**Larbi Ben M’hidi University**

**Faculty of letters and languages**

**Department of English**

**Module: Literature**

**Level: 3rd year**

**Lecture: Russian Formalism**

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**Introduction:**

Russian Formalism is a formalist approach that began in Russia, in the second decade of the twentieth century, in Moscow and St Petersburg. It found a new home in Prague in the late 1920s, when the political climate in the Soviet Union has become too repressive, and travels to France where it comes into full bloom in the 1960s and begins to draw widespread international attention.

Like its Anglo American counterpart, this originally Russian approach to literature initially concentrated on poetry. But that is about all two had in common. The English, later Anglo-American, line of development and the Russian one had nothing whatsoever to do with each other.

The roots of Formalism turn to:

1. Aristotle view of poetry “ Poets do not imitate things as they are but as they should be”

2. Sir hilip Sidney developed Aristotle’s idea in his book *The Apology for Poesie*

3. Emanuel Kant’s philosophy of the beautiful which he outlined in his book *The Critique of Judgment1790*

**Key Concepts of Russisan Formalism**

**1. Literariness:** From their earliest meetings, around 1914, the Formalists are focused on what Jakobson in 1921 started to call **‘literariness’** – that which makes a literary text different from, say, a piece in *The Economist* or *Time*. In other words, although they always work with individual texts, what they are interested in is what all literary texts have in common, in a literary common denominator. Seeing the study of literature as a science, they concentrated like true scientists on general rules. Whereas practical criticism and the New Criticism focused on the individual meaning of individual texts, Formalism wanted to discover general laws.

**2. Defamiliarization**:

**\*Defamiliarization in Poetry**: The Formalists believe that in poetry – the initial focus of their interest – ordinary language becomes ‘**defamiliarized**’. While an article in *Time* is satisfied to use fairly ordinary language, poetry subjects language to a process of **defamiliarization.** How does poetry defamiliarize ‘ordinary’ language?

It employs an impressive range of so-called ‘devices’. It uses, for instance, forms of repetition such as rhyme, a regular meter, or the subdivision in stanzas, metaphors and symbols. What these devices have in common is that they always draw attention to *themselves*: they constantly remind us that we are dealing with language and not with the real world because they signal their own difference from the non-literary language that we ordinarily use. For the Formalists, then, poetry is not poetry because it employs time-honoured and profound themes to explore the human condition, but rather because in the process of defamiliarizing the language draws attention to its own artificiality. As Roman Jakobson said in 1921, poetry is a form of language characterized by an orientation towards its own form. What it first of all allows us to see in a fresh manner is language itself. What that language refers to – what it communicates – is of secondary importance.

It is this linguistic defamiliarization that then leads to a perceptual defamiliarization on the part of the reader, to a renewed and fresh way of looking at the world. Viktor Shklovsky put it in 1917, literature has the ability to make us see the world anew – to make that which has become familiar, because we have been overexposed to it, strange again. But although the Formalists were prepared to recognize this as a not unimportant effect of literature, they initially relegated it to the far background. The social function of literature, either as the repository of the best that had been thought and said, or as one of the great revitalizers (with the other arts) of our perception of the world around us, largely left them cold in the first phase of their explorations. For the New Critics the formal aspects of literary works were not unimportant because from their perspective meaning was always bound up with form. Still, they were first of all interested in the form in which a poem presented itself because a close scrutiny of its formal aspects would reveal the complex of oppositions and tensions that constituted the poem’s real meaning. But the Formalists were after what they considered bigger game and in order to do so ignored literature’s referential function.

**\*Defamiliarization in Fiction**: In 1925 Boris Tomashevski, building upon earlier efforts of his

colleagues, formulated the fullest Formalist answer to the question of how to distinguish the language of fiction from ordinary language. The difference, he argued, is not so much a difference in language but a difference in *presentation.*

***Fabula* and *syuzhet:*** While the *fabula* is a straightforward account of something, the Suyuzhet is the story as it is actually told and it is the *syuzhet* that has the defamiliarizing effect that devices have inpoetry: like for instance rhyme, the *syuzhet* calls attention toitself. It will immediately be obvious that one and the same *fabula* can give rise to a good many *syuzhets*. That insight became the basis for a book that much later would enjoy widespread influence, Vladimir Propp’s 1928 *The Morphology of the* *Folktale*.

It had struck Propp that if you looked closer at many Russian folktales and fairytales you actually found one and the same underlying story. In *Folktale,* he tries to show how a hundred different tales are in fact variations upon – in other words, *syuzhets* of – what seemed to be one and the same underlying *fabula*. Propp very ingeniously solves this problem by thinking in terms of *actors* and *functions*, by which he means acts or events that crucially help the story along. Propp distinguishes a limited number of actors– hero, villain, seeker (often the hero), helper, false hero, princess – and thirty-one functions that always appear in the same sequence.