



## Defamiliarization in Sohrab Sepehri's Poetry

### DEFAMILIARISATION DANS LA POESIE DE SOHRAH SEPEHRI

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#### Abstract

The tendency of the human beings to get used to the things, people and objects around them is an undeniable matter which is usually referred to as habituation. Art (and in particular literature) is what helps us see the familiar in an unfamiliar and fresh way. As a distinctive feature of literature, defamiliarization refers to any process which tears away the reader's familiar and habitual ways of looking at the world. Most of the methods of defamiliarizing technique include the creative use of everyday language and common concepts. The aim of this article is to show how Sohrab Sepehri, the Iranian modern poet, has made use of various methods of defamiliarization in his poems and also, to indicate the ways that these techniques serve the aim of changing the reader's mode of perception back from the trite, automatic patterns of everyday life.

**Key words:** Defamiliarization; Habituation; Forgrounding; Sohrab Sepehri

#### Résumé

La tendance des êtres humains pour s'habituer à des choses, les gens et les objets autour d'eux est une question indiscutable qui est généralement dénommé habituation. L'Art (et en particulier de la littérature) est ce que nous aide à voir le familier d'une manière inconnue et fraîche. Comme un trait distinctif de la littérature, défamiliarisation se réfère à tout processus qui arrache les moyens familiers et habituelle du lecteur de regarder le monde. La plupart des méthodes de défamiliarisant technique comprennent l'utilisation créative de la langue quotidienne et des concepts communs. Le but de cet

article est de montrer comment Sohrab Sepehri, le poète iranienne moderne, a fait usage de diverses méthodes de défamiliarisation dans ses poèmes et aussi, pour indiquer la façon dont ces techniques servent le but de changer le mode du lecteur de la perception de retour de les banales, les modèles automatiques de la vie quotidienne.

**Mots-clés:** Défamiliarisation; Habituation; Mise à la terre; Sohrab Sepehri

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#### INTRODUCTION

Poets from diverse cultural origins and literary heritage had already shown the tendency to manipulate form and content through unconventional ways in their works, so that their readers would be encouraged to see the already-held social relations and dominant concepts in different ways and, in one word, to look at the world with a new awareness.

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980) is among those poets who aim at presenting the habitual in a fresh perspective in order to change the reader's mode of perception of the objects around. He believes that the people have to withdraw from their habitual perceptions and judgments of the things and search for new impressions, emotions, and experiences, free from our oft-done act of labeling the objects of the phenomena of life (Siahpoush, 2003, p.122).

The terms often used in literary criticism to refer to this particular process are diverse, but the term "defamiliarization", coined by Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984), has the potential quality to cover all the various challenging and unconventional ways of expressing fresh ideas in literature. Sepehri's poetry by its attempt at

shifting the worldly ideas to the readers by challenging their thoughts through estrangement and focusing attention on minutest particulars which usually remain out of our focus, lends itself to be analyzed within the context of Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization. This study will aim to survey Sapehri's collection of poems, named "Hasht Ketab", from the view point of both his creative application of the language resources and the unsettling of customary concepts and ideas, and in this way elucidate the nature of his poetry from the perspective of defamiliarization.

## 1. DEFAMILIARIZATION

Defamiliarization (or estrangement) is the poetic technique that forces readers to see the familiar things in strange and unfamiliar ways, so that a renewed perception of them creates a fresh awareness in the beholder, beyond the stale routines of automatized schemes. Russian literary critic, Victor Shklovsky, is the one who first introduced the term, in 1917, in his critical article, "Art as Device". Lawrence Crawford in his essay "Différance in Defamiliarization" (1984) discusses that Shklovsky's idea is the result of his belief in the fact that "only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism" (p.209). Shklovsky believes that our lives are intrinsically habitual or automated because things get old to us very quickly. It is as if we are not experiencing anything at all when we are involved in familiar everyday experiences, which do not evoke any fresh reaction in us. This is what we have experienced frequently in our lives: passing the same places in our way to work every day without realizing the passage of time, as if it is an automatic action, is one example of the automatization of life. As another example, one might compare his feeling when moved to a new house, on the initial days of arrival and some weeks later. While at the beginning, everything seems new and appealing, after some weeks the person would move around the house each day, failing to notice any of the objects. For Shklovsky, these are not real reactions to life and if people get used to such passive experiences without attempting at any freshness in their looks towards world, they are not really living. In this regard, art can be one way to react against this dullness, repetition and automatic responses. It is a "tool to revitalize our dull perceptual habits" (Ginzberg, 1996, p.8). Therefore, according to Shklovsky, "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (Shklovsky, 1965, p.12). Art's duty, in this sense, is to create perceptions by overcoming automatizations, which make life dull. Its function in literature is to make the literary language differ from ordinary language. In fact, in everyday language, the main objective is to communicate. Consider the language of an encyclopedia

or dictionary, for example, whose main purpose is to inform, thus they use a direct and a non-metaphorical language. However, in literary texts, style is paramount and the act of communication is secondary and therefore, the language and meaning are used in a way to retard the perception of the object. A work is created artistically that "its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception" (Shklovsky, 1956, p. 22).

But the question here is that how the goal of defamiliarization would be fulfilled in a work of art? In other words, is it possible to recognize any techniques or principles which contribute to the act of defamiliarization in a literary work? Generally, defamiliarization in literature happens either in form or content or both. Defamiliarization in form is achieved when the language with which a literary work is read and understood finds changes that thwart the automatization of it, caused by the routine, everyday use. At the same time, the writer may choose to use words or phrases in a way that affects a noticeable change in what we take to be their standard meaning.

The term "foregrounding", coined by the Czech theorist Jan Mukarovsky (1932-1964), is used to refer to a range of stylistic effects that occur in literature, whether at the phonetic level (e.g. alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme), the grammatical level (e.g. inversion, parallelism), or semantic level (e.g. Metaphor, symbol, metonymy) (Bertens, 2001). These deviations correspond to the traditional idea of poetic license: the write of literature is allowed – in contrast to the everyday speaker – to deviate from rules, maxims, or conventions, the result of which is some degree of surprise in the reader. The employment of the various rhetorical figures or tropes (figurative language in general) enables the poet to express his ideas more attractively and effectively (Cuddon, 1976). Defamiliarization aims at nothing beyond that: to sharpen and deepen our perception of an object or phenomenon. Let's illustrate the idea in this way. "Wrestling" is wrestling and "God" is God, separately, and in everyday usage. Then, in the following juxtaposition by the well-known Persian poet, Rumi (1207-1273), "having wrestled with God, drunk with illusion of thy Godness"(1981, p.328), they are suddenly both defamiliarized. The effect is to make us remember the peculiar effect of the sin of vanity in the Sufi mysticism vividly. As another example of the effect of defamiliarization on the postponement of the reader's comprehension, take the following lines by Ahmad Reza Ahmadi (b.1940), the popular Iranian modern poet:

Let me call you by two names:

Black

Black

You, the exactness of black eyes (2000, p.129).

The reason that comprehension of these lines

seems impossible through the first reading resides in defamiliarization gained by distorting our expectation of being faced with two names. The poet's repetition of the same name twice can be only justified through contemplation on the hidden relations in the lines. This is considered to be the desired goal of defamiliarization: to prolong the process of understanding.

Besides the formal estrangement, defamiliarization of the idea and content is another effective way of deautomatization in literature. Ginzberg (1996) defines it as "a delegitimizing device, operating at every level – political, social, and religious" (p.18). This kind of defamiliarization deepens the reader's understanding of history, oppressive societies and stereotyped aspects of life that are usually hidden and unnoticeable. Here, the appearance is overcome and a deeper understanding of reality – naked and obvious – takes its place. Poets and writers also employ numerous other devices to postpone immediate perception of a given concept in order to make it strange. Of the many ways of achieving this end, one can refer to defamiliarizing titles, pretending disability to describe, describing through the viewpoint of a child or mentally imbalanced person, different uses of mythical and historical anecdotes, and archaism.

## 2. EXPLORATION WITH "WASHED EYES": SEPEHRI AND DEFAMILIARIZATION

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980) the well – known Iranian poet, has made use of defamiliarizing techniques and concepts in his poems in order to deviate the general process of the reader's perception and to direct it to a new kind of perception. He achieves this goal, mainly by drawing upon radically new forms of expression, either lexically or semantically, and showing the common experiences, which through repeated usage, have become devoid of meaning. Besides, he makes a lot of mythological or historical references in his poems which slow down the process of the reader's understanding. As a whole, this unsettling of the customary and Sepehri's unique blending of form and content defamiliarizes ordinary concepts of life in the most efficient possible manner. Personification can be called a dominant figurative device through Sepehri's poems. The experience of seeing unanimated things alive is something impossible to imagine, so that it shatters the existing conventions and norms. It gives audience a new and intense experience.

Below are some examples of personification in Sepehri's "Hasht Ketab" (2001):

The ladder brings the morning, from up the wall into the earth (p.336). Now and then, loneliness rubbed its face against the windowpane. / Desire would come and put its arms around the sense's neck. / Thought played (p.275). A fan was visible in the summer's hand (p.282). I can hear the garden breathing (p.286).

Sepehri is also unconventional in his application of symbolism. He looks at the natural phenomena around him in a different way from his contemporaries. Comparing him with another well-known poet of his time, Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000), this difference in the outlook will be obvious. Shamlu makes use of the conventional and traditional symbols in his poetry. For instance, "night" is always a symbol for tyranny, dictatorship, and suppression, as in the following lines:

There is not a more betraying sign for tyranny than night  
(Shamlu, 2003, p.652).

However, Sepehri defamiliarizes the concept of night and instead of associating it with common oft-attributed negative qualities, pictures it as a beautiful and pleasant creature:

Let's not say that night is a bad thing (Sepehri, 2001, p. 293). It was a full night. / The moonlight in the valley, / The mountain bright / The God visible (p.333-4).

In the same way, crow, which is believed to be disastrous and ominous in many cultures and is often referred to through negative connotations of blackness, gloominess, lack of hope and death, is accompanied by a chain of positive words, which, altogether, create a very pleasant atmosphere in the following lines (Hassan Li & Akbari, 2007):

The pines, too high the crows, too black / The sky, blue enough / The roof gutter embellished with sparrows / The sunshine, explicit / The soil, pleased (Sepehri, 2001, p.447).

Paradox is another foregrounding device in Sepehri's poems. The value of paradox is its shock value. Its apparent implausibility shocks the reader, makes him more careful towards what he is reading, and as a result, lengthens his perception (Shamisa, 1993). Consider the opposition between "decline" and "full", and also "darkness" and "lantern" in these lines:

My fist becomes full of the decline of grape's volume (Sepehri, 2001, p. 350).  
I find the path in darkness; I'm full of lanterns (p.336).

Here is another paradoxical statement:

I will dedicate a pair of earrings to a beautiful leprous woman (p.339).

It is obvious that by using those perceptions which are not normally acceptable, Sepehri raises a set of questions in the reader's mind, such as: how Sepehri dedicates a pair of earrings to a beautiful leprous woman? And how a leprous woman can be considered as beautiful? Such and other questions will make reader hesitate to contemplate on the idea of the line and this is the desired goal of defamiliarization.

Moreover, Sepehri, sometimes, deviates from the generally-accepted rules of the language of poetry by omitting a key word or hiding an important idea

intentionally:

Doors open, / Eyes of watching open, / Eyes of watching wet, /  
and was God in every.....? (p.220)

This is also done through applying the conversation framework to the poetry and omitting one part of the conversation (either question or answer), by purpose, as in the following poem with the strange title, "and":

- Yes, we are the buds of a dream / - Buds of a dream? do we blossom? / One day, and no leaf shakes. / - Here? / - No, in the valley of death. / - Darkness, loneliness. / - No, the seclusion of beauty. / - Who comes to watch? Who smells us? / - .... / - And fall off with a breeze? / - .... / - And another fall? / - .... (pp.230-1).

However, Sepehri defamiliarizes the familiar concepts and ideas which have become habitual and lost their freshness to us, as well. He goes to the heart of actual facts – such as death, life, love – and penetrates them so as to see the kind of things as they really are. In this way, he invites the readers to overcome their false ideas and imaginations. Death is a concept that Sepehri has dealt with, very frequently in his poems. The general attitude is that death is horrible, dark, and disgusting. But the poet defamiliarizes this common concept about death in order to create a new perception and challenge the reader's mind to see it as a new form, as if it is recognized for the first time:

Life flies as big as death / Death dwells in the pleasant climate of mind. / Death speaks of down in the nature of village night / ... / Death is responsible for the beauty of butterflies' wings (p.295).

Surprisingly, death is not associated with emptiness, absence, and destruction, but with life. This paradoxical union of death with "life", "dawn", "pleasantness" and "beauty", much in contrast with common belief, creates a rethinking of a new different perception.

Sepehri suffers when he witnesses how people have the habit of labeling the things around into good and bad, mainly informed by social and traditional mores and norms. He asks readers to overcome their false ideas drawn from the collective social connotations, hesitate about their already-held perceptions and linger to find a new one:

I do not know, / Why some people say / Horse is a noble animal,  
/ Pigeon is beautiful / Why does nobody keep a vulture in cage?  
/ The flower of clover is not as degrading as the red tulips. / The eyes should be washed; we should observe in the other way (p.291).

## FINDINGS

The distinguishing quality of Sepehri's poetry is to remove expectations, instinctive responses and all traditional connotations of the familiar but significant concepts of life. He gives his readers the chance to explore them uninhibited by "false" ideas that can cloud their judgments.

Defamiliarization in these poems helps the readers to reconsider their own conventional assumptions, and subvert their initial reactions and thoughts about the issues discussed in the poems. The important result is opening the mind to allow for new possibilities, interpretations and meanings to be taken out of the phenomenon of life.

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