



UNVEILING UNCONVENTIONAL DEPICTIONS: NATIVE IMAGERY IN KAISER
HAQ'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the unorthodox depictions of native imagery in the selected poems of Kaiser Haq. By employing the literary device of defamiliarization, Haq introduces unconventional representations of indigenous themes, challenging traditional perspectives and inviting readers to reconsider their preconceived notions. Through a detailed analysis of Haq's selected poems, this study highlights the significance of Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization in revealing alternative dimensions of native imagery. By examining the ways in which Haq's poetry subverts expectations and unveils unfamiliar aspects, readers gain a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between language, culture, and representation. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader appreciation of the power of poetic language in reshaping and reimagining indigenous imagery.

Keywords: Defamiliarization, Kaiser Haq, Poetry, Sense of humor, Urban landscape, Viktor Shklovsky

Introduction

In the realm of literature, the power of language lies not only in its ability to reflect reality but also in its capacity to reshape and challenge our perceptions of the world. Poets and writers often employ various literary techniques to evoke new perspectives and engage readers on a deeper level. One such technique is defamiliarization, which serves as a means to disrupt habituation and rejuvenate our perception of familiar images and scenes. This paper explores the concept of defamiliarization in the selected poems of Kaiser Haq (1950- present), a renowned poet known for his unique sense of humor and exceptional imagination.

Humans possess an inherent inclination to become desensitized to their surroundings over time, as the novelty of everyday scenes gradually fades away. However, through the use of defamiliarization, poets and writers can transcend this sense of habituation and offer fresh encounters with familiar objects, landscapes, and experiences. Kaiser Haq adeptly employs this technique, skillfully defamiliarizing common and contemporary scenes within his poetry. By infusing his verses with his distinctive sense of humor and unusual imagination, Haq presents readers with an alternative lens through which to view the world.

The landscapes Haq paints within his selected poems encompass a range of subjects, including traffic-congested streets, the ravages of war, encounters with street people, glimpses into the minds of the mentally ill, and the towering minarets that adorn our cities. Through his artful manipulation of language and imagery, Haq breathes new life into these familiar backdrops, offering readers a fresh and unfamiliar perspective.

Viktor Shklovsky's (1893-1984) framework provides a valuable lens to analyze and interpret Haq's poetic craft. By applying Shklovsky's theory to Haq's selected poems, this paper aims to shed light on the ways in which Haq defamiliarizes urban landscapes, explores acts of violence, and challenges conventional notions, such as the portrayal of 'Banalata Sen' in his poetry.

Through a comprehensive exploration of Haq's defamiliarization techniques and their impact on readers, this paper seeks to uncover the underlying motives behind Haq's narrative choices. By unraveling the intricacies of his unique poetic style, we endeavor to offer a fresh perspective on Haq's work, opening up new avenues for appreciation and interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the theory of defamiliarization by Viktor Shklovsky. Defamiliarization is a process of making things strange. In the early twentieth century, European writers abandoned the traditional artistic forms and culture; and started writing in a way that is completely new, shocking and sometimes brutally honest. Inspired by the idea, Shklovsky wrote the essay "Art as Technique" in 1916 in which he argues that when one repeatedly encounters an object or feeling, it becomes mundane and automatic, leading to a loss of perception and emotional engagement. He illustrates this point by saying: "...[I]f one remembers the sensation of holding a pen or of speaking a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us" (Shklovsky, 2017, p. 8). Shklovsky suggests that habitualization erodes the vitality of life, and art serves as a means to reinvigorate one's perception and evoke emotions: "And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (2017, p. 9). The aim of art, according to Shklovsky, is to present things in a unique and unconventional manner. The technique of art involves making objects unfamiliar, forms challenging, and perception extended. Artfulness lies in the artist's presentation, even if the object itself lacks inherent artistic qualities. By following the theory of defamiliarization, an author can transform an ordinary object into something extraordinary, eliciting a sense of astonishment and novelty in the reader:

The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.* (Shklovsky, 2017, p. 9)

As familiarity with an object increases, perception becomes automated, and the object loses its significance. Shklovsky contends that only art can rescue humanity from this process of automatization. He cites Leo Tolstoy's use of defamiliarization as an example, where Tolstoy describes familiar objects and events as if encountering them for the first time. By avoiding conventional names and using comparisons to other objects, Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange and captivates the reader's attention:

Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. For example in "Shame" Tolstoy "defamiliarizes" the idea of flogging in this way: "to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches," (Shklovsky, 2017, p. 9)

Shklovsky also highlights Tolstoy's "Kholstomer" as an instance of defamiliarization, where the story is narrated from the perspective of a horse, creating an unfamiliar viewpoint for the reader. This departure from the human perspective adds freshness and intrigue to the narrative.

The shock and novelty experienced by readers when encountering such defamiliarization demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach. Defamiliarization can be achieved through various means, as exemplified by Tolstoy's narratives. It extends beyond narration and can encompass defamiliarizing images and ideas employed in literature.

Literature Review

Many scholars have commented on Kaiser Haq's work, discussing his place in South Asian and global literature. They have examined Haq's use of imagery, irony, poetic materials, and sense, providing insights into his artistic style and significance. Carlo Coppola highlights Haq's distinction as the first Bangladeshi English language poet known worldwide, emphasizing his role in introducing Bangladeshi-English poetry to the global stage. Coppola acknowledges Haq's participation in the war of independence, which influences his poetry, though Haq's work primarily reflects satire rather than explicit depictions of brutality. Coppola (2001) also explores Haq's portrayal of urban landscapes, particularly Dhaka, showcasing Haq's unique perspective and his ability to capture the beauty and squalor of the city:

The only poem in Haq's first collection, *Starting Lines* (1978), to treat the event directly is "Bangladesh '71."... Otherwise, the poems in the collection show Haq as a spirited, self-assured observer of the urban landscape. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, serves as the aesthetic focus of many of the

poems, which depict the beauty but more often the squalor of this unmanageable sprawl of a metropolis. (p. 480)

Though Coppola's scholastic essay helps readers know about the style and features of Haq's poetry, Coppola does not talk about the elements of defamiliarization in Haq's poetry. And this is a research gap for this paper.

Fakrul Alam emphasizes Haq's awareness of a world in decline and his depiction of Dhaka's landscape in his collection of poems. While reviewing *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006*, Alam in *Forum* writes: "He is only too aware that he lives in a world where things are falling apart, but he knows full well also that "evil...requires no axis/To turn on," and that Dhaka is no worse a location to pitch in together with other flaneurs of the imagination chronicling the absurdities of contemporary existence." (2007)

However, Alam's review lacks a comprehensive analysis of Haq's defamiliarization techniques, which presents a research gap. Additionally, Alam discusses Haq's position in Bangladeshi English-language literature, noting his acclaim and relatively limited critical attention, though this observation may be debatable given the international recognition of other Bangladeshi English-language poets.

Aasha Mehreen Amin views Haq's collection of poems, *Pariah and Other Poems*, as akin to a short film that encompasses imagery from the past and present: "Cleverly he juxtaposes imagery through economically chosen words to recreate stories that have an almost journalistic authenticity. At times he is the perfect romantic at others the jaded cynic but each poem has elements of reality that are all too familiar" (2014). Amin appreciates Haq's ability to juxtapose imagery with economical language, creating poems that possess a sense of journalistic authenticity and familiarity.

While reviewing *Published in the Streets of Dhaka*, Radha Chakravarty in *The Book Review* notes, "Spanning forty years of the poet's creative life, the poems in this anthology span an immense range of ideas, emotions and experiences" (2008). The review overlooks Haq's tendency to present observations in an unfamiliar manner rather than expressing personal feelings directly.

The aforementioned reviewers discussed various aspects of Kaiser Haq's poetry, including his sense of humor, irony, memorable use of native and contemporary imagery, creative ideas, emotional impact, personal experiences, and his significance within South Asian and global English literature. However, none of them acknowledged defamiliarization as a prominent feature of Haq's poetic style. In contrast, I approached Haq's selected poems with the intention of recognizing defamiliarization as the central element.

Discussion

While Kaiser Haq is primarily recognized for his wit and depiction of urban scenes, he can also be interpreted as a poet who employs defamiliarization in his work. Haq presents familiar native images in an unfamiliar manner. According to Shklovsky, a writer whose works are brutally honest and shockingly new can be classified as a practitioner of defamiliarization. In this context, Shklovsky introduces defamiliarization as a means of evoking emotions by perceiving things in a fresh light. To illustrate this, he refers to Leo Tolstoy's story "Kholstomer," where Tolstoy employs a unique narrative perspective by omitting the introduction of a traditional narrator. If Tolstoy can be regarded as a successful practitioner of defamiliarization through his unconventional narrative style, then Kaiser Haq can be considered a poet who employs defamiliarization through his distinct similes, imagery, and ideas.

Reimagining the Urban Landscape through Defamiliarization

The mundane landscapes of Dhaka city have served as the muse for numerous poems by Kaiser Haq. With an astute eye for urban life, Haq keenly observes the ceaseless incidents that often disrupt the peace of mind of many individuals. Through the enchanting power of unique similes, he breathes new life into these images. One such instance can be found in the poem "Inheritance" from his collection *Pariah and Other Poems* (2017a), where Haq writes:

as we wait for the traffic light
to turn green, and when it does,
for the traffic policeman's restraining arm
to come down as he toots his whistle

like a soccer referee signaling Goal!
The jouissance of getting through
is as good as an orgasm. (p. 13, lines 17-23)

In this excerpt, the element of defamiliarization lies not in the narrative technique, but rather in the presentation of the idea and the subsequent comparison. Traffic congestion is a common occurrence in Bangladesh, and people in Dhaka often find themselves trapped in long hours of traffic. As a result, traffic lights have become an unremarkable sight, no longer capable of eliciting any emotional response. However, when Kaiser Haq likens the sense of release from traffic or the thrill of witnessing the green light to an orgasm, it immediately captures readers' attention. Haq cleverly compares the traffic police to a soccer referee, and the sound of the traffic police's whistle becomes as gratifying as witnessing one's favorite team score a goal. The joyous sensation of finally navigating through the traffic is likened to the pleasure of experiencing an orgasm. Thus, the defamiliarization lies within the skillful use of the simile, which evokes a fresh and unexpected response in readers as they perceive the image of traffic. This simile not only delivers a delightful shock of humor but also carries a profound truth within it.

Defamiliarization of Murder, War and the Notion of Aging

Haq's crude sense of humor and vivid similes extend beyond lighthearted subjects, penetrating even the solemn themes of murder, old age, and war. He defamiliarizes these incidents through the use of similes, injecting them with a playful twist or satirical commentary, symbolically and directly. One such instance of defamiliarization can be found in the poem "War" from the collection *Pariah and Other Poems*:

What is war

Well
War is war

But what is it like

It's like sex. (Haq, 2017a, p. 37, lines 17-21)

In this poem, an interviewer questions Haq about war, assuming he would provide a serious and informative response based on his experiences as a freedom fighter. However, shockingly, Haq defamiliarizes the concept of war by comparing it to sex. This comparison is novel and unconventional. Ordinary individuals might make such comparisons, but it becomes distinct when it comes from a freedom fighter who has witnessed the horrors of war. In the final two stanzas of the poem, Haq further emphasizes the absurdity of war thus:

But war
Is not like sex
In one simple respect

It cannot
Give
Mutual Satisfaction. (2017a, p. 38, lines 37-42)

Here, Haq mocks the notion of war. While sex generally brings satisfaction to both participants, war inevitably results in winners and losers, eliminating any possibility of mutual satisfaction.

Moving on to the poem "Kabaddi with Death" from the collection *Pariah and Other Poems*, Haq satirizes people's reactions and the actions of the mass media following the murder of Bishwajit Das on a Dhaka street. The act of murder itself is defamiliarized within the poem. The title alone hints that death is treated as a game within the lines. Haq depicts the city of Dhaka as a place where people play a constant game of Kabaddi with death, devoid of safety or security:

They've got him...
No, he's got away...
The Chase is on again...
There's desperation in those gentle eyes... (2017a, p. 56, lines 21-24)

These lines express the audience's reaction to a Kabaddi game. Through this portrayal, Haq mocks the apathetic response of ordinary people who stood by as Das was murdered in broad daylight, with nobody coming forward to intervene. Journalists were busy capturing photographs and broadcasting live, treating it as if it were a game: "It could be a game of kabaddi / Such as young men might play" (Haq, 2017a, p. 57, lines 25-26). No one came to save the young man from the assailants. Haq then draws attention to another common image in Dhaka: bargaining with rickshaw pullers, a regular and often frustrating sight. He presents a rickshaw puller, clad in a lungi, as a human being who dutifully rescues Das' beaten body, without haggling over the fare:

Or when a man in lungi picks him up
And sits him on his rickshaw and sets off—
No question of a fare here—
Do we trot out a tired cliché
Like 'Angel of Mercy'? (Haq, 2017a, p. 57, lines 36-40)

The act of not bargaining is likened to the role of an angel of mercy. This comparison is entirely fresh, yet closely related to reality, as without bargaining, the rickshaw hardly moves an inch. In the final stanza, Haq satirizes the actions of the mass media and the general public. People tend to forget these humiliating acts, such as murders and rapes, when new incidents occur in town, just as television channels switch to commercials to avoid embarrassment. This absurd act of ignorance or forgetfulness is ridiculed: "But we can spare ourselves the embarrassment / Of pondering the question: it'll soon / Be time for a commercial break—" (Haq, 2017a, p. 59, lines 76-78).

Regarding the concept of old age, it is commonly looked down upon, as exemplified by poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and "Sailing to Byzantium." Yeats expresses regret about aging, stating, "Maybe at last, being but a broken man, / I must be satisfied with my heart, although / Winter and summer till old age began" (1993a, pp. 1893-1894, lines 3-5). He is dissatisfied but compelled to accept his age and the realities of life. In the poem "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats mourns, "A tattered coat upon a stick" (1993b, pp. 1883-1884, line 10), highlighting the lament of old age. He believes that an old man is nothing more than a scarecrow and finds no place for elderly individuals in this world.

In contrast, Kaiser Haq approaches the concept of old age with humor, presenting it in a diverse and truthful manner. In the poem titled "Senior Citizen" from the collection *Published in the Streets of Dhaka* (2017b), Haq writes:

I'll just take things easy,
let eyes wander where they will
forget to zip up after a pee,
wear red underwear on Valentine's day. (p. 3, lines 8-11)

These lines reveal the realities of old age. Some may argue that sixty is the new beginning of youth, but Haq dismisses this notion and labels them as fools in an earlier stanza of the poem. Instead, he candidly confesses to the behaviors of an elderly person. These lines may seem simple and straightforward, but they represent truths that are rarely expressed by aged poets when it comes to depicting old age. This is where Haq's uniqueness lies. He neither regrets nor delves into philosophical musings; instead, he simply presents honest confessions.

Rethinking "Banalata Sen": Challenging the Conventional Image

Kaiser Haq's "ms bunny sen" is a transcreation of Jibanananda Das' love poem "Banalata Sen". The original poem is infused with a touch of nature and love. However, Haq's version shocks readers by presenting the boredom of the twenty-first century. The transcreation is characterized by rough language and the replacement of Banalata with Bunny. It stays true to Haq's time and reflects his honest portrayal of contemporary themes. To compare Haq's transcreation with Fakrul Alam's translation of the original, titled "Banalata Sen," we can examine specific sections:

For a thousand years I have walked the ways of the world,
From Sinhala's Sea to Malaya's in nights darkness,
Far did I roam. In *Vimbisar* and *Ashok's* ash-grey world
Was I present; Farther off, in distant *Vidarba* city's darkness, (Alam, 2010, p. 61, lines 1-4)

A restless wanderer is roaming around the world. Foreign seas, nights in some dark city provide no peace to Das' speaker. The message of these lines has been transcreated by Haq as:

been buggering around this goddamn city
for godknowshowlong –
feels like a thousand bloody years,
no kidding;
from bongshal's rancid restaurants
to gulshan's toxic lake
I've trod every effing inch (2017b, p. 84, lines 1-7)

Haq's transcreation begins abruptly, adopting the melancholic tone of a weary wanderer in a harsh manner. Slang is used to expose the harsh reality and boredom of Haq's time. Furthermore, Haq replaces Das' original images and places with his own urban references, stripping away the touch of Bengali nature. Rural images are replaced by urban ones, such as Sinhala's Sea and Malaya being replaced by Gulshan's Lake and Bongshal's rancid restaurants. Haq presents the chaos of the twenty-first century, where the connection with nature is reduced to occasional holidays and becomes hard to find.

Additionally, Haq introduces a theme absent in the source text: the absurd behavior of postmodern individuals driven by the pursuit of money and materialism. This theme is reflected in the lines:

& all for what
i ask you—
a few bloody takas
for which i have to shout
myself hoarse
tutoring the unteachable
scions of nouveau riche swine (Haq, 2017b, p. 84, lines 15-21)

The concept of tuition, a common job in Dhaka, is highlighted, where one must teach to survive regardless of personal preference.

The lines "I, a tired soul, around me, life's turbulent, foaming ocean / Finally found some bliss with Natore's Banalata Sen" (Alam, 2010, p. 61, lines 5-6) in Das' poem depict a tired soul seeking rest, finding solace in the simplicity and beauty of a rural woman named Banalata Sen. Banalata Sen also represents Bengali nature, as Das finds peace only in the context of his homeland. In contrast, Haq, being restless, seeks moments of peace through champagne and short encounters with Ms Bunny Sen from Banglamotor. These poems depict two different ways of escaping the chaos of life, representing the experiences of poets from different times and places.

Haq's transcreation gives a postmodern face to "Banalata Sen," which is strikingly new, thereby defamiliarizing the original work. Haq's reinterpretation captures the essence of the twenty-first century, reflecting the realities, boredom, and chaos of contemporary life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that Kaiser Haq's poetry successfully employs defamiliarization techniques, challenging the habitualization of Bengali urban readers and offering fresh perspectives on familiar objects and incidents. Haq's use of unique similes and ironic elements effectively reshapes common experiences, inviting readers to perceive them in a new light. Through his work, Haq disrupts the automated thought processes of readers, leaving a lasting impression that may evoke laughter and reflection in unexpected moments. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of Haq's poetry, shedding light on his use of humor, irony, and postmodern elements. Moreover, this paper highlights the significance of cultural hegemony as another theme defamiliarized by Haq, as seen in the poem "Ode on the Lungi." By offering a fresh perspective and inspiring further research, this project aims to broaden the existing viewpoints and encourage future scholars to explore Haq's poetry from further innovative standpoints.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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