

Chapter III

Russian Formalism

There was a fierce debate in Russia on the matters relating to poetic art and its comprehension during the second and the third decades of the twentieth century. Criticism related to the previous century was highly didactic or moralistic in tone and tenor. Many other schools proclaiming symbolism or aestheticism were also prevalent in lesser degree of importance, but a great diversion came with the advent of Russian formalism. It was an influential school of literary criticism in Russia. This group of formalists was united by the idea of liberating poetic diction from the fetters of the intellectualism and moralism which were more and more obsessed the symbolists. They strongly opposed the symbolists for whom language was only a medium. Russian formalism was major reaction against the biographical determinism. They started attacking the sociological, historical and other extrinsic approaches to literary study. It was a group of writers who grown during the period of the Russian Revolution in 1917. In the beginning, the term 'formalism' in Russian formalism concept was used in the sense of disparage by the rivals of this movement, because of its focus on the formal patterns and technical devices of literature to the seclusion of its social values and subject matter, later, however, it became a neutral appellation. The term 'formalism' generally denotes the kind of criticism that lay stress on the form of a work, rather than on the content.

Russian formalism can be divided into two schools. The first school, Moscow Linguistic Circle, led by Roman Jakobson, was shaped in 1915. Its other leading members were Osip Brik and Boris Tomashevsky. The second school, OPOJAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniya Poeticheskovo*

Yazyka, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) was established in 1916, and its distinguish figures were Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Yuri Tynyanov. It can be categorized into three periods: 1916-21, when the attention was paid on poetic language, and prose composition; 1921-28, during this period re-examination of various literary problems were taken under the consideration; and 1928-35, the last phase of this sequence during which it started to lose its importance. In the words of K.M. Newton:

The Russian Formalists rejected the unsystematic and eclectic critical approaches which had previously dominated literary study and endeavoured to create a 'literary science.' As Jakobson put it: "The subject of literary science is not literature, but literariness, i.e. which makes a given work a literary work." The Formalists were uninterested, therefore, in the representational or expressive aspects of literary texts; they focused on those elements of texts which they considered to be uniquely literary in character. Initially they emphasized the differences between literary language and non-literary or practical language (Das 81).

According to the Russian formalists, literary language is distorted language. It violates the rules that govern practical modes of discourse and compels us to feel the texture and sensuousness of the linguistic sign, not to see it merely as a medium for communication. They stated that in practice uses of language the emphasis is predominantly on the message but in literary work, the language consistently draws attention to itself and the emphasis is on the medium of the expression and not only the message. In literary language it is the medium that matters. This view of literary language is propounded by Victor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization. According to Shklovsky, the function of literature and of art in general, is to rouse the reader from habitual modes of perception by taking objects out of their familiar contexts.

In the words of Russian formalists, literary criticism should concern itself solely with the literary work as such; the literary work should not be seen as a means to divulge the author's psyche, nor should it be approached for what it may reveal about the social circumstances during its production. Indeed, the critic should judge the work as an autonomous object. According to Russian Formalists views, poetic language predominantly as a transgression of ordinary language and this transgression makes the reader's awareness to the ways in which language works. The formalists were against the tradition of Russian literary scholarship because of its extensive view of the function of literature that allowed literary analysis to stray into the domains of psychology, sociology, and politics. In rejecting these other approaches, the Formalists actually rejected not the methods, but rather the irresponsible mixing of various disciplines and their problems. The basis of Russian Formalists was the object of literary science. Roman Jakobson formulated this view with impeccable clarity:

The object of the science of literature is not literature, but literariness-that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature. Until now literary historians have preferred to act like the policeman who, intending to arrest a certain person, would, at any opportunity, seize any and all persons who chanced into the apartment, as well as those anthropology, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of science of literature, they created a conglomeration of homespun disciplines. They seemed to have forgotten that their essays strayed into related disciplines-the history of philosophy, the history of culture, of psychology, etc.-and that these could rightly use literary masterpieces only as defective, secondary documents (Lemon and Marion 107).

The Russian formalists laid emphasis on 'literariness' of language and literature. They had spoken emphatically on the 'literariness' of language on the basis of which they distinguished it

from other disciplines. It is an irony of fact that Russian formalists were not taken under serious consideration till 1960s. It is only the decade of sixty when the Bulgarian critic Tzvetan Todorov, the American critic, Frederic Jameson, and the French critic, Julia Kristeva, rejuvenated Russian formalism and valued its contribution to criticism. Rajnath has rightly stressed this with the following words:

The Russian Formalists were the first theoreticians who addressed the question of literariness. Prior to the Russian Formalists, literariness was presumed to exist in all literary works and vague standards were applied to judge whether or not a work was a literary construct. The Russian Formalists were the first to problematize literariness, to subject it to critical scrutiny, to examine the difference between literature and non-literature, and to ascertain the exclusive characteristics of literature and literary language (Das 82).

Literariness was a special use of everyday language. It was the effect of the formal and the linguistic properties of a text- the purpose of criticism was to discern these underlying properties. What a literary text did was to use language in such a way that everyday objects could be made to look different, extraordinary or even strange. Literary and poetic language transformed everyday objects into something else by using words about the objects differently. A literary text represents the world in such a way that ordinary things appear different. This is what engages our attention. This process is what Shklovsky termed defamiliarization.

The formalists stated that there are literary elements present in literary works that make them distinguishable from other forms of writing. The initial base on which formalist theory depends is the conception of literature as a distinct form of language usage that serves a primarily aesthetic function and for this reason does not conform to the rules that govern practical language. The poetic language draws attention by transgressing the norms of ordinary language, thereby

encouraging the reader to consider the ways in which language function in the work. The first and most important step toward the difference between practical language and poetic language can be traced in Leo Jakobinsky's essay '*On the Sounds of Poetic Language*'. In this essay Leo compared practical and poetic language and suggested that:

The phenomena of language must be classified from the point of view of the speaker's particular purpose as he forms his own linguistic pattern. If the pattern is formed for the purely practical purpose of communication, then we are dealing with a system of practical language (the language of thought) in which the linguistic pattern (sounds, morphological features, etc.) have no independent value and merely a means of communication. But other linguistic systems, systems in which the practical purpose is in the background (although perhaps not entirely hidden) are conceivable; they exist, and their linguistic patterns acquire independent value (Lemon and Marion 108).

Russian formalism was the earliest attempt to justify the existence of literary study, and put it on a strong scientific footing. It was an endeavor to create an independent science of literature which examines literary material precisely. According to Roman Jakobson, the object of study in literary science is not literature but 'literariness', that is, what makes a given work a literary work. In Jakobson words, "poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (Nagarajan 136).

Victor Shklovsky's essay '*Art as Technique*' was one of the central statements of formalist concepts of Russian formalism. It announces a break with the only other 'aesthetic' approach available at that time and in that place, and partly because it offers a theory of both the methodology

of criticism and the purpose of art. Here in this essay, Shklovsky attacks on the views, both typical of Potebnyaism, that art is thinking in images and its aim is to present the unknown (most often the abstract or transcendent) in terms of the known. At this time the Formalists required a critical formula that would define the difference between literature and non-literature more precisely and more generally than had been done, and that would at the same time state the purpose of literature. Shklovsky's notion of 'defamiliarization' did both. It is in '*Art as Technique*' in which, Shklovsky introduces one of the fundamental concepts of Russian formalism; concept of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization means, precisely, pulling you up little or taking you by amazement, making you feel that what you thought was the state of affairs is not the state of affairs. The poet Wallace Stevens explains defamiliarization beautifully when he says that poetry should "make the visible a hard to see" (Fry 47) in the other words, it should defamiliarize that which has become too accustomed and predictable. Defamiliarization is the literary method whereby language is used in a way that ordinary and familiar objects are made to look different. It is a process of transformation where language asserts its power to affect our perceptions. Reality is thus modified for us through a special use of language. In short, the content of reality, story or theme is made to look attractively ugly or good through the representation in language. Defamiliarization is therefore about form as it affects content and reading. Art defamiliarizes things which have become habitual. It is opposite of automatization. The usual example given for this is that walking is habitual activity, and it goes generally unnoticed by us whereas dancing too uses the actions of the limbs, but dance is seen which is felt. It is a walk made to be felt. Similarly, the everyday use language we use in our daily commerce is rendered bizarre in poetry because of the formal devices, such as rhyme and rhythm acting upon it. Defamiliarization is what distinguishes poetic or literary language from non-poetic or non-literary language. In '*Art as Technique*' Victor Shklovsky says

that we face certain objects regularly and perform certain acts repeatedly throughout our day to day lives, our process of perception becomes habitual or automatic. After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is before us and we know about it, but we do not realize it. Due to this habituation and automatisaion we do not perceive objects completely, but rather detect by their parts. Such habituation explains the principals by which, in usual speech, we leave phrases uncompleted and words half expressed. In this process, things are replaced by symbols. Complete words are not expressed in hasty speech; their initial sounds are hardly perceived. The consequence of this is that we become so accustomed to our habitual perceptions that we are unable to perceive objects as if for the first time. Habituation gulps works, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war. According to Shklovsky, the function of art is to undo this automatized perception:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. 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', to make form difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of 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 (Nagarajan 137).

According to Victor Shklovsky, our habitual process of perception is suspended when we join to works of art. That is why various techniques are employed in a literary work to serve the function of resisting habitual perception. This is accomplished through the 'making-strange' of familiar acts and objects by taking them out of their ordinary contexts or by showing or explaining them as if they were seen for the first time. In verse 'roughened' texture of speech sounds, the 'retardation' of awaited outcomes in narrative and the 'laying-bare' of devices of construction in

poems and narratives assist to create the defamiliarization. It produces 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.

Russian formalists took both poetry and prose under their province. They gave parallel attention not only poetry but also to prose. Russian formalists explained the concepts of *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot) in the novels. The *fabula* (story) refers to the chronological sequence of events, the story, while the *syuzhet* (plot) refers to the order of the presentation in the narration. Story is essentially the temporal-casual sequence of described events. Its formula, capable of infinite extension, is always of A, then B. In the story every incidents and scene take place according to the chronological order, in the other words, everything occurs as it happens in real life. This is the familiar or simple way of telling something. As it is the familiar way so it is not the artistic way. Artistry, according to Shklovsky, demands both defamiliarization as well as an obvious display of the devices with the help of these the familiar is made strange. Then plot fulfills the condition of the both. *Fabula* (story) is 'the action itself' while *syuzhet* (plot) is 'how the reader learns of the action.' *Syuzhet* (plot) creates a defamiliarising effect upon *fabula* (plot). These concepts are put to effective use in narratology and fictional poetics. The writer of prose fiction uses his raw material, rearranges it and gives it a shaped in such a manner as to create a literary object out of it. The process involves, not a direct, chronological; and literal representation of the material; but selection, concealment, focalization, distancing, and taking up different points of view, all of which go to create the object. Hawthorne's '*The Scarlet Letter*' is superficial simple novel but the novelist distorts both the temporal or cause-effect relations by beginning in the middle, after adultery that properly begins the main action.

Victor Shklovsky in his essay entitled '*Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary*' declares that '*Tristram Shandy*' is the distinguish novel in the ocean of world literature. He says

that it is the most plotted and the least storied. In it there is nothing in the sequence or doesn't fulfill the 'cause and effect' concept in order to progress of the story of the novel. The first impression of the novel is its chaos and disorder of the sequence of the incidents. Here in this novel action is continuously disturbed; the author repeatedly goes backward and forward in order to make it unique creation. About ten pages are filled with quirky discussions or about the influence of a person's nose or name on his characters. Usually such deviations are not visible in the basic and common narratives. When we try to solve the riddle related to the structure of the novel, we are able to find that the technique of disorder accepted by the writer is intentionally and, in this case, poetic. Everything is displaced and transposed in the novel. Chapters in the novel are also not in proper orders. Even the Preface is not in its usual place. Usually preface comes at the beginning of the novel, but here in this novel it is not like this. It covers around twenty four page of the novel, not at the beginning of the book rather in Volume 111, Chapter 20, pages 192 through 203. Sterne justifies this by saying "to let people tell their stories their own way" (Lemon and Reis 28). The ordering of chapters shows another of Sterne's basic techniques – that is stop of the flow of the action. Another device of literature that is adopted by the writer in this novel is the displacement of the time which is easily visible from the very beginning of the novel. The causes follow the result, and the author himself makes the ground work for false expectations. The quibbling about the coitus motif repeats from time to time and bonds together the several sections of this masterfully work. This type of time shifting provides the poetics quality to the novel. Sterne even presents the technique of combining separate story lines to make up the novel. In general, he highlights the very structure of the novel. By violating the form, he obliges us to attend to it; and, for him, this consciousness of the form through its violation creates the content of the novel.

Time is arbitrary in any work of genre, here in this novel arbitrariness of literary time is used as material for the novel. A beautiful example of time as a material is visible in Volume 11, Chapter 8 of the novel:

If the hypercritic will go upon this; and resolved to take a pendulum, and measure the true distance betwixt the ringing of the bell, and the rap at the door;- and, after finding it to be no more than two minutes, thirteen seconds, and three fifths,- should take upon him to insult over me for such a breach in unity, or rather probability, of time;- I would remind him, that the idea of duration and of its simple modes, is got merely from the train and succession of our ideas,- and is the true scholastic pendulum,- and by which, as a scholar, I will be tried in this matter,- adjuring and detesting the jurisdiction of all other pendulums whatever (Lemon and Reis 48).

There is abundance of techniques which are used by the novelist in order to make it a unique creation in the ocean of literature. There are many digressions which make its content defamiliarized. Euphemistic material is another technique which contributes in making of this novel extraordinary.

Boris Tomashevsky is a well-known name in the Russian formalism. His essay entitled '*Thematics*' plays an important role in the understanding of Russian formalism. Here in this essay Tomashevsky throws light on some fundamental issues of the narrative art. He tries to reveal the various elements which are involved in narrative arts. According to Tomashevsky theme makes the work cohere. Tomashevsky added that theme must be contained emotions. The emotions, involved in the theme, play a major role in continuing the interest of reader. The chief purpose of emotions is to hold the attention of the reader or listeners. It would be not sufficient to explain the content in the simple words for the success of work of art, the audience or reader must sympathize,

must be indignant, disturbed. Only then the work achieves the reality. In literary works the orthodox virtuous hero and the villain straightly express this positive or negative appraisal. The theme of work is usually painted; it arouses and evokes feelings of hostility or compassion according to system of values. We should remember that this emotional coloration is integral in the work; it is not enforced by the reader. Tomashevsky says that theme is the essential part of any work which provides the soul and life to any work. What is being said in a work is called 'theme.' The theme bonds the dispersed elements of a work. The work as a complete has a theme, and its single parts also have themes. Anything which is written in meaningful language has a theme; only intentionally meaningless works, because they are basically experimental laboratory exercises of certain poetic schools, have no themes.

Tomashevsky says that theme has a definite unity and is comprised of small thematic elements organized in a definite order. This arrangement can be according to two ways. The first is that in which causal-temporal relationships occur between the thematic elements, and the second one is that in which the thematic elements are contemporaneous. The former are stories (tales, novels, epics) while the latter comes not under the title of 'story', but they are only 'descriptive' (descriptive and didactic poems, lyrics and travel books).

Now Tomashevsky defines the features of 'story' and 'plot' in the novel. He says that time is important for the growth and development of the story but there must be indications of cause also. Tomashevsky opines that if the description is only about the sights and not about the individual adventures of the travellers, we have explanation without story. As weaker the casual connection will be as stronger the chronological connection be. In general practices the story may be told in the actual chronological and causal order of events, no matters how the events were originally arranged in the work. But in the case of plot is not like this. Plot is different from the

story. Though both comprise the same events, but in the plot the events are not placed and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work.

Further Tomashevsky turns towards motif. According to him it is the smallest particles of thematic material that is irreducible. For instance, 'evening comes', 'the hero dies', 'the letter is received' all are the examples of motifs. The theme of an atomic part of a work is called the motif. There may be different kinds of motifs within a work. The motifs which cannot be avoided are called bound motifs; on the other hand which may be omitted without disturbing the whole causal-chronological course of events are free motifs. There are other kinds of motifs. Dynamic motifs and the static motifs are some kind of motifs of their own type. Motifs which are helpful in the change of situation are called dynamic motifs. The actions and behavior of the main characters are some example of dynamic motifs. Dynamic motifs are those motifs which formulate the central part of the story and which keep it moving; in the plot. Motifs which are not able to change the situation are called the static motifs. Free motifs are usually static. Descriptions of nature, local color, furnishings, the characters, their personalities etc. are typical static motifs.

After explaining about the importance of motifs, Tomashevsky pays attention towards the character building. He states that motifs play an important role in making of character. The character is the nucleus which makes it possible to untangle a conglomeration of motifs and permits them to be classified and arranged. The reader must know how to recognize a character, and the character must attract at least some attention. A character is known by his characteristics which define the psychology of the person. Characterization can be divided into two categories. The first is the direct characterization and second is the indirect characterization. In direct characterization the author can characterize the figure directly by straightforward report. In indirect characterization the character betrays himself in his actions and conduct. Sometimes such actions

at the beginning are irrelevant to the story but these are necessary for the characterization. The 'mask' is a major device for direct or indirect characterization. The development of concrete motifs in harmony with the psychology of the character is called the mask. The description of the external appearance of the hero, his clothes, the furnishings of his apartments come under the category of mask. The diction of character, the style of speech and the topics which the hero touches upon in conversation may also serve as a mask. It is not necessary that visual appearance would include in the category of mask. The very name of the hero may fulfill the value of mask. We can distinguish the characters into two categories, static and dynamic character. The static characters are those characters who remain exactly the same throughout the development of the story. These types of characters remain unchanged till the end of the work. There is no progress in their behavior, work etc. On the other hand, there is another type of characters who are continuously changing throughout the work. These types of are mainly responsible for the development of story. The character that draws the most attention is the protagonist. He is the person whom the reader watches with the greatest intensity and attention and who call forth the reader's compassion, sympathy, joy and sorrow.

The Theory of the Formal Method is a distinctive essay written by Boris Eichenbaum. It provides an admirable overview of the work of the Russian formalists. Eichenbaum joined the *Opoyaz* group shortly after its formation in 1914 and quickly became one of its most prolific and influential members. The main purpose of this essay was to show, how formal method evolved and broadened its area of research, and became a distinguish science of literature. Eichenbaum states that it is the isolation, isolation from history, philosophy, psychology that makes the study of literature scientific. Eichenbaum stated that "art demanded that we approach it closely; science, that we deal with the specific" (Habib 605). Eichenbaum said that despite of looking other

disciplines, the Formalists focused on linguistics. The concept of focusing on linguistic was inspired by the work of the Russian linguist Leo Jakobson, who concocted a fundamental principle of the formalist approach to poetics: the difference between poetic and practical language. In his essay '*On the Sounds of Poetic Language*', Jakobson had claimed that practical language contains a linguistic pattern of sounds and morphological features that have no independent value and are merely a means of communication. But on the other hand linguistic system which is employed in poetry, the linguistic patterns of these elements acquire independent value. He formulated the difference between them by saying:

The phenomena of language must be classified from the point of view of the speaker's particular purpose as he forms his linguistic pattern. If the pattern is formed for the purely practical purpose of communication, then we are dealing with a system of practical language (the language of thought) in which the linguistic pattern (sounds, morphological features, etc.) have no independent value and are merely a means of communication. But other linguistic systems, systems in which the practical purpose is in the background (although perhaps not entirely hidden) are conceivable; they exist, and their linguistic patterns acquire independent value (Lemon and Marion 108).

Most of the Russian formalists expressed their views in relation to the work of art with a different perspective. Some focused on the art of poetry while others paid their attention toward the narratives or art of writing novels. Some took the form of the literature for their discussion but one device which was common in all Russian formalists was the 'literariness'. Everybody talked on literariness of language or literature in one way or other. In this way we can squeeze the essence of the Russian formalism in the words that the first step for the Russian formalists was to realize that 'literature' could not be an object of study. Who knew what literature was? Nobody had ever

really known how to define or delimit the objects that count as literature. Then it is better to look it in isolation. Eventually we can say that 'literariness' is the soul of Russian formalism.

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