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**Signifying Slowly: Defamiliarization and Interrupting Tempo in A Strange and Sublime Address**

Amit Chaudhuri’s novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, is a story obsessed with time. It is a slow novel. Its pages are comprised of the minutia of home life—those things which most novels so consciously pass over. Chaudhuri abandons typical, forward narrative momentum and instead, places present experience under a microscope, lingering over it. At their home, in Calcutta, the novel’s characters exist in a bubble, separated from the frustrating constraints of modernity’s structured notion of time. They have a clock that always runs ten minutes fast; they’re home does not keep up with it. They have a car that consistently breaks down, and its driver—a failed business man named Chhotomama—can never seem to get to work on time. He is a tortoise working in a hare’s world. This temporal theme manifests not only in the plot of the book, but also in the very fabric of the language that the author wields. It is through the use of this language and an artistic technique known as defamiliarization that the intent to question modern time structures truly crystallizes. *A Strange and Sublime Address* is an attempt to question the temporal constraints of modernity and its use of defamiliarization’s narrative slowing language is the vehicle that invokes a slower, older way of life—a way of life that favors present experience.

In order to explain how defamiliarization can slow our experience of a story, I will begin with an illustration. Imagine that someone has a job building stop signs. This person has devoted his or her life to this simple symbol. It is a life spent obsessing over a signifier that is otherwise taken for granted. A stop sign is a tangible object inextricably connected to, yet distinct from that which it represents. Now imagine that it were possible to sever the link
between signifier and signified. If one could look at the stop sign and think not about the represented concept “stopping”, but linger over the symbol itself, the tenor of perception would change. If for a day a stop sign no longer represented a concept, if particulars had no universals, signifying objects would be subject to a reborn scrutiny. The scrutiny with which an infant treats the world would be applied to the simplest and most mundane of objects.

Now, let us replace the stop sign example with a description from a story. That is, let us imagine that a collection of words that is recognizable as representing a concept, is no longer recognizable. This would cause our experience of a narrative to slow. For time can be understood as a narrative. Things happened, are happening, and will happen. One’s life, according to the French philosopher Paul Riceour, is a collection of events which form a “narrative identity” (SEP). Yet, a narrative must be expressed through language, written or spoken. And language, says Riceour, is inextricably linked to narrativity and a narrative is a structure of language which represents temporality (Burton, 43). Therefore, it seems that the perceived sense of time within a narrative would be affected by specific qualities of the language used. That is, the language of a text--while perhaps not explicitly referencing time--may affect how a reader understands temporality in a story.

If this is the case, then using a tool such as defamiliarization--a technique coined by the Russian Formalist Victor Schlovsky--may indeed slow the passage of narrative time. It is perhaps strange that this would be the case, considering the fact that defamiliarization is a method of description rather than a device concerned with plot or structure. But--I quote from Bressler--“defamiliarization slows down the act of perceiving everyday words or objects, forcing the listener or reader to reexamine the image.” In short, as the word implies, defamiliarization renders the familiar unfamiliar. If a thing is described in plain, expected language, then the
cognitive jump from its description, to what the thing actually is, takes place almost immediately. On the other hand, the complex and jarring descriptions of defamiliarization will often cause a temporal gap between the reading of the description and identifying that which it describes. The signifier seems new, and therefore points to no known signified. The semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure asserts that these two parts of a sign—the signifier and signified—are arbitrarily linked. If their relation is indeed arbitrary, then a described object could not be attached to its concept until the object was perceived as a known object with a known referent. Thus, the perceived slowing of narrative.

I will return to the stubborn clock. It is in a room on the top floor of the Calcutta home in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. The room is odd. Time seems to move differently in it than it does in the city. In addition to the clock there is a lizard that lives in the room, and the lizard is described as “ticking urgently and accurately, like the hand of a clock that never runs faster or slower than the exact time.” Strangely the lizard is described as accurate, while the clock is not. However, perhaps the question to be asked is: accurate relative to what? This lizard seems to be in tune to a different notion of time than the one the clock attempts to represent. While in the confines of this room, the clock cannot accurately reflect the notion of fast paced modern time that we are all accustomed to. But the lizard *accurately* reflects a different kind of existence. Quote: “The room itself was timeless, without beginning or end. The furniture and the wall—lizard symbolized another world, another order of calm, inviolable existence.” Without a past or future, without memory or inference, what remains but present experience?

And it is moments of present experience and perception that defamiliarization tries to hold on to. Sheobhushan Shukla writes that Chaudhuri paints his world not “by looking at life through tinted glasses but by removing the layer of the dust of desensitized, habitual perception
which usually lies over it.” Rather than allowing us to move on so easily to the next plot point in a narrative, we are stuck in moments of perception, during which we wrangle with a difficult or strange image. The following passage from *A Strange and Sublime Address*, in which Chhotomama has a heart attack, will provide an example. He was “trying to tear his shirt off. The buttons were coming apart, exploding like peas and falling to the floor.” While this passage is far from indecipherable, it is strange. Chhotomama’s buttons are not just popping off as buttons are usually described as doing. Rather they are “coming apart” and “exploding like peas”. It seems to be the uniqueness of this description--its difference from the usual--that causes us to pause and reconsider. We are forced to prolong the moment of perceiving the image, rather than simply identifying the trope to which it belongs and moving on. All of this slows narrative time. The mental steps necessary to reconcile this description with a known concept causes this scene to move slowly. Therefore, forward narrative momentum is interrupted as our focus shifts to the experience of the present image.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address* Amit Chadhuri invokes a world that is concerned not with plot and forward momentum, but rather with the simple and often forgotten moments of present experience. And by using defamiliarization to slow our experience with the narrative, he seems to suggest that something is missing from our contemporary, structured system of time. In writing in the modern world, Chadhuri has tried to capture that which is so rare: a measure of “calm and inviolable existence.”

Works Cited


