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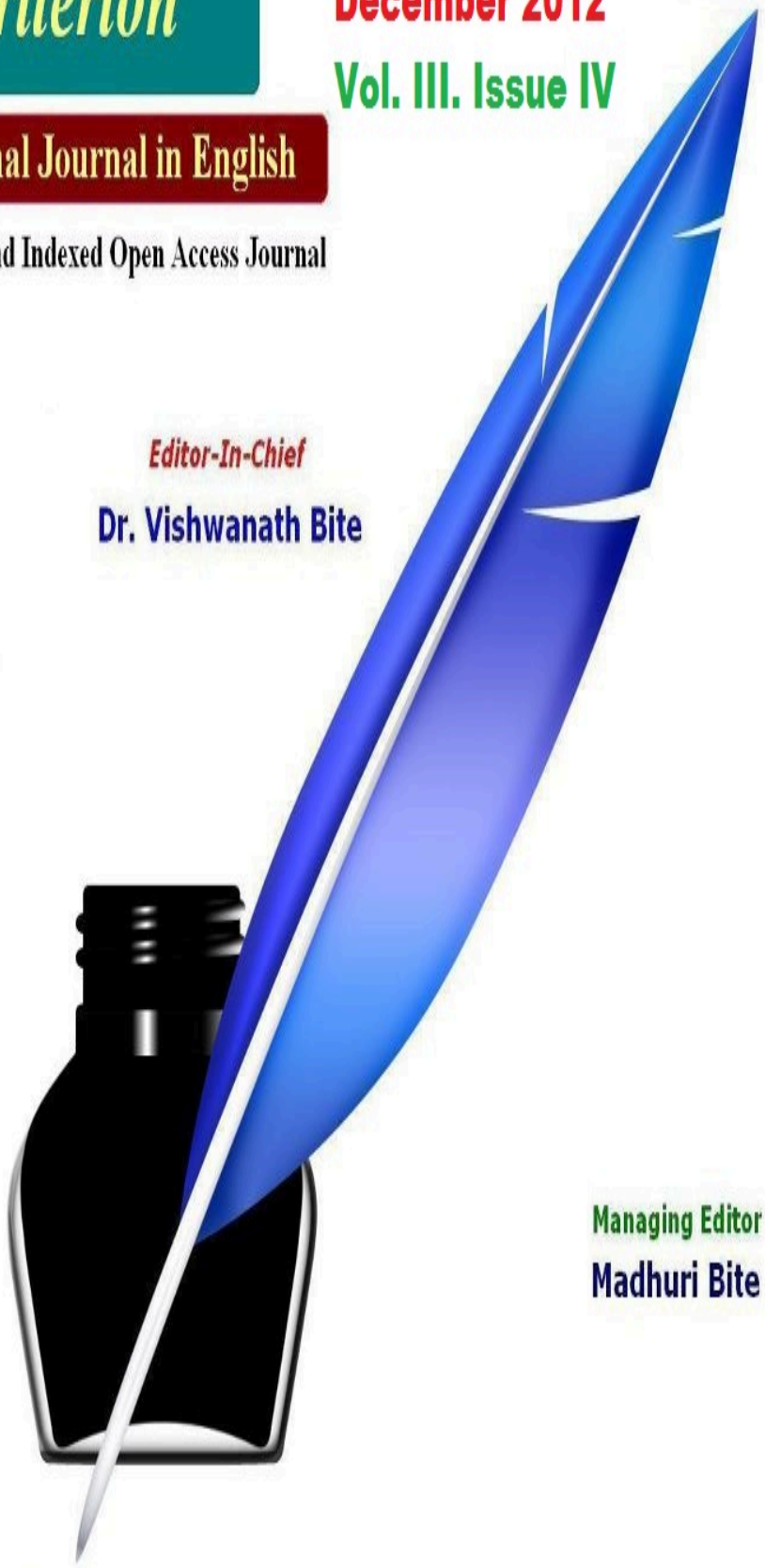

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Passing the Same Streets with Running Leopards: Reading Bijan Najdi's Short Fiction in the Light of Shklovsky's Defamiliarization

Fatemeh Pourjafari
Department of English Language and Literature,
Islamic Azad University,
Kerman Branch, Kerman,
Iran.

Abstract
Shklovsky understood literariness in terms of defamiliarization, a series of deviations from the ordinary language in order to force the reader to perceive the subject in a different way. The effect of this technique is to raise the willing suspension of disbelief and cause the readers to see the world afresh by questioning their conventional perceptions. Keeping this concept in mind, the author of this paper has applied the difamiliarizing perspective to the short stories of the modern Iranian writer Bijan Najdi. Considering such a framework, the article tries to advocate the idea that Najdi has deviated from the conventional usage of language, both in semantic and lexical level, and in this way challenged the reader's thought and imagination that is faced with a text which contains infinite possibilities of interpretations.

Keywords: defamiliarization, Foregrounding, short story, Bijan Najdi

1. Introduction

The contemporary Persian fiction has introduced new and modern approaches to writing by its dynamic experimentation with techniques of narration, plot structure and the use of imagery. Bijan Najdi (1941-1997) the prominent Iranian poet and short story writer has greatly contributed to this trend by his fresh perspective on matters and his distinguished application of poetical language to literature which challenges all the norms of narrative conventions (Abdollahian, 2005:117). His stories do not conform to the regulations and limitations imposed by the traditional fictional frameworks, but have succeeded in the skillful usage of literary devices to deal with the common issues in a distinguished fresh way.

The goal of such avoidance of conventional forms of expression in his works is to "make fresh, new, strange, different what is familiar and known" (Cuddon 214) and therefore deepen the awareness of the readers. The term often used in literary criticism to refer to this particular concept is "defamiliarization", coined and introduced by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky.

Shklovosky believed that "the aim of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived not as they are known" (Shklovsky 12). This principle that slows down the act of perceiving objects is considered as the distinguishing attribute of a genuine art versus mere craft. It provides a new window towards the truth to us; the truth which is usually ignored through the barriers of everyday perceptions. The present study starts with clarifying Shklovsky's defamiliarization and the various ways and devices that the authors may use to create the desired effect. The article proceeds, then, by tracing the manifestation of the mentioned term in Bijan Najdi's two collections of short stories, namely *The Leopards Who Have Run with Me*, and *Once Again the Same Streets*.

Finally, the study concludes that Najdi's stories demonstrate an estrangement of the simple everyday concepts and in this way challenge their readers' thoughts, which in turn results in the infinite possibilities of interpretation of the collections by the audience.

II. Defamiliarization: Deautomatization of Sensation and the Enrichment of the Concepts

Defamiliarization is the poetic technique with the function of forcing the readers to make new perceptions out of familiar, everyday concepts. Russian Formalist literary critic Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984) first coined the term to show how art can change "our mode of perception from the automatic and practical to the artistic" (Selden and Widdowson 31).

Thus, for Shklovsky, every kind of experience in life and particularly in art should be unfamiliar, fresh and intensified. In the same way, if a work does not provide the reader with a fresh representation of everyday objects, emotions and events, it is not considered as an invaluable piece of art and as far as it has failed to fulfill the predetermined duty of literature, which is estranging things, it is useless to be read. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* describes this duty of art as making strange "the world of everyday perception" and renewing "the reader's lost capacity for fresh sensation" (103).

Delaying or prolonging the process of perception is a considerable notion in the Formalist's approach to literature. When the poet/writer defamiliarizes the familiar concepts and actions, we will no more perceive them automatically. As far as they are presented to us as new and unfamiliar things, we need to spend more time to understand them. As a result, the process of perception is delayed or slowed down, which in turn, would make us rethink of the new different perceptions and attend to them. Lawrence Crawford in his essay "Différance in Defamiliarization" discusses that Shklovskýs 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" (209). Art's duty, in this sense, is to create perceptions by overcoming automatizations, which make life dull.

Defamiliarization can happen in different levels and through various methods and devices. The following sections of the article aim at identifying and studying the ways through which Bijan Najdi has exhibited the effect of Defamiliarization on the readers of his fiction.

II.1 Foregrounding

Originated from the Czech theorist, Jan Mukarovsky, foregrounding refers to the disruption of the "modes of ordinary linguistic discourse" with the aim of "making strange the world of everyday perception and renew [-ing] the reader's lost capacity for fresh sensation" (Abrams 103).

This violation may happen in phonetic, syntactic or semantic level and includes a wide range of figurative devices which make literary language distinguished from everyday language. "All figures of speech aim to defamiliarize; to renter the familiar unfamiliar. If they fail, it is because they are either inept or clichéd" (Wall 21).

Metaphor and Simile, comparing two seeming dissimilar things, are two frequently used poetic devices in Najdi's stories. He intentionally applies strikingly unfamiliar comparisons to prolong the process of perception and activate the reader's imagination. Following are some examples of such departure from the standard meaning of the words: "Morteza's throat was like sandpaper" (*Leapards* 17); comparing the echo of the doctor's pace in the cellar to" the trotting of a horse on ice or glass" (26); describing the strange noise of an airplane from the view point of a native Indian "as if thousands of corpses were moaning with closed mouths" (*One Again* 7); "he had thrown himself on the mattress like a bed sheet" (16). In a more complex manner, Najdi uses

implicit metaphor to offer us a fresh perception of a scene or an object which is so familiar and ordinary and does not evoke any fresh response in us anymore: "In a winter that smelled like the tanned leather of the carriage, we saw a tree off that was no more a tree" (*Leopards* 66). Here, tree has substituted a defeated warrior whose political illusions are shattered under the totalitarian ruling system, and through this association, the essential qualities of a brave warrior will be renewed, brought into focus and defamiliarized. In another example he presents the image of the red traffic light and its reflection on asphalt as the splash of "a handful of blood on the face of the street" (*One Again* 139). Actually, this rethinking of an everyday object in a new different form postpones the reader to get the idea which, in turn, lengthens the process of comprehension.

Synecdoche, though to a lesser degree, is used in Najdi's short stories as well. In "he gave a cry in swaddling clothes to Alie" (156), baby is replaced by "cry". "A huge iron was coming forth" (tank) (Leopards 49) and "the black chadors had not reached the square" (women) (126) are other examples.

In this regard, Mukarovsky admits that "foregrounding is the opposite of automatization" because "automatization schematizes an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme" (19). Najdi's writing style can be summed up in his attempt to employ various literary devices to postpone the perception of an object by making it strange and unfamiliar to the reader. There are many examples of personification in his stories as well: "water had embraced Taher" (*Leopards* 7); "all plants could hear his fall" (*One Again* 74); "a leafed autumn was passing the street" (112); "summer held Morteza's shoulder to help him sit" (190).

Other instances of the effective use of figurative devices in Najdi's stories are presented briefly below:

i) Synesthesia: "Morteza could hear the trembling of the street by his ankle" (*One Again* 142); "he wanted to embrace the paperboy's shout" (73).

ii) Paradox: "Many years older than his death" (180); "to scream so silently" (*Leopards* 43).

iii) Ambiguity: This literary technique whose function is to present a multi-layered universe open to different interpretations of the readers, holds a prominent presence in Najdi's stories. A characteristic feature of Najdi's style is to appoint an addressee in many of the stories, to whom all the events are narrated. However, he does not usually determine the identity of this addressee clearly, so that the reader is made to believe that he/she is invoked only to find at the end that the narrator has recounted everything to someone beside him. This confusion immediately puts readers in a defamiliarized state, forcing them, sometimes, to go through the story once more to find any traces of the existence of this newly-found addressee beneath the lines. In "An Indian in Astara" from *Once Again the Same Streets*, there are repeated references to an addressee to whom the events are retold: "little fisher boys never go to sea for fishing (to river, yes), they play on the sand at the beach where the sea throws up its froth (you have seen that, haven't you?) (3). It is not revealed before the end of the story that all the events are spoken to Parvane, the narrator's wife: "This is why I don't have any fingers now… I have anyway… but each as small as a little pin… that's why I am recounting to you whatever I remember from Morteza… from the Indian… from the Kurds. Write Parvane, for God's sake; write it. You see what has happened to my fingers, write Parvane, for God's sake" (12).

David Lodge believes that defamiliarization usually happens by making innovations in form and "exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse" (481). Najdi's creative art has achieved that goal amazingly by drawing upon such radically new forms of

expressions which prevent the reader from reaching a clear notion of the nature of events when the texts are read only once.

II.2. Defamiliarization in Narrative Mode

Narrative mode refers to the ways and methods through which the events of the plot are presented to the audience. A prominent feature of Najdi's stories is that most of them tend to violate the limitations of traditional narrative patterns and by the application of defamiliarization in narrative structure prolong the reader's aesthetic experience. The present study has found three major areas in which defamiliarization of narrative mode happen: the shift in point of view, the use of non-human narrator and generation of self-conscious narrator.

i) The shift in point of view

Traditionally, point of view is usually consistent in fiction and the author adopts a single approach to point of view through which the events are presented. However, the point of view sometimes shifts from one character to that of another in order to demonstrate details unknown to either side.

In “The Day of Horsefalling” – itself a defamiliarizing title – the tragic fate of a horse from the height of prosperity, as the Khan's racing horse, to the depth of wretchedness of being tied to wagon for the rest of his life is presented. The story is told from two different points of view. In the beginning, the first person point of view – the I, the horse – narrates the events: "I had a white skin. The hair grown on my neck had the yellowish color of wheat. There were two blotches of tobacco color inside my hands and I could feel – I suppose – the smell of my being a horse from them" (*Leopards* 21). However, this point of view shifts to third person at the rising action and keeps changing from first to third person point of view through the rest of the story. Technically, the first point of view offers an "immediacy and reality, since we get the story directly from a participant" (Arp and Johnson 231). When the horse narrates the events of its life, the presented world with all its images is totally different from the one shown through third person narrator. The world of the horse is lively and concrete and its utter pains and sufferings are described tangibly. After the horse runs wild and kicks the khan excitedly, it is punished to be a wagon horse, a bitter price it has to pay for his momentary experience of freedom. No other perspective better than first person, can transfer the excess of the horse's distress while pulling heavy load, moving on ice and snow and being injured by the cruelty of the rein and the whip. On the other hand, the reader's distance with this intensified experience grows as the authority of the third person point of view takes control. While the use of I by the horse as the narrator of the events gives the human qualities to the animal and consequently enhances the readers’ degree of sympathy and identification with the animal narrator, the third person provides them with the chance to take a neutral position to judge the events and confirm the utter truth by evaluating the story from different angels. As the story nears its end, the author proficiently weaves together the two points of view at short intervals, so that gradually, even an individual sentence consists the two points of view at the same time: "Atai and Pakar drew aside. Now, the bending hands of the horse laid on the earth and all my neck and the horse's silhouette were on the snow. Atai and Pakar had to help fasten the horse to the wagon again" (27).

The same technique is used by Najdi in "What Is Called Wolf, What Is Called…". With a slight difference the story is divided into two sections: the first section is narrated through the third person point of view by which the essential question of the story is raised. Little Taher, being driven on a car through the wet rainy roads of north, his head laying on his mother's lap, is curious to know what is meant by "twilight". The second section is the narration of the events,

eleven years after that night, by the adolescent Taher, who comes to realize the meaning of "twilight" at the height of the 1971 Siahkal uprising, during which the narrator's father and 30 other guerrillas were executed at the twilight of the 8th of February, 1971. "I walked to remain awaken and find something, with my own eyes, that years ago someone, has brought up, somewhere" (One Again 199). This alternation from third to first person uncovers the deepest unspoken thoughts of narrator and the result of this deviation from the standard paradigm for narration is the lengthening of the reader's aesthetic experience. The experimentation with point of view brings about a change in the modes of perception which is the desired goal of defamiliarization.

ii) Non – human Narrator

A narrator is the speaker or "voice" of the narrative discourse (Genette 186). It tells story and communicates with the addressee and by choosing the proper words seeks to achieve the desired response from them. Conventionally, the narrator is human being – made of flesh and blood – which the reader easily identifies with and believes in. Although animals and nonhuman objects do not naturally talk and we do not normally expect to face with a story with nonhuman or lifeless narrators, Gentte alludes to the possibility of assigning the role of the narrative agent "to an animal […] or indeed to an inanimate object" (244). Richard Harland refers to a scene in which Tolstoy presents the events from the eyes of a horse narrator, as a means of distorting the literary conventions of his time, and admits that this technique is the ground on which "the recovery of nature proceeds by way of art" (150).

Najdi has applied this technique to some stories of the two collections, in which the human world is viewed from the perspective of a nonhuman, inanimate protagonist. In almost the same way as Tolstoy, his "The Day of Horsefalling" brings into play its first person point of view narrator as a horse, who describes the miseries and sufferings that it experienced after being tied to wagon to carry loads all its life. Here, Najdi uses animal as an imaginary commentator and a critic of human conduct. Our ordinary treatment towards animals such as whipping and tethering are overemphasized when the animal itself expresses directly what it feels and thinks: "A strap was between my teeth. My mouth had the taste of leather" (25); "He pulled the bit so vigorously that the corners of my lips were injured:" (25); "The scar on my skin burnt as if someone was writing with the fire of a cigarette on the whiteness of my body" (26). Could it be possible to probe into the suffering world of an animal, captive in the cruel hands of human beings, other than being acknowledged of its agony through its own mouth? This nonconventional choice of narrator provides the reader with the opportunity to discover the corrupting effect of cruelty to animals, which are treated as mere properties, lifeless.

Moreover, attaching the idea of narration to physical objects is another way of defamiliarizing the narrative mode. The narrator of "My Button Eyes" narrates the events after the September 1980's Iraqi attack on Khorram Shahr, Iran, through the eyes of a doll." I have a big head. My face is flat and cheekless. My eyes are two buttons. I can't stand on my own. Someone has to help me walk; otherwise I would bend on my thighs and fall on my face" (*Leapards* 47).

There are numerous narratives about the tragedy of the occupation of Khoram Shahr by Iraqi troops, described through the human eyes that were either within or without the disaster. But here, the familiar scenes of troops, tanks, corpses, bombs and burials are made strange and new by choosing a doll, thrown to the corner of the street after a bomb attack, as the narrator. "Later on, I saw a huge piece of iron approaching me. There was a long pipe-like nose on its face. Its iron legs were round and plowed the earth while moving" (49). Military tank, a very

familiar object to be seen on news programs frequently, is made new to the readers who are faced with the opportunity to draw new conclusions and interpretations of the concept of war and the horror that accompanies it. The defamiliarization of the concept of war which is attained by innovations in narrative structure creates a thinking of the new different perception. To sum up, animal narrator and object narrator can provide social critique due to their distance from the agency of a human narrator and Najdi has benefited greatly from this technique to defamiliarize a familiar concept.

iii) Self Conscious Narrator

One way to defamiliarize the narrative is employing the self conscious narrator. Cuddon defines it as a technique by which "the writer reveals to and reminds the reader that the narration is a work of fiction while at the same time pointing up or exposing the discrepancies between the fiction and the reality which it purports or seems to represent" (536). It can occur when a story is about someone writing the story or includes the characters that are aware of playing role in the circumstances. The primary function is to emphasize the artifice of the narrative, and by the unique transformation of the established narrative tradition, the writer invites the audience to wash away the dust of habits from their eyes.

This technique is proficiently demonstrated in "One Again the same streets" (in the collection with the same name) when Najdi himself appears as one of the characters of the story, in his real profession: the writer of the same story.

An old woman suffocates her old, sick husband by pressing the cushion on his face. Being choked with grief and depression, she leaves the house and wanders through the streets, until she reaches a house with number 21 inscribed on it. From now on, the point of view changes from third person selected omniscient to first person:

> The old woman arrived at the house 21, pressed her finger on the doorbell and kept ringing. I could no more write with that bothering, incessant noise of bell. I threw my cigarette on the uncarpeted floor of the room and put it out with my plastic slippers. […] when I opened the door, the old woman was on the verge of fainting. She was taller than what I had written. She was wearing sunglasses on the tear of her eyes. I had never imagined her with glasses till then. […] Her chin and lower lip were in the same shape that I had intended to write (62).

The woman has come to Najdi's house to ask him to change the events of the story and let her continue her life with the old and weak husband. A character is rebelling against the writer, showing her dissatisfaction with the created world of her creator and forces him to change it. Finally, the writer contends and the story ends with the old woman preparing dinner for her husband and the writer deciding to change the black dress of the woman with a light blue one. This self-conscious narrator enables the readers to know about the processes by which they are faced with the world as a text, and by changing the whole narrative through the story itself, it is openly questioning the existence of any fixed presence. In other words, any singular truth or meaning is denied in a postmodern manner.

II.3. Defamiliarization of Ideas: Fiction as a Means of Rediscovering the Meaning of Life

Although Russian Formalists showed little interest in the content of literary works, their insistence on the "artifice of literary text" by reacting against the inherited conventions of the language system, inevitably led to" a re-examination of the ideology contained within those texts" (Peck and Coyle 210). That's how defamiliarization helps us see into the depth of things and consequently overcome false ideas and visions.

Bijan Najdi invites the readers to wash away their eyes from the prejudices that the collective social consciousness has attributed to certain relationships, institutions and concepts. Traditionally, the concept of "death" connotes gloominess, horror and darkness, but Najdi describes it as a natural phenomenon which can be defined according to the life principles. Death, in this way, is stripped from the conventional partial judgments ascribed to it. By representing death in an intensified, amplified way, Najdi gives his readers the chance to explore this concept uninhibited by the false assumptions which dull their judgments.

The following lines describe the death of the trawled fish poetically: "The strange thing is that the fish can't scream. They die more slowly on rainy days. At the last moments, when they have become too weak to move their tails and do not feel their scales getting warmer (we human beings only feel our death, you know), few drops of rain can drive death two or three steps away from them. It is as if death lights a cigarette and walks around until the rain stops" (*One Again* 3). Death is associated with music in the following lines from "An Elegy for Grass": "He had to stop the car immediately so that the children who often run after their ball were not crushed under the wheels. In that case, Taher could have seen a piece of death on every song, attached to the words for the rest of his life or some drops of blood from every music would be poured in to his ear forever" (108).

Besides the examples of poetic representation of death demonstrated above, there are other instances in which death is introduced through its external manifestations, rather than ascribing metaphysical unknown characteristics to it. In the following lines from "My Button Eyes…" death is not a complex phenomenon, but as simple as a foot shaking before lying motionless: "Fati's mother was also thrown out of the room by that strange blare which torn the air. I fell on the side walk motionless, and Fati's mother – a little further from me – shook her foot twice and then stared with button eyes, as those of mine, at people" (*Leapards* 47). In another story, "send Me to Tunnel", death is underestimated from its oft-attributed grandeur to the frame of numbers on monitors and the signs sent via sensors: "The silence of his pulse and the quietness of his heart were transformed into numbers and the same numbers left the sensor attached to his chest and passed the same black ceiling to solve the simple equation of a death…" (52). With a taint of humor in it, the following sentence indicates the significance of Taher's death as a mere loss of weight on earth: "He watched the indicator of the scales which stood at 49, and this meant that if Taher were not born or happened to die at that moment, and someone burned his corpse, Earth could move around sun, 49 kilos lighter than before" (79).

Irvin Yalom believes that death and life fuse together psychologically and death is "one truth of life" (56). It seems that Najdi has had the same attitude while approaching the death phenomenon. Believing that death is a part of life, Najdi withdraws from the conventional correlation between death and mystery or darkness, and defamiliarizes the common image of death in order to create a novel insight and challenge the reader's mind. Therefore, by "tearing the object out of it habitual context" and creating fresh perceptions, Najdi "forces us into a heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture" (Erlich 629). The idea that man's life is surrounded by fixed assumptions and stereotyped beliefs that prevent him to achieve a deeper understanding of reality is treated symbolically in a story entitled, "A plant in Quarantine". Taher has inherited a "fear" from his ancestors. Through a superstitious belief held by villagers, a small lock is clamped tightly to his shoulder to undo the attack of the fear at his body. The fear ailment (and the lock as its symbol) stays with Taher for years. He has got used to it and feeling it on his shoulder has formed a habit to him: "It was with me all the time, like my bones, like your name which you carry with yourself all your life…" (84). When doctors decide to remove the lock

from his body (symbolically, to break the traditional delusions and customary inherited ideas), Taher refuses. He can't live without it and demands while crying: "don't remove it for God's sake. I can go to military service with this lock anyway…" (85). He clings to traditions, as most of us usually do in the course of our lives, for the fear of falling into an unknown trouble. Najdi figuratively illustrates the way we create traditions and then carry them through the years blindly. By uncovering the nature of traditions and false ideas which are usually made hidden or concealed, this story invites the readers to subvert their habitual thinking. The technique of poetic defamiliarization here prepares the ground for the reader to contemplate on the familiar issue of traditions through a deeper judgment. In regard with the significance of defamiliarization in intensifying our knowledge of the world and society, Michael Clune shows how critics like Bruno Latour finds value in "the defamiliarizing gaze" in which "even the most routine, traditional, and silent implements stop being taken for granted" (447).

In a strange story entitled "blue-body, wet-body" the manipulation of both narrative events and content becomes means of postponing the reader's perception. A young worker, opening a bottle of coca cola after a day of hard work, faces a pretty girl that leaves the bottle and enters his simple poor room. Her name is Pepsi and her presence changes the monotonous course of Mansur's life. They go on an excursion to the city and experience carefree moments of joy and happiness. While they are together, "TV pictures" and "Radio voices" cut off totally and "all the street lights and the lamps of the houses are switched on" (*One Again* 83). The story beautifully illustrates the defamiliarizing effect of love through a non-familiar defamiliarized narrative mode: the love between a worker and a girl made of cola drink. Picking an eccentric beloved with amazingly extra ordinary powers helps the writer to convey the notion that love has the capacity to change the crude realities of everyday life into refined, splendid scenes that could not have been even imagined before.

All the mentioned examples show that Najdi's fiction aims at directing the reader's perception towards a realization which is detached from stereotyped beliefs and habitual thinking. This new realization is achieved when the reader compares a non-familiar conception with an already held one and after an extended and laborious perceptual process can uncover the new understanding hidden in the displayed object.

III. Conclusion

Defamiliarization demonstrates a great deal of creativity on two sides: creativity of the writer to picture the world of his literary work as it exists only in his imagination and not as a fixed objective fact in the external world, and creativity on the part of the reader to make sense of this newly created unfamiliar universe and intensify his awareness of life. This article has reasonably demonstrated the employment of various literary techniques and poetic strategies in Bijan Najdi's fiction whose function is to dissociate the readers from their habitual attitudes towards the common realities of life. This goal is mainly achieved through the violation of conventional narrative modes of fiction, the use of various figurative devices and foregrounding techniques and finally treating the defamiliarizing ideas and themes by washing the dust of habit away from the eyes of readers and inviting them to rethink about their beliefs and traditions. The presentation of worldly life in a non-familiar and ambiguous way foregrounds defamiliarization and as a result the possibility of infinite interpretations and readings is provided for the reader.

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