

A Study of Defamiliarization in the Select Poems of Craig Raine

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Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian formalist, in his seminal essay, "Art as Technique," "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,'..." (Shklovsky 09). He argues that the poetic language must show some difference from everyday language ("Defamiliarization").

In 1979, Craig Raine was honored with the *New Statesman's* Prudence Farmer Award for his poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." He implemented an innovative narrative technique in poetry with this poem. He has written this poem from the perspective of a Martian who visits the Earth for the first time. The readers are made to look at the domestic objects of humans through the eyes of a Martian. The familiar domestic objects are portrayed in a strange or defamiliarized way. For instance, "books are defamiliarized as birds;" "mist as spaceship;" "telephone as ghost;" and "car as a room locked inside." Raine allured a large number of audiences towards his poetry through his narrative technique of defamiliarization.

Craig Raine's poem, "An Inquiry into Two Inches of Ivory" has been marked as one of the best defamiliarized poems. The museum has all the rare collection of sculptures, portrayals and the outfits of the orthodox aristocrats. There are miniatures engraved in the ivory. The scrimshawed ivory as a rare collection in the museum does not feel amazed when there was a new arrival of any rare art pieces. Rather, the scrimshawed ivory feels excited sighting the human world.

The ivory says that they are living "in the great indoors." The great indoor refers to the great museum where all the rare collection of sculptures and art pieces are kept. The second line talks about the domestic animal, cow. The cow is presented through a technological image of a "vacuum cleaner." The action of grazing is looked through the vacuum cleaner cleaning "over the carpet." The comparison can be confirmed visualizing the "swollen udder wobble" used in the next line.

"At night, the switches" in the walls are staring at the people in the houses like "flat-faces barn owls." The switches are compared to barn owls which are always awake in the night. The light glows like the fruit "ripens" in the tree. The "electric pear" are nothing, but the electric bulbs which are in the shape of a kiwi fruit.

“Esse is percipi,” according to Raine refers to George Berkeley, a philosopher, who said, “to be is to be perceived.” Raine points out that he has known the “irony of objects” – all the objects are identified as they are perceived (qtd. in Tuma 702). The objects can tell lies is perceiving the idea of the object in a strange light which may entertain the readers. The readers laugh at the amusing lies of the poet which is presented through the unfamiliar perspective.

Raine insists that the supreme and extraordinary things that are displayed in the museum as marvelous art pieces of culture and evolution are not the only remarkable things. According to him, such objects in museum are ordinary artistic pieces, but the ordinary domestic objects are strange, unusual and artistic devices to project the unfamiliar world. The clothes are lined up neatly in the wardrobe. Normally, the word “echo” is associated with hearing sense. In this poem, the poet associates it with the sense of vision. The glittering clothes with frills keep on ‘echoing’ in the eyes like the sound echoing in the ears. The “jangle of Euclid” is a metaphor for the complicated designs woven in the orthodox garments of Jews. These garments are sewed in the model of Jewish conventions. The garments are decorated with tassels like tzitzit.

In the morning, “the milkman delivers” chilled milk bottles. The milk bottles are in the shape of “penguins” – short and stout-bellied. These milk bottles make clinging sound when milkman carries it. The clinging sound of the milk bottles are not musical. It makes strange sounds which are not the musical keynote. The phrase “Jenkins’ Ear War” refers to an historical event of an ear severed from Robert Jenkins who was a captain of a British merchant ship. The clinking sound of the tea cups reminds the slashing sound of sword in the war. “The giant puts a kettle on the octopus” refers to the tea kettle which was placed on the stove. “An Inquiry into Two Inches of Ivory” is undoubtedly, marked for its defamiliarization of the miniature engraved in the two inches on an ivory. Through the eyes of the scrimshaw ivory, Raine helps the reader to visualize a defamiliarized world of a familiar museum. Artistically, he has employed the technique of defamiliarization throughout the poem.

Raine’s another famous poem, “The Onion, Memory,” describes the life of divorced couples who meet after a long time. The remembrance of the past in their lives is described as a strange event. The poet portrays the familiar world of married couple as friends in the defamiliarized world, after their separation. The life after divorce, as friends, depicts the strangeness in their relationship. Though they are once married and lived together, after their divorce, they become good friends in their familiar world. The friendship between the ex-married couple is defamiliarized and the estrangement effect as friends has been carried throughout the poem.

The “divorced” poetic persona and his wife are walking in the backyard of their house. The untold feelings for each other is defamiliarized in a strange way using the strong comparison of onion. The second line metaphorically, suggests the defamiliarization of the old memories of the couple when they were together. They are maintaining a good friendship. “Uncomplicated weather” describes the flawless friendship of them in the present. The divorced couple “laugh and pause” for sometimes. The old memories make them feel guilty. The “tiny dinosaurs” are the bitter experiences which become a major issue in their lives. Those tiny dinosaurs are crushed in “between the tractor ruts in mud.”

As the couple walk through the park which is “green,” indirectly suggests the smooth relationship between them as good friends. They witness a young boy swinging. The “swinging” of the boy is defamiliarized as the minds of the couple which sway and remind them of their green and everlasting love life. They defy the traditional wedding knots and feel guilty for their separation – “rusty with blood.” The carnal life of the couple has been artistically defamiliarized with subtle metaphor of green, young and become erotically aroused.

Alan Robinson, in his book *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*, describes that even though the lovers are friends now, the memories of their intimate past cannot be erased. They may become friends, even after getting married and divorced – “All's over in a flash.” Without realizing and expressing the true love to each other, time has changed everything without hinting anything – “too silently.”

The trees, outside their house, are “bending over backwards” – the couple still reminded of their old memories to please each other. The trees in the backyard are bending to give space for the wind. The “shinning swords” are the metaphor for the sharp blade grasses. These grasses are sharp at the edge. The belly, mostly, refers to the fat muscles present in the abdomen. Here, the poet says that the belly of the grass is flattened, not sharp to hurt anymore. Raine defamiliarizes the concept of forgetfulness in the lines – how they have sharp criticism in their tongue about each other but in the deep heart, they still love each other.

Raine has recorded his defamiliarization technique through the lines 35-36: “In the fridge, a heart-shaped jelly / strives to keep a sense of balance.” The human body is defamiliarized as a refrigerator which is cold because of the hatred towards each other and being cold-hearted. In the present, the cold-hearts of the couple begin to melt. The hearts after seeing and remembering the past together make their hearts melt, once again. They struggle to “keep a sense of balance” as friends.

The poet compares the old memories of the poetic persona’s married life with an onion. The intimate relationship with his wife is compared to the ‘skin of onion.’ The poet does not mean that he is crying while slicing the onion, but when he was reminded of their physical closeness towards each other. The recollection of such intimate moments - “intimately folded skin” make the poet to cry. The layers of the dress on the skin of his wife, now friend, is metaphorically defamiliarized as the layers of onion. As it is time to leave, the couple are trying to farewell each other. The unspoken sendoff of the couple is defamiliarized as the clock “stammers softly.” They utter same words at a same time and they farewell with unfinished gestures in their hearts.

Raine’s *tour de force* lies in the conclusion of the poem. The poetic persona has come out of his emotional prison. “Friends of mine” describes the displaced emotion as a friend from being a husband. The divorced couple are living in a defamiliarized world of friendship, although they are once married.

Alan Robinson, in his book, *Instabilities in Contemporary British*, says about Raine's poem, "Flying to Belfast, 1977." It deals with the nervous preconceptions of the troubles with a bride's responsibilities of her new role as a wife, and a daughter, he says. The poet defamiliarizes the flight journey of a bride and groom with that of venturing into married life. The journey gives fear and tension to the bride and groom, as they are about to start a new journey of life. The poem concentrates more on the anxiety of the bride.

The word "laugh" does not suit the bride in the wedding ceremony. Though she loves to get married, the occasion makes her feel emotionally upset. The poet defamiliarizes the ignition of flight engine as the whistling tea kettle. Often, the word "boil" refers to the anger, but here the poet portrays it in a different perspective referring to the anguish of the bride that in getting heated up within. The clouds look like the snow which are shovelled here and there. The clouds are defamiliarized shovelled snow, Apple Charlotte, and tufty tail. The clouds also refer to the relatives and family members of the bride. Raine uses images like "Apple Charlotte" and "tufty tails" to defamiliarize the image of clouds where the flight is flying.

The poetic persona, a guest in the wedding, enjoys the sight of Belfast from the sky. Raine describes the ship fleet in the Irish Sea. He artistically defamiliarizes the ship fleet as "faults in a dark expanse of linen." The linen is the defamiliarization of expanded dark blue Irish Sea, where the tiny ship fleets are sighted as faults, from the flight. Belfast has been a developing country. It has large number of tall buildings and industries. The developing Belfast country is defamiliarized as a radio which has been wired up with industries. Though Belfast is intricately connected with many industries they are "neat and orderly" located at the center of the agricultural fields.

In these lines, the readers may link this idea with Philip Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" poem. In the latter poem, the poet describes the weddings as an event like Raine's description of an event. Here as the bride is laughing at the event sarcastically. In "The Whitsun Weddings," the girls are presented in "parodies of fashion" and laughing at the marriage ceremony which is considered to be the "religious wound" and a "happy funeral." The bride's anxiety has increased when she thinks of the "empty house" which is without her parents. And she is also scared of her physical and psychological life with a stranger, the groom. Raine has perfectly used the technique of defamiliarization to match the theme of anxiety of the bride from the ignition of the flight till she enters the empty house.

Raine's another exceptional poem, "Nature Study" is a well-known poem which depicts zoo as an unusual world. He has again proved his power of creating a fresh world. He depicts the zoo as an unnatural picturesque of life. "The lizards are asleep" in the pagodas. The "pagodas" are tall religious building in Asia with tier-building roofs. The sleeping lizards, on the pagodas, is seen as though the lizards are perching in the pagoda. The "milky lid a steamed-up window" refers to the windows in the winter. The foggy blurred windows are defamiliarized as a vapored milk lid. The clock inside the pagodas is defamiliarized as "a sleepy gong." The word "nothing" refers to the meaningless time for the animals in the zoo.

Raine has reverted the world when God had not created anything or anyone. The poet defamiliarizes the God's creation of world as an activity of God writing poetry when he was bored. The creation of the animal world is defamiliarized as composition of poetry. The activities of the snake is depicted in an unusual way. The "cobra knits her Fair-Isle skin" expressed, by the poet, as if the cobra has knitted her own skin in a traditional pattern of Fair-Isle. The skin of cobra is defamiliarized as a dress knitted in a traditional pattern. The word "rattlers" refers to the rattle snakes. The poet says that the rattle snakes "titter over the same joke." The rattling sound is defamiliarized as the tittering of humans. The python, a kind of strong snake, slithers in the ground. The slithering movement of the snake is defamiliarized as if the spring contracts and expands.

The calculative bees are "shut inside the hive" in the winter season. The buzzing sound of bees are defamiliarized as the hymns and hums of the humans in the Sunday chapel. They buzz like the drowsy people in the church. The "wrinkled brain" refers to the sleepy people who are, drowsy, humming in the church. The poet defamiliarizes the crocodiles lying like the wet wooden tree logs, completely covered with sand. They are lying parallel to each other. The grasshoppers are shivering in the winter. The poet, amazingly, defamiliarizes the grasshoppers who are shivering like the humans. They "chafe their limbs" to restore the warmth in their body. They are "crouching" like the humans squat and standing in their marks without moving anywhere.

The ferocious lions are defamiliarized as inactive and sleepy hand. The "rumple-headed lion" is always, inactive and snoozes with its dirty coalition (group of male lions). The walrus is a sea creature. They are "stuck forever on his rock" without any movement. The stuck walrus is looked as "a chaise lounge with missing castors." They are not moving an inch like lounge without the small wheels.

The sleepy seals are playing crib. They are scratching in the ground with their tusk. The chimpanzees are intellectual creatures. They are simply wailing away the time by killing the fleas. The hand movements of them while killing the fleas is defamiliarized as sewing nothing without thread and needle. Raine has artistically created a fresh world out of a normal zoo with different varieties of animals. He has already mentioned, in his poem, that God has created poetry (animals) when he was bored. This defamiliarized poem has, definitely, entertained the readers.

According to Raine, poetry does not demolish the essence of poetry when it is told vividly. Satisfyingly, most of his poems hold the defamiliarized concept of Viktor Shklovsky. The poems of Craig Raine hold different perspectives which have completely alienated him from all his contemporary writers. The poet, artistically, attempts to defamiliarize the artificial objects by comparing it with nature. He uses this technique to critique the technological development of humans in the world.

The artistic strategies of Craig Raine have been represented through defamiliarization of objects and images in his poems. He has thoroughly rendered the ordinary objects to something

unfamiliar and weird. There is so much of perspective shifts portrayed in the analyzed poems. The poems of Craig Raine sometimes remind the readers of a pretty neat magic trick. Viktor Shklovsky, in his essay, “Art as Technique” argues that defamiliarization is more or less, the point of all art. Art means language-strange, as well as the world that the language presents. The poems of Craig Raine bear testimony to this statement. Though Raine has made the language and perspective of his poems strange, he has brought out its beauty through his artistic strategies.

Works Cited

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