opposite directions from each other but united in their love for Bony, the one constant in their broken marriage.

The Immortals (2009), Chaudhuri’s another outstanding novel is set in Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s. It draws the life of two families, one immersed in corporate prosperity

and the other living on its musical tradition. It portrays the fortunes of two families connected by music. Basically, *The Immortals* is about two families and their very dissimilar relationships with the world of business.

His very recent novel *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013) is a beautifully written portrait of a great Indian metropolis Calcutta, showing Calcutta in all hues. He depicts the city comparatively untouched by the waves of globalization. He takes us along lively as well as deserted streets; makes us meet intellectuals, Marxists, street vendors, servants; acquaints us to the city's sounds and smells, its buildings, its shops and restaurants, new malls and hotels, much more.

Though, Amit Chaudhuri's literary output is not abundant, he has become highly famous across the world. He has received worldwide appreciation and numerous prestigious international awards for his thought-provoking literary writing. His style and language has been largely praised by various critics. Reviewers have applauded his "attention to sensuous and psychological detail" (Seaman 1038), and found his novels to be "distinguished by their peaceful and poetic tone" (Steinburg 119). However, there are some reviewers who find Chaudhuri's concern with language to be too passionate. Reviewer Barbara Liss finds reading Chaudhuri's *A New World* to be "the literary equivalent of standing in line at the post office" (Z.14). Liss' criticism highlights the main flaw with which Chaudhuri's writing is charged: that he writes beautifully, but fails to bring out compelling plots and characterization, the usual components of novels. Critics also believe that his writing lacks depth. Nevertheless, despite this weakness, "one goes on reading it with as much attention as one would focus on the works of a great master" because of defamiliarization comprising his prose style, his imagery and "the use of the language" (Anu Shukla 110).

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