



The Assessment of Defamiliarization in Forough Farrokhzad's Poetry

Zahra Esmaeili

Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, PO box 91779-48974, Park Square
Mashhad, Iran

Tel: 00989151228246 E-mail: esmaeili_zahra@yahoo.com

Shima Ebrahimi

Linguistics Department, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, PO box 91779-48974, Park Square
Mashhad, Iran

Tel: 00989155039738 E-mail: shima.ebrahimi@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Defamiliarization is a literary device which has been coined by Shklovsky and its aim is to move readers to see familiar things in an unfamiliar way. Shklovsky argues that defamiliarization creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it, and it is exactly what Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), the Iranian modern poet, applies in her poems and what the authors of this study intend to demonstrate. Farrokhzad defamiliarizes her poetry by making familiar things seem new, by unearthing oppressive elements of familiar situations and relationships, and by subverting traditional approaches with familiar and domestic things. The current study proposes and investigates three categories of defamiliarization which are stylistic, syntactic and semantic. Some examples are also given to shed light on these classifications. The current study aims to demonstrate the ways that Forough Farrokhzad has applied to take advantage of three aforementioned methods of defamiliarization.

Keywords: stylistic defamiliarization, syntactic defamiliarization, semantic defamiliarization, Forough Farrokhzad

1. Introduction

Poets from different nations, cultures, origins, languages and literary contexts have always shown their interest to manipulate form and content through various techniques to make their readers pay more attention to their works and to change their mode of perception of the objects around. One of these techniques which can be so helpful is defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization is a literary device whose purpose is to force readers to see the familiar things in a strange and unfamiliar way. This term coined by Victor Shklovsky (1917, cited in Pourjafari, 2012) refers to the potential quality which can cover all the various challenging and unconventional ways of expressing fresh ideas in literature. He believes that our lives are getting habitual and automated 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; therefore, they do not evoke any new reaction in us and it is an automatic action. So, people need some freshness in their looks towards world and life. Ginzberg (1996, p.8, cited in Pourjafari) believes that defamiliarization is "a tool to revitalize our dull perceptual habits".

Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) is a poet who has mostly applied defamiliarization technique in her poetry to attract her readers' attention and improve them from a habitual perception towards an aware understanding.

The present study intends to assess defamiliarized elements in her poetry. On the basis of unique style of Forough's poetry and her abundant use of defamiliarization, authors of this study suggest three classifications of defamiliarization existing in her poetry and investigate one of her books named "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" within the concept of defamiliarization. Three proposed classifications are stylistic, syntactic and semantic defamiliarization which will be discussed in detail through different examples.

2. Review of Literature

Defamiliarization is a term which was offered by the Russian Formalists in the twentieth century. Victor Shklovsky, who coined the phrase, was thinking of literature in mechanical terms; he wanted to know how a text works in the same way as a mechanic who wants to know how a car works (Wall, 2009); Although according to Holcombe (2007) at first Russian Formalists' approach was mechanical and they treated literature simply as an assembly of literary devices, later, they recast literature as a system where every component had a constructive function just as the social fabric was a 'system of systems'. The present paper does not aim to investigate Forough's poetry as objectively as Shklovsky, but rather it intends to assess and classify defamiliarized phrases in Forough's poems.

According to Wall (2009), the purpose of defamiliarization is to set the mind in a state of radical unpreparedness; to cultivate the willing suspension of disbelief. We see and hear things as if for the first time and the conventionality of our perceptions is put into question. Through ‘making strange’ – *ostranenie* –, we force the mind to rethink its situation in the world. Shklovsky (1992, cited in Eggins, 2005) states that art aims to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. Therefore, a poet can achieve his/her goal through defamiliarizing readers’ expectations.

Defamiliarization can be also regarded as an indication of the complexity of a text since the recognition of foregrounded patterns is not so easy. According to Viktor Shklovsky (1965 [1917], cited in Zyngier et al., 2008), the more foregrounded the text is, the more it will produce deautomatization. In his words, “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” (ibid.: 12). However, as argued by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986: vii), “Human cognitive processes are geared to achieving the greater possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort.” In their view, readers will tend to invest the least effort possible when processing texts. When a foregrounded pattern is met, defamiliarization occurs, and more energy is spent on processing the information and organizing chaos. This results in the reader’s perception of the text as a complex one. Its processing will accordingly be slower, a notion for which the Russian Formalists employed the term “retardation.”

According to Nofal (2011), poetry cannot be grasped without a thorough knowledge of grammar, so foregrounding can be considered as an essential dynamic process which aims at defamiliarizing for making the text strange. He believes that foregrounding may be accomplished by the use of deviant or ungrammatical constructions. Patterns formed by the repetition of similar items will be more common and more noticeable in poetry than in other kinds of language. This is usually made to focus on certain features of the language, (the poetic language in particular) to make them more prominent, or highlighted in order to convey certain messages.

The idea of Urbanová (2003) is a little bit different from Nofal. He states that the defamiliarization process is closely associated with the search for interestingness, originality, uniqueness or irony. Its principal aim is to make meanings extraordinary and “strange”, i.e. non-familiar (defamiliarized) but still formulated within the realm of standard, conventional language, not deviant or ungrammatical constructions.

Also, there are some people like Tung (2009) who attack the idea of Russian Formalists as the sole distinctive feature or literary and poetic language in contrast to practical language, and foregrounding the utterance as the sufficient aim and quality of literariness. He believes that literariness is more than just verbal artfulness, and it is a piece of literature consisting of an artful piece of discourse ‘uttered’ by the author to express a certain idea or feeling to the reader. According to Jakobson (cited in Tung, 2009), this discourse includes six elements such as addresser, addressee, contact, message, code and context. And writer of a piece of literature is actually performing a speech act besides narrating a literary work.

Miall (2006, cited in Iwata, 2008) states that literary reading is an interactive process between text and reader and comprises a “defamiliarization-recontextualization cycle”. It happens when the reader reads a literary text and encounters a part which sounds striking due to defamiliarization. Through this distinctive feeling, the reader experiences subsequent shift in understanding and a new understanding emerges when the reader searches for meaning guided by the feeling that defamiliarization has evoked. Miall believes that approximately two minutes later, that experience which has been the result of defamiliarization becomes recontextualized. It shows that it takes an evolutionary process and as Miall proposes, literary response can be understood as “a theory of dehabitation”.

3. Data Analysis

Forough Farrokhzad employed defamiliarization through simple and domestic words. She did not use awkward and difficult vocabularies to express an idea and this style seemed a little nonconformistic at that time, since most of the writers did not dare to break the rules and utilize novel approaches. The mentioned nonconformity was not just related to the style of composing poetry, but it could also be attributed to the subject of her poems. She chose some plain and intelligible issues and composed her poems based on them; therefore, she made her poetry comprehensible to most of the people and created an innovative and specific style for herself. She collocated simple words and so subtly applied them to make non-traditional adjectives and descriptions.

The present study has investigated one of Forough Farrokhzad’s books of poetry which is named “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season” and three different categories of defamiliarization are proposed which are as follows:

- Stylistic defamiliarization
- Syntactic defamiliarization
- Semantic defamiliarization

3.1 Stylistic Defamiliarization

This type of defamiliarization specifically belongs to Forough Farrokhzad. Unlike traditional poets, she employed simple words and colloquial subjects in her poetry. Inferring this kind of defamiliarization does not require any specific literary knowledge, since it is totally vivid in her poetry. She proved in her poetry that there is no need to use complicated and formidable vocabularies to make a poem moving and admirable. In addition, she confirmed this fact that a poet can strongly impress his/her readers through simple and understandable words. Indeed, no literary devices can be seen in this type of defamiliarization and events have been often conveyed through the most domestic ways.

Due to the fact that readers of Forough Farrokhzad's poetry were not accustomed to simple topics used in poems, this deviation is considered as an approach of defamiliarization. Forough's readers expected to see some traditional topics which were mostly assigned to all poems, and traditional poets tried not to deviate them.

Forough tries to apply some domestic subjects and make readers' minds prepared to accept her next delicate expressions which are not semantically straightforward. The following examples indicate stylistic defamiliarization in Forough's poetry:

Time flew (line7, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season , translated by Ismail Salami)

Time flew and the clock struck four,

Struck four

Today is the thirty-first day of December

As it can be noticed, the poet used vocabularies related to time in the way that they are utilized in colloquial speech. No complicated word can be found in these lines.

Wind is blowing in the alley (Line 17, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season , translated by Ismail Salami)

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.
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And a man passing by the wet trees (Line 22)

Passing a man by the street and wet trees is an understandable and common event in which there is no complicated literary device.

Shall I ever comb my tresses (Line 135, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season , translated by Ismail Salami)

In the wind?

Shall I ever plant violets in the flowerbeds?

Forough has derived these sentences from colloquial speech. It is one of her specific strategies in composing poetry.

Someone is coming through the sky (Line 83, Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone, translated by Ismail Salami)

Of Artillery Square in a night of fireworks

And he spreads the tablecloth

Distributes the bread

And distributes the Pepsi

And distributes the national garden

And distributes medicine for whooping-cough

And distributes the registration slips

And distributes the hospital tickets

And distributes the rubber boots

And distributes the Fardin films

And distributes the trees of Seyyed Javad's daughter

And distributes whatever she has hoarded

And gives us our share

I have dreamed ...

Forough has employed very commonplace activities which were part of people's custom at Forough's time. This part of her poetry has no difference with colloquial language of Iranian people.

Father says to Mother: (Line 28, I Feel Pity for the Garden, translated by Ismail Salami)

Curse be upon every fish and fowl

When I die

What does it matter to me whether

The garden remains

Or it does not?

Cursing other people mostly occurs in casual and informal speech which is seen in this part of Forough's poetry. She has repudiated the dominant rules of composing poetry and merged the boundaries of written and spoken languages.

I said to my mother, "It's over." (Line 142, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Ismail Salami)

I said, "Before you know it happens

You should send in advance an obituary notice."

Sending obituary notice for newspaper is an event which rarely happens in a poem. She also wrote a common dialogue between a mother and a daughter without any changes which is an indicative of her stylistic defamiliarization.

Someone is coming (Line 10, Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone, translated by Ismail Salami)

Someone else

Someone better

Someone who isn't like anyone, isn't like Father, isn't like Ensi, isn't like Yahya, isn't like Mother

Forough has utilized some proper names like Ensi and Yahya in her poetry which demonstrates her hatred from stylistic complexities. Even she has used the nickname of "Ensi" instead of "Ensiyeh".

I have dreamed of a red little star (Line 2, Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone, translated by Ismail Salami)

And my eyelids keep fluttering

And my shoes keep pairing

And may I be struck blind

If I am lying.

Employing people's attitudes and beliefs in the poetry is one of the ways a poet can defamiliarize his/her poem. For instance, "fluttering eyelids" or "pairing shoes" are among cultural and traditional beliefs which are specifically related to Iranians and prove Forough's claim of dreaming in these lines. In the last two lines, she strikingly swears not to be lying which is obviously a sign of colloquial speech.

And he can (Line 26, Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone, translated by Ismail Salami)

Read all the difficult words in the third grade book

With his eyes closed

And he can deduct one thousand from

Twenty million without missing a point

And can get buy anything on credit

From Seyyed Javad's shop.

All combinations such as buying something on credit, third grade book and Seyyed Javad's shop used in Forough's poetry have been derived from ordinary life.

How good is light! (Line 37, Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone)

How good is light!

And how much do I desire

Yahya

To have a little cart.

And a little lantern

And how much do I desire

To sit among the watermelons and the melons on Yahya's cart

And take a turn round Mohamadiyeh Square

Ah...

How good it is to take a turn round the square!

How good it is to sleep on the roof!

How good it is to go to national garden!

How good is to sip Pepsi!

How good it is to see a Fardin movie

And how much do I love good things!

And how much do I desire

To pull the hair of Seyyed Javad's daughter.

In the aforementioned lines, Forough has depicted all her desires in real life. In her poetry, there is no distance between the poet and the readers. Readers can easily visualize themselves at the time of Forough and identify with her. Without

any complicated literary device, she has beautified her work through employing simple memories and common events of her life.

3.2 Syntactic Defamiliarization

In this type of defamiliarization, the poet alters the place of sentences' components and in this way, she makes some parts more prominent and enhances her poetry's beauty. So, readers can more easily remember her poems due to the unusual place of the words. For example, she changes the place of verb and subject. Although it may not be clearly noticeable in their translation, some examples have been provided which are as follows:

Why did I not look? (Line 111, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Ismail Salami)

It seemed as if my mother had wept that night

According to the structures of Persian language, adverbs of time come before the verb. But in this line, "that night" which is an adverb of time has come after the verb. This way of using adverbs is mostly popular in colloquial language. Forough has defamiliarized this sentence though changing the place of verb and adverb.

What is silence, silence? O sole friend! (Line 196, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Ismail Salami)

Silence is but unspoken words

What can a swamp be? (Line 20, Only the Voice Remains, translated by Karimi Hakkak)

What can it be except the spawning ground for petrifying vermin?

In both above examples, Forough has a question, and she answered her question in the same line. Repetition can be also considered a strategy of syntactic defamiliarization which can be seen in both examples.

3.3 Semantic Defamiliarization

According to Shklovsky (cited in Vegge, 2000), walking is an activity which as we go about in everyday life, we have ceased to be aware of; but when we dance the automatically performed gestures of walking are perceived anew. A dance is a walk which is felt and even more accurately, it is a walk which is constructed to be felt. Conclusion can be drawn that each poet defamiliarizes her speech through deepening readers understanding of his/her poetry and making them feel what s/he says. Forough Farrokhzad has largely applied semantic defamiliarization in a special way. She has juxtaposed some words which cannot be ordinarily and semantically grouped together. For instance, attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects or vice versa is one of the unique features of Forough's poetry. In this type of defamiliarization, numerous similes and metaphors are noticed. The following examples demonstrate lexical syntagmatic and semantic defamiliarization outright:

And this is I (Line 1, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Michael Hillman)

A woman alone

At the threshold of a cold season

At the beginning of understanding

The polluted existence of the earth

And the simple and sad pessimism of the sky

And the incapacity of these concrete hands.

As it can be noticed, some human characteristics such as "understanding" and "sad pessimism" have been attributed to the inanimate such as "sky" and "earth".

And I am thinking of the coupling of flowers (Line 19, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Ismail Salami)

Of buds with thin anemic stems

And of this tired tubercular time

Anemic and tiredness are adjectives related to human beings that Forough has used for inanimate objects such as stems and time. There is no constraint on her use of similes and metaphors.

A man whose blue veins (Line 23, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season

, translated by Ismail Salami)

Creeping up

Like dead snakes from the two sides of his throat

Reiterating

That bloody syllable in his twitched temples.

Hello!

Hello!

In the above lines, Forough drew an analogy between veins and dead snakes. Moreover, she has employed twitched as an adjective for temples which is not common. So, she could semantically defamiliarize her poetry.

At the beginning of a cold season (Line 31, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

At the mourning ceremony of mirrors

And the bereaved company of pale experiences

And this evening grown out of the knowledge of silence

How can one order someone walking

So patiently

So resolutely

So restlessly

To stop?

“Evening grown out of the knowledge of silence”, “pale experience” and “mourning ceremony of mirrors” are all extraordinary and unusual compositions which make readers rethink and re-experience the world.

The solitary crows of solitude (Line 42, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

Flying in the old gardens of weariness

Silence is but unspoken words (Line 198, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

I fail to speak, but the tongue of sparrows

Speaks the tongue of the fluent words of nature’s feast.

The tongue of sparrows means spring, leaf, spring.

The tongue of sparrows means breeze, perfume, and breeze.

In Forough’s poetry, there is no limitation in using lots of adjectives for just one word. This strategy of Forough is clear in the above lines.

As if they were of the green lines of imagination (Line 58, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

The fresh leaves panting in their passion for breeze

When in the sky, lie began to blow (Line 68, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

And beside your springs, the spirits of willow trees (Line 99, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

Smell the kind spirits of axes

So the sun eventually (Line 213, Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season
, translated by Ismail Salami)

At a certain time

Did not shine on the two poles of despair

You were emptied of the echo of the blue tiles.

In the above lines, Forough largely makes analogy between human sentiments and natural elements.

4. Conclusion

Defamiliarization is a literary device which moves readers to see familiar things in an unfamiliar way. It is a challenging way of expressing new ideas in literature. Poets from different nations, cultures, origins, languages and literary contexts have always shown their interest to make their readers pay more attention to their works and change their mode of perception of the objects around. To achieve this goal, defamiliarization is a helpful instrument.

Owing to the fact that Forough Farrokhzad has largely employed this method in her poetry, the authors of this study classified the existing defamiliarizations in her poetry into three categories of stylistic, syntactic and semantic

defamiliarization. In her stylistic defamiliarization, Forough has used simple words and colloquial subjects in her poetry which were unusual to appear in poems at her time. Through syntactic defamiliarization, she has tried to change the place of sentences' components and in this way, she has defamiliarized her poetry. She has also utilized semantic defamiliarization through juxtaposing some words which are not semantically accompanied with each other. For each classification, some examples have been provided from her last book titled "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season." Conclusion can be drawn that Forough Farrokhzad has applied different methods to defamiliarize her poetry.

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