

Perturbing the symbolic order through defamiliarization in Mohsen Namjoo: A Marcuse study of *Reza Khan*

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Abstract— This research focuses on making a correlation between Lacanian ‘symbolic order’ and defamiliarization in Mohsen Namjoo’s song, *Reza Khan*. Mohsen Namjoo is one of the most controversial Iranian artists, creating constant innovations in his art to challenge the taken for granted concepts and the status quo in general. Mainly, the theories of Herbert Marcuse are applied to Namjoo’s ideas and the song *Reza Khan* to draw on one technique Namjoo implemented in this track. At first, the researcher elucidated the historical figure, Reza Khan (King of Iran during the 50s). In this section, broad details are presented regarding him. Next, Marcuse’s theories are applied to Mohsen Namjoo and his art. Then, the researcher looked for the traces of defamiliarization in his works, in general, and the song *Reza Khan*. As a final point, the researcher claimed what Reza Khan did to the people was psychoanalytically perturbing people’s “symbolic order” (a term coined by Jacques Lacan). Accordingly, the results of the research demonstrate that Namjoo has followed the same pattern in this track.

Keywords— Mohsen Namjoo, Jacques Lacan, defamiliarization, Marcuse, Reza Khan, culture, Slavoj Zizek, symbolic order.

I. METHODOLOGY

Generally the researcher has applied the theories of Psychoanalysis and Frankfurt School in this research. Firstly, the theories of Herbert Marcuse are applied to study this piece of art (*Reza Khan*). Simultaneously, defamiliarization, a term coined by Shklovsky, is also applied to this research. This is done because firstly Mohsen Namjoo has mentioned that he has formalistic approach in this art and secondly, Marcuse believed that defamiliarization is one of the technique through which the artist can display the ‘great refusal’. (Brownuniversity) Therefore, there is conciliatory link between Namjoo,

Marcuse and the concept of defamiliarization. Besides, at the final part of the research, the author also pointed out Lacanian theories including the *symbolic order* and *hysteria*.

II. DEFAMILIARIZATION: A SHORT OVERVIEW

The term defamiliarization (estrangement) was coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his magnum opus, *Art as Technique* (1917) in which he makes a distinction between what is poetic and artistic language and what is ordinary and everyday language. He maintains that:

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 forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky: 16)

In fact, defamiliarization comprises of ‘placing characters and events in unfamiliar contexts, foregrounding dialects and slangs in formal poetry, and employing unusual imagery.’ (Quiin: 112) The purpose of defamiliarization is to slow the process of observation so that the audience pauses a moment and think on the peculiar art given to him/her and reevaluate the common stories.

III. HERBERT MARCUSE

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) was one of the leading and prominent practitioners of Frankfurt school of thought. He was born into a Jewish family in the course of the Nazi crisis. Along with Max Horkheimer, Theodore W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Eric Fromm, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, Jurgen Habermas, they formed ‘The Institute for Social Research’ (Institute für Sozialforschung). In the institute, they had an interdisciplinary approach to the society and social issues. Marcuse held that art, society, and

politics are all intermingled with each other and they cannot be analyzed independently. As of for the growth of fascism, he left Germany for the United States to stay there, the rest of his life. He was very much influenced by Hegel, Marx, and Freud. Consequently, he shaped his own thinking mingling psychoanalysis with Marxism. For the first time, Marcuse printed his thoughts on the matters associated to the future of individuals in industrial society. In his essay *Some Social Implication of Modern Technology*, he maintains that with the progression of capitalism and machinery, the power structure hungers further adaption to the status quo. Later on, he published his magnum opus, *One Dimensional Man*, in which he holds that modern man has lost his individualism, freedom and the aptitude to disagree. As stated by him, the capability of negating, dissenting and non-conformity is vanishing in such civilizations, as it is 'the society' that determines people's standards and vital wishes.

The 'great refusal' is one more term coined by him to delineate the moment of saying 'no' to, and the process and methods of conflicting with the power structure. This is done by 'outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, unemployed and unemployable' living 'underneath the conservative popular base' (Marcuse 2002: 260). Hence, the great refusal is called 'great' since it is executed 'outside the democratic process' (260). The individual 'refuses to accept the given universe of facts as the final context of validation, such 'transcending' analysis of the facts in the light of their arrested and denied possibilities, pertains to the very structure of social theory.' (xli)

Altogether, Marcuse published a number of works in Germany and United States including *Hegel's Ontology and Theory of Historicity* (1932), *A Study on Authority* (1936), *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941), *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (1965), *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (1958), *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (1968).

IV. JACQUE LACAN AND SYMBOLIC ORDER

Jacque Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst. He published *The Mirror Stage* in 1949. From 1952 on he circulated yearly seminars reexamining Freudian theories. Lacan asserts that we are 'imprisoned by the Symbolic' Order (Zizek 2006: 11). Symbolic order means the whole system of law, rules, reality, 'social structures' and also

language. It includes how one's universe is built on since the moment we are born. (Myers: 20). He holds that Symbolic order is the big other, the whole social structures. In reading Lacan, Slavoj Zizek maintains that the big other doesn't exist; meaning that the social structure, the language or ideas are 'sustained by' individuals' 'continuous activity'. (Zizek 2006: 11)

V. MOHSEN NAMJOO

'Hailed as the 'Bob Dylan of Iran' by New York Times' (Fathi 2007), Mohsen Namjoo (1976-) is one of the most noticeable songwriter, globally recognized and provocative artist Iran has ever seen to itself till today. He is celebrated for his 'sly protest' and 'satirical music' which he considers to 'accurately' reflecting 'the frustrations and disillusionment of young Iranians' (Fathi 2007).

Mohsen Namjoo was born in northeastern part of Iran. His first live performance in 1997 was called 'modern mixture of Iranian poetry and music'. Later in 2007, his debut album, *Toranj*, was released; in which one can see the first official advent of what he later termed Iranian fusion. In 2009, he was sentenced in absentia to five years' imprisonment for setting passages from Qur'an to music (Al-Shams surah) with sitar and a western theme'. (Kamali Dehghan)

Namjoo has not stayed entirely out of politics. In 2009, as Iran went through an extraordinary period of post-election unrest, he released *Gladiators*, which was critical of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But he said it was an act of solidarity with those protesting against Khamenei, and that he would not repeat it. (Kamali Dehghan)

'What interests' Namjoo 'in music is the form,... .The tradition in itself doesn't attract' him. (Kamali Dehghan) Similarly, Marcuse holds that 'traditional concepts and traditional words, used to designate a better society that is a free society ... seems to be without meaning today'. (Marcuse 2006: 42) How can this 'deceptive' status quo be mended?

Marcuse goes on to remark 'music' as 'a great force of negation' which can break 'through the false and deceptive appearance of our world, and thus is connected with the great refusal and quest for liberation'. (45)

In 2014, Namjoo taught the course 'Revolution and Poets: Content and Form in Iranian Poetry' at Brown University. In Music he 'constantly blends... Persian classical and traditional music... with western jazz, blues and rock'. (Fathi)

He believes that calling him Iran's Bob Dylan is not because he shares with Dylan the voice quality or method of singing

but because Dylan was a 'poet'; since he was nominated for Nobel Prize in literature. (Namjoo 2013)

Since leaving Iran, Namjoo has been managing diverse scientific performances in which he clarifies about the songs he had made while performing them. He has stated that he tried to create an 'Iranian fusion' and his approach has merely been formalistic. While he is widely criticized by Iranian society for 'the mockery of Persian traditional music and classical music', he holds that he just 'wanted to save Persian music':

It does not belong to the present time and cannot satisfy the younger generation. The fact is that Persian music is very close to other styles, and it is possible to mix in other styles with a little shrewdness. (Fathi)

Moreover, he postulates that a musician should as well be an actor to constitute 'relations' with his 'audiences'. (Fathi)

Marcuse recounts the same issue as following:

It was some sort of despair or desperation. Despair in realizing that all language, all prosaic language, and particularly the traditional language somehow seem to be dead. It seems to be incapable of communicating what is going on today, and archaic and obsolete compared with some of the achievements and force of the artistic and the poetic language, especially in the context of the opposition against this society among the protesting and rebellious youth of our time. ...When I saw and participated in their demonstration against the war in Vietnam, when I heard them singing the songs of Bob Dylan, I somehow felt, and it is very hard to define, that this is really the only revolutionary language left today. (Marcuse 2006: 42)

Furthermore, Marcuse holds that 'art can no longer depict reality'. To give a picture of the genuine truth, the artist should do it in the most 'unreal' way possible. This cannot be 'represented' in 'traditional forms':

For example, the true story of Hitler's ascent to power may be brought out most effectively in the form of a cheap gangster melodrama with a Shakespearean plot of collusion, murder, treachery and seduction (the German poet Bertolt Brecht has made such an attempt). (Marcuse 2004: 169)

VI. DEFAMILIARIZATION IN NAMJOO'S LYRICS

There are many techniques through which Namjoo displays defamiliarization. He shouts in *Toranj* which is a love song,

which lyrics come from Persian classical literature. 'He goes breathless in a part of *Zolf*' and he 'clears his voice in the beginning of *Hasti*' (Abedinifard). These are all acted to bring an instant of shock in the mind of the audience, and consequently ignite the moment of criticism (now whether it is toward his music or generally the medium of music and as the result of that, the society itself). The listener would pause a moment to doubt if this is an authentic song, sang by an authentic artist. This is for Marcuse and also Namjoo the representation of the 'great refusal'. But the question is 'how has Namjoo expressed the great refusal in the track *Reza Khan*'?

VII. REZA KHAN (HISTORICAL FIGURE)

As Hitler has been the icon of dictatorship for the west, Iranians recognize Reza Khan (King of Iran during 1945) as the same. The entire stereotypes articulate the story of him as the one who brought modernization into Iran (with the railway that joined northern parts of Iran to the southern parts), his forceful eradication of Hijab, and ruthlessness in punishing the ones who violated his rules. It's been 50 years since Reza Khan's descent from power. Still, 1979 revolution of Iran, which abolished 2500 years of monarchy in Iran, failed to deliver a more egalitarian power structure. Conversely, nowadays Iranian society supports Reza Khan's deeds, while forgetting the fact that his strategies were entirely autocratic. As a result, the existing Iranian predisposition toward Pahlavi dysentery all together, particularly the father (Reza Khan) is totally sympathetic. It is almost parallel with 'Heidegger's description of the death in extermination camps' when he mentioned that event as 'just another anonymous industrial-technological process'. Heidegger's logic was that the Jews were 'just industrially exterminated'. (Zizek 2008: 6) The same applies to Iranians' feeling toward Reza Khan.

In theory, it is concluded that the imperative factor that triggered the whole 'Islamic revolution' was probably feeding the people with too much 'modernization' without being aware of 'Iranian society, their mentality and their principles' (Zizek 2009 :33-34). Reza Khan assumed he can modernize Iran solely by forcing the women to stop 'wearing hijab and making them look like Europeans, without going through five hundred years of humanism'. (33-34) As a consequence, Reza Khan's chief error was undoubtedly the fact that he couldn't see that people's inclination toward 'traditional values' had been 'rooted in many centuries ago' (Namjoo 2013: 6). For that reason, it is unlikely possible to change it in a couple of years without leading to 'fundamentalism' (Zizek 2009: 33-34)

... some other societies-exemplarily the Muslim ones- were exposed to this impact directly, without a protective screen or temporal delay, so their symbolic universe was perturbed much brutally, they lost their (symbolic) ground with no time left to establish a new balance. (34)

There is no doubt that in such societies, in order to 'avoid total breakdown', people would take refuge behind 'the shield of fundamentalism' (34) that for Iranian society was specifically 1979 revolution.

VIII. REZA KHAN (SONG)

Mohsen Namjoo released the song *Reza Khan* in 2010 talking to Iranian listeners in a critical tone. It starts by asking the listeners to be the 'revolution sq'. Once the 1979 revolution took place, the government changed the name of many streets and squares to names like 'Revolution sq', 'Martyrs st.', etc. in memory of the revolution and its memories. However, this statement has no relation and link to the following sentences, reminding David Lodge's concept of 'non sequitur' way of expressing an idea where 'many aspects' of a piece of art 'resist paraphrase'. (Singer 2011: 173) It doesn't ask the listener to support 1979 revolution but asking them to be different and prepare themselves for a different kind of art, a 'revolutionary' one (when probably he doesn't mean the content of his poem), as 'traditional' ways of expressing the same 'concept' seems 'to be without any meaning today' (Marcuse 2006: 114).

In this study, the lyrics are divided into two separate parts. In the first part, several characteristics of a cruel, illegitimate ruler are listed; exemplary being a 'drug addict', having 'cruel behavior', people not being able to 'mention his name', everyone being 'frightened of him', 'being reticent' (once he mentioned the first letter of some opposition character, his forces silenced him). Notwithstanding, throughout the story these characteristics don't seem to cause a problem for his crown. The problem starts when in the second half of the song Reza Khan starts to 'broadcast' his cruelty. Then, the singer takes Reza Khan's voice while talking about his cruelty.

'Broadcasting' is very much critical as it perturbs the symbolic order. Probably prior to broadcasting, almost everyone knew about his totalitarian methods, but once it is done, they could 'no longer pretend that (act as if) they do not know it - in other word, because now the big other knows it'. (Zizek 2006: 25):

Therein resides the lesson of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes': one should never underestimate the power of appearances. Sometimes, when we inadvertently

disturb the appearance, the thing itself behind appearance also falls apart. (25)

As it has been previously stated, the song divides into two parts; before Reza Khan broadcasting his illegitimate deeds and the parts that taking place posterior to broadcasting it.

The opening lines are spoken in the third person:

Be revolution sq.

Be revolution sq.

Once upon a time a king was walking somewhere in those old days

Tall and good looking, don't mention his name

He was short tempered and everyone was afraid of him

He was reticent, he said 'R' and they built railway for the country

Once upon a time a king was walking somewhere in those old days

Tall and good looking, don't mention his name

Serious looking and a giant

He was short tempered, the king, with the mustache and opium user

He was short tempered and everyone was afraid of him

He was reticent, he said 'R' and they built railway for the country

He was reticent, he said 'M' and they silenced him (Reza Khan's opponent)

...'

Thereafter, the singer himself addresses the hearer while shouting, 'O people, the modernity was brought on through cruel behavior'.

Then the following part of the song starts:

Once upon a time a king was walking somewhere
He decapitated everyone and then he broadcasted it in the media

On Damavand Street there is a square which I will name it after my wife

24th of Esfand (March), in memorial of my mother's name, I kiss her hands

Between the two squares, there is a street, which my name will be on it, 'Shah Reza' (King Reza)

I am the dictator Reza Khan

...

Plus my four wives

I am great, great, great, great

Reza Khan himself is talking of his ego on the surface while being proud of what he does. Zizek explains 'Hegel's notion of List der Vernunft (cunning of Reason), where' one is 'active through the other' (Zizek 2006: 25):

I can remain passive, sitting comfortably in the background, while the other does it for me. Instead of hitting the metal with a hammer, the machine can do it for me; instead of turning the mill wheel myself, water can do it: I achieve my goal by way of interposing between me and the object on which I work another natural object. The same can happen at the interpersonal level: instead of directly attacking my enemy, I instigate a fight between him and another person, so that I can comfortably observe the two of them destroying each other. (25)

The singer presents the contradiction between one letting 'the other does it for him' or personally speaking about the issues. After a while Reza Khan takes a personal tone and disturbs the big other (the symbolic order).

What Namjoo has done in this track is thus precisely the same (what Reza Khan did to the people unintentionally); brutally perturbing the symbolic order. (Zizek 2009: 34) It is worth mentioning that, in this track (and similarly in many other) Namjoo changes the orders (musical orders or Radiff), just like Reza Khan. What Reza Khan did, was to destroy the symbolic order, which includes all the rules and modifications in people and public universe including the Islamic laws that was delivered to the people since the old days. Consequently, this led to a revolution. While following the same motive, Namjoo alters the forms. These forms comprise all the traditional musical forms that were just made up 'somewhere in the history' and at the moment, disobeying them is considered as deadly sin. (Namjoo 2013)

My criticism is to our musicians who play traditional music, they consider themselves very elite, they see themselves better than others. Their mind won't let them go forward. (Kamali Dehghan)

Our musicians weren't interested in anything except for traditional music. They didn't see the need to experiment with other mediums or listen to other music – or as an artist, to go and watch a film, go to a gallery – because they were full of themselves. They thought they're doing something very great, especially because they consider that music to be divine. (Kamali Dehghan)

A similar tendency is expressed by Marcuse:

Ordinary language, ordinary prose, even little sophisticated has been so much utilized by the establishment, expressed so much. They control the manipulation of the individual by power structure. That already in the language you use, you have to indicate rapture with conformity. Therefore they attempt to convey the rapture in the syntax, grammar, in the vocabulary. There is equally great danger in premature popularization of tribally complex problems we face today. (Shargh)

If all contents are *gleichgeschaltet*, incorporated and absorbed into the monopolistic way of life, the solution may be found in the form. Free the form from the hostile content; or rather make the form the only content, by making it the instrument of destruction. Use the word, the color, the tone, the line in their brute nakedness, as the very contradiction and negation of all content. (Marcuse 2004: 202)

Marcuse holds that society needs 'a new language ... a revolutionary language' if the artist of that society wants to break 'the spell of the Establishment' (Marcuse 2006: 114). 'Establishment' for Marcuse is the whole laws and orders of the world including the art itself. Artist should 'assume a new form and function ... consciously and methodically destructive, disorderly, negative nonsense anti-art. (115)

...in a world in which sense and order, the positive, must be imposed with all available means of repression, these arts assume by themselves a political position: a position of protest, denial and refusal. (115)

The same propensity goes with Namjoo:

I wish I could be someone like Banksy in music. Frankly I wish I was so strong that I could say no. I don't want to be seen in public and just want to produce music. (kamali Dehghan)

Establishment and symbolic order embraces the same area of meaning. Namjoo tries hard to 'say no' to the establishment in his art to perturb the symbolic order. Hence, in this song he refers to a poem called *orphan's Tear* by a 20th century poet Parvin Etesami. Referring to a sad critical poem humorously in a beat-up music while playing electronic guitar, is aiming to produce what Brecht created about the character of Hitler in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. It encompasses the 'quality of estrangement which is constitutive for the political function of art' (Marcuse 2004:

p 168). Mingling a classic subject matter (old king of Iran) and *Orphan's tears* poem with a modern medium aims to produce a postmodern, objective, formalistic piece of art. What is produced at the end is a poem that is 'alien to the reality which it indicts'. Nowadays, as Marcuse considered, 'Classical masterpieces' (such as *Orphan's tear*) 'has very little effect' because the 'classical art ... has been made part ... of the official culture'. Therefore, 'they have been domesticated with the prevalent pattern of thought and feeling' and 'they have been killed' (Marcuse 2004: 168). Lacan termed language as the 'torture-house'. (Zizek 2008: 4) Therefore, in order to communicate the most genuine truth through this medium, 'language should be tortured to tell the truth'. (Zizek 2008: 4). What Namjoo does, is 'fusing two various musical genres; first he eliminates the features of each ones. Then he fuses it with another genre. The traditional music is firstly cleansed of its typical features. Then, it is mixed with another genre'. (Sadeqi: 3) Today *Orphan's Tear* is read to refer to the cruelty and brutality of the past kings, not post-1979 events of Iran. Hence, in order to 'sock the audience', one needs 'Brecht's epic theatre' to disrupt their 'taken for granted assumptions'. Thus, firstly the poem *Orphan's Tear* and Persian classical music are 'cleansed' of their senses, connotations and meanings and then mixed with western forms. (Sadeqi: 3)

It is worth mentioning that Namjoo studied theater for one semester at Tehran University. Then, he changed his major to music a year later. Another practitioner of Frankfurt school, Walter Benjamin used the 'technique of montage':

Reproducibility liberates objects and images from their original context of time and space, it becomes possible to recombine and juxtapose the leftover cultural fragments in ways that create new meanings while destroying traditional ones. (Moore)

It is worth mentioning that the artist in this song doesn't aim to come to a conclusion about any truth about this historical character. Namjoo simply questions the establishment. Thus, at the end of the song, the singer declares that the memorial statue (celebrating the revolution) located in 'Revolution sq.' was replaced by a dome. Afterward, his tone changes to the question 'was the modernity brought by a cruel behavior?' which implies hysteria; the 'moment a subject starts to question or to feel discomfort in his or her symbolic identity'. (Zizek 2006: 35) A subject can never be sure:

...the subject's symbolic identity is always historically determined, dependent upon a specific ideological context. We are dealing here with what Louis Althusser called 'ideological

interpellation': the symbolic identity conferred on us is the result of the way the ruling ideology 'interpellates' us - as citizens, democrats, Christians. (35)

In an interview, Namjoo stated that he didn't mean anything political by singing this song, but he prepared this beat-up song so that people use it in their parties. This statement reminds Marcuse's suggestion to depict 'Hitler's ascent to power'. (Marcuse 2004: 169)

IX. CONCLUSION

In this research, the author studied the atmosphere of Namjoo's art in general. A Marcusean reading of the song *Reza Khan* disclosed that on the surface the listener doesn't grasp anything by the 'non sequitur' sentences (lyric) of the song. Although the character of Reza Khan was a controversial figure in the Iranian history and society, Namjoo didn't aim to make a comment through the content. But, the very form of this piece of art is precisely significant. The researcher made a correlation between Lacanian concept of symbolic order and Iranian ethical tradition. These traditions were handed over to them since the old days and construct their symbolic order. Then, the researcher stated that Iranian traditions, including wearing hijab, were rooted in the old days while Reza Khan (the historical character) suddenly perturbed this 'symbolic order'. This, as a result, at the end led to 'fundamentalism'. As stated by Slavoj Zizek, this is the fate of Muslim societies, when they are suddenly presented by modernity. Next, the researcher claimed that Namjoo follows the exact same process in this song. It is precisely similar to what Reza Khan did. Namjoo perturbed the 'symbolic order' (the establishment according to Marcuse). The 'symbolic order' in the Iranian traditional music is 'Radiff' (musical orders) or the establishment in the music tradition. However, mainly the researcher applied Herbert Marcuse's ideas on the art and music as means of saying 'no' or showing the 'great refusal'. Finally, in this research *Reza Khan* and Namjoo's tendency is analyzed to trace the moment of saying 'no'.

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