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Defamiliarisation in Chaudhuri's Freedom Song

Abstract

Freedom Song is the third novel by Amit Chaudhuri, a well established name in the field of literary fiction. The novel is about the everyday lives of two closely related middle class Bengali families who live in Calcutta. It is about the relationship of two friends as they grow up together and grow old. The novel describes how a middle class family manages the wedding of their son who is inclined towards politics and has even joined a political party. Basically, the novel is about the everyday, ordinary, mundane lives of the Bengali family that lives in Calcutta. The novelist renews our perceptions of the familiar by the process of defamiliarization and thus makes things interesting. The concept of defamiliarization derived from the Russian word, 'ostranenie', was introduced by Victor Shlovsky in his essay, 'Art as Technique'. Defamiliarization is about renewing our perceptions of the daily, routine things with the help of literary devices and tropes like simile, metaphor, imagery and so on. It is about perceiving ordinary, mundane things in a new light. This novelty in which we perceive daily, habitual things with the help of literariness in the language becomes important. In the

present paper, we will go through various examples of defamiliarisation and see how the familiar things have been defamiliarised in the novel, *Freedom Song*.

Key Words: Defamiliarisation, perception, mundane, perspective, imagery.

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile, voracious contemporary writer who has been appreciated and acclaimed worldwide. His debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* after receiving the Betty Trask Award in 1991 and Guardian Fiction prize, opened the gates of literary world for the writer. *Freedom Song* is the third novel by Amit Chaudhuri. Like his other two previous novels, this novel also received lot of appreciation and was awarded the LA Times Book Award in 1999. Chaudhuri has no particular plot or story to tell his readers, but his description of daily life and experiences are presented in a beautiful manner that fascinates the readers. The novel, *Freedom Song* revolves around the lives and reminiscences of two families, Khuku and her husband Shib, a couple in their sixties and Khuku's younger and less prosperous brother, Bhola and his wife Abha. It is also about the family's wedding plans for their unambitious son, Bhaskar.

Amit Chaudhuri possesses the unusual gift of turning every little mundane detail of daily life into poetic beauty. Rather, he defamiliarizes the familiar, mundane, daily activities of our lives through the magic and marvel of his language. He does this by renewing our perceptions of everyday events and things which are so familiar that they get habitual. The concept that in translation has become known as 'defamiliarization' was introduced by Victor Shklovsky, a Russian Formalist, in his essay 'Art as Technique' published in 1917. Defamiliarization is derived from the Russian word 'ostrananie' that means making strange or estrangement. Shklovsky's thesis was that we often take for granted or are unaware of our daily view of things and the relations between them, which is why our perceptions of them become a habitual, automatic process. It is thus the special task of literature to disturb this habitualisation and make us see things in a new light. To put it in the words of Harry

Blamires, “Defamiliarization is the process by which art can refresh perceptions that are ‘automatised’ by daily habituation. Whenever an act or an object is described in such a way that our habitual notion of it is transformed, the process of defamiliarisation is at work. It is operative too when the literary presentation is punctured by intrusions which destroy the illusion of reality”.

The title of the novel, *Freedom Song* suggests that the novel is indeed a song but more of the Bengali culture and Kolkata rather than any kind of freedom. So, the title seems to be ironical. Probably it suggests how far we have reached in the sense of freedom and liberty after getting independence from the British rule. As an individual, freedom is of great significance in our social constructions. The very title emphasises the importance of freedom. In her article, ‘Such Stuff as Amit Chaudhuri’s Song is Made on’ Dr. Anu Shukla says, “Thus, social freedom is negated by subtly, hiddenly and powerfully rising communalism in an apparently secular culture. Economic freedom too appears to be withering away with the ever increasing intervention of multinationals and the forces of privatisation. Individual freedom appears to be at stake because of the compulsive, conventional social structures.”

The novelist’s imagination reaches far and wide to bring in images, analogies, irony, simile, metaphors, etc. that produce the effect of defamiliarisation. Through this, even the most ordinary and familiar things get imprinted on our minds by the use of such strange images and analogies. To cite a few examples from the novel, Khuku “went around the hall aimlessly, like an insect exploring a window pane”(3); “labourers worked like bees”(15); retired men are “as free as children”(18); the three servants in the house who had no work to do for long stretches of time in the day “ Bhaskar and his friends while practising their dialogues for their performance were sometimes “loud as demonstrators on the street, and at other times secretive as thieves”(79). So, to refresh our perception of the familiar, the novelist uses these beautiful similes and analogies and thus makes the familiar, ordinary, mundane

things seem strange and interesting. Now, in another example, the osteopathic aids and implements do not have anything unusual about them but, in the novel, these are presented differently as “some of these implements were curved and bent fluently, so that they looked like limbs themselves, on the verge of moving, except that they were sturdy and shone, metallic”(168). The familiar sights and situations are defamiliarised with the use of such literary devices. For example, Bhaskar’s newlywed wife, Sandhya and her mother-in-law “bent like two conspirators” while putting the gold chain in the box to keep it safe which is something common in all households.

The novelist’s ability to defamiliarise the familiar is indeed commendable. In his novels, he does not present any heroics, rather, he writes about the daily happenings of our lives. He is a writer who can create magic out of the ordinary through his narrative technique. His novels are replete with similes and analogies that impart a kind of newness and freshness to his work thereby producing the effect of defamiliarisation. Let us consider a beautiful example of defamiliarisation where women’s love for jewellery and their treatment of it as their property that could help in times of need is presented that is otherwise a familiar, common thing in our society. Let us see how the novelist renews our perception of jewellery.

After Bhola had left his job and embarked upon his business, Bhaskar’s mother had been protective and uncompromising about one thing: her jewellery...And this disinterested emblem of beauty and desire, the soul’s continual yearning for celebration, so removed from everyday, which would one day belong entirely to her children, to Piyu or to her sons’ wives, remained untouched. (178)

Amit Chaudhuri often uses irony as a literary device that produces the effect of defamiliarisation. He is both amused at and critical though never harsh of whatever he sees around himself. In the novel, Samresh Hajra, one of the members of Bhaskar’s group, made a speech about the International Monetary Fund. He tried to convince people that foreign investment was dangerous for the growth of India and so mentioned it in his speech, though the masses were looking forward to it. It is ironical when he says, “This pen is made in our

country, India. It may not write as well as a Parker, it may not write at all after a few days” – there was laughter – “but we have made it ourselves”(47). While moving forward, we find that the novelist’s ironical comments do not spare even Gods and Goddesses and religious rituals. He mentions Khuku’s personal deity, Bipad Nashini or Destroyer of Distress as mysterious female divinity in the following passage from the novel:

But Khuku and Mini did not believe in Ram or Krishna, Khuku’s personal deity, which she might have created herself, or which have possibly been created by her mother, was one she called Bipad Nashini, or Destroyer of Distress, whom she saw as a maternal figure who watched over her and her family, and whose name she muttered whenever she was worried: ‘He bipad nashini, he bipad nashini’. (55)

Sometimes Chaudhuri’s comments are clear and comprehensive though sometimes subtle as he puts it, “Meanwhile, the muezzin went on praising the virtues of Allah in syllables that sounded like ‘laillallah rasulallah’, and Allah was great, Allah was good and glorious” (85). To cite another example, we are quite familiar that in Hindu marriages, the bride and the groom have to sit for quite a long time to complete the rituals and offerings of prayers to different Gods and Goddesses in order to seek their blessings for their happy marriage life. The priests guide the couple in following the rituals. These priests, since they are paid as per their hour, can manipulate the required time of prayers and can make shortcut to all this if so requested as is apparent in the following passage:

For they had been asked by Bhola to complete the rituals as quickly as they could and had managed to abbreviate a few things and skim guilelessly over others (and dilate a few stanzas, since they were being paid by the hour) and they had finished in just under two hours.(172)

Amit Chaudhuri’s novels abound in pictorial quality. He literally paints the picture of his characters and places while describing them through the use of his beautiful, vibrant and complex fabric of language. He possesses special skills for creating images in his works. Imagery is an important literary trope that plays a vital role in producing the effect of defamiliarisation or, to put it in other words, makes familiar seem unfamiliar and strange. It

creates a different way of perception and thus events, happenings and things become more interesting. Let us consider an example of visual imagery from the novel where the novelist describes the winter season and how the season changed the city, the atmosphere and even the clothes worn by people.

Winter came only once a year and it changed the city. It gave its people, as they wore their sweaters and mufflers, a sense of having somewhere else, the slight sense of the wonder and dislocation of being in a foreign city. Even the view from their own houses was a little strange. Smoke travelled everywhere, robbing the sunlight of its fire. Afternoon, with its gentle orange yellow light, was the warmest time of day, though the wet clothes, assisted by a breeze, dried more slowly than in the summer. (27)

Amit Chaudhuri is a writer to whom even the ordinary, familiar, daily routine things like clothes hanging in a clothesline becomes an experience. And while penning down his experience in his beautiful language he actually defamiliarises the familiar things around him. It seems that the novelist has a special fascination for wet clothes hanging in a clothesline as he himself puts it in 'Aalap', "Because the wetness, moisture, baths, water are important to me..."(175). This fascination for wet clothes is apparent in almost all his novels. The novelist describes even the common, ordinary things so vividly that they seem interesting and strange. He describes even the physical appearance of the novel's characters in such a manner that an image of them is easily formed in the minds of the readers.

Amit Chaudhuri possesses a unique gift for sound and sound patterns. His novels abound in sound images. He has an acute ear for sound effects probably due to his training and accomplishment as a musician. Such sound images are too numerous to take note of individually, but to cite a few examples from the novel, "two pigeons, making rapid pistol like sounds with their wings..."(10); newspaper fell on the floor with a "sharp sound"(12); "sound of trams clattering back and forth outside"(62); "tender, destitute noises, of a cat meowing, and maidservants chattering and laughing"(62); "noise of the traffic"(101); "sound

of the flush in the silence of the night”(111) and so on. We can thus see that the novel abounds in such sound images and patterns. Therefore the noise of the traffic, the sound of radio, sounds produced by birds, cats and even child, etc. can be found throughout the novel. The novelist has even emphasised the silence of the night.

Another important aspect of the novelist that needs to be mentioned here is his inclination and love for music that is apparent in all his novels. He has a great taste and sense for music. He himself is a well trained and accomplished classical singer. The way he presents and talks about even the most minute things of classical music with such ease is indeed commendable. The very title of his previous novel, *Afternoon Raag*, makes his love and inclination for music apparent where he has described how different raags in classical music are divided or classified according to different hours of a day and season. The use of the word ‘song’ in the title of this novel, *Freedom Song*, also connotes the novelist’s fascination for music. Apart from this, most of the characters in the novel are found either singing or humming a piece of music. Chaudhuri’s love for music also becomes apparent when he mentions Rabindra Nath Tagore’s songs in his novels. So, throughout the novels of Amit Chaudhuri, we can find such sound patterns or some kind of music in ordinary routine things like chirping of birds, washing kitchen utensils, brushing teeth, meowing of a cat, crying of a baby, and so on.

Amit Chaudhuri’s senses are very active while observation and perception. As a result of this, all kinds of imagery are found in his novels that produce the effect of defamiliarisation. For example, Chaudhuri’s strong sensation for smell is palpable when he mentions how after ripping the peel of orange, “the smell of orange suddenly burst upon the air” (10). Amit Chaudhuri also possesses great taste buds. He could tell the quality of food by the very smell of it. He is fond of good food as he himself admits it in “Aalap”. Let us consider how the novelist’s strong sense for smell and taste together become active when he

says, “The smell of tea, strong and bitter sweet and a little rancid, like sweat, had begun to waft through the kitchen”(9). Chaudhuri’s love for food is apparent through his various food images and metaphors that he mentions throughout his novels. Now, we know that Bengalis are fond of fish and since, the characters in the novels of Chaudhuri are mostly Bengali, so, special mention of fish in their meals is found in his novels. Amit Chaudhuri is therefore a writer in whose works the function of all the five sense organs could be perceived. His novels abound in vivid and beautiful images of sight, sound, smell, apart from touch and taste. Let us consider the following passage where the movement of mosquito is described, which is a beautiful example of image drawn from sight, sound and smell:

Mosquitoes that had drifted in during the talk still wandered about, searching a human smell. On the Young Party members’ arms they had left tiny red postulations; all through the talk there had been the Sound of agitated slapping. (46)

The novelist does not invent anything new to produce the effect of defamiliarisation; rather, he changes the perspective and thus renews our perception of the ordinary. The novelist has a great fascination for the world of children. The world of children is full of fancy and fantasy and they perceive even the ordinary, familiar things with great wonder and mystery. They have their own perspective and so perceive things differently. They take special interest in the world where ghosts and spirits are active and invent their own stories. In the novel, Bhaskar and Manik, as children, believed in the activities of ghosts and spirits. If they sensed anything abnormal and unearthly around that scared them, they promptly muttered the lines they knew by heart to themselves out of fear:

Ghoul’s my daughter,
Ghost’s my son.
Ram’s in my heart,
And no harm can be done. (35)

The childhood of the children in the novel has been aptly described by the novelist. He describes how reluctant these children were to wake up early in the morning and how the two brothers, Bhaskar and Manik fought with each other while getting ready for their school. The novelist also describes how the girls during their childhood have a strong fascination for their tiny kitchen and its utensils. This becomes evident when Bhaskar's wife while cleaning the house finds a doll and Piyu's kitchen utensils. Even the small and minute details related to children do not go unnoticed by the novelist and gets mentioned in the novel. Apart from children's perspective, even the grownups having different perspective have also been vividly described by the novelist. For the same object and thing, the different perspective of children as well as grownups surely brings a difference in the perception of the familiar things.

It is apparent from the works of Amit Chaudhuri that he is deep rooted in Bengal and its culture. Though he lived in Britain, but he is well aware with the society, polity and culture of Bengalis. Calcutta, now Kolkata is present in almost all of his novels. The novelist presents the picture of the city in an interesting and vivid manner. The characters are emotionally attached to this city. As we all know that Bengal has always been a rich reservoir of literature and music. Being in the literary field, he has lot of interest and inclination towards music and this mingling of literature and music is found in his works which adds sublimity to his works. Rabindra Nath Tagore, a Bengali, and the first Indian Nobel laureate was also related to music. The novelist frequently mentions Tagore's song with lot of reverence. As far as the language is concerned, the novelist is quite conscious of it, whether it is English or Bengali.

Amit Chaudhuri is therefore a novelist who depicts the ordinary, mundane, daily activities of people specially the middle class and by the magic of his words and language, defamiliarizes the familiar happenings of daily life. Defamiliarization is a process that basically transforms an ordinary piece of writing into a beautiful literary piece of writing with

the help of literary devices and language. In the novel, *Freedom Song*, the novelist does not describe any great event or happening, rather he talks about the daily activities of life in an interesting manner. The novel deals with the lives of specially two Bengali families who live in Calcutta. The novelist has beautifully presented the picture of the city of metropolitan Calcutta with its developments and changes, its culture, society and the emotional bonding of the characters.

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