



Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive Approach of Reading Text

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Abstract:

Deconstruction is one of the approaches to literary criticisms that emerged in the late 1960's. It has been the subject of controversy in contemporary literary theory. Jacques Derrida, the successor to structuralism has developed a wonderful and groundbreaking theory Deconstruction. Derrida, the central figure of post structuralism, sets out a deep study on structuralism, where he finds some inherent weaknesses on it. Derrida first questions on the way how structures are made. Structuralism views that various references are needed in understanding a work of art. On the other hand, Derrida argues there is no such reference because nothing is fixed, exact, and finite in the true structuralist sense. The center also plays an important role in orienting, balancing and organizing the structure. Nobody can conceive an unorganized structure. The organizing principle of the structure is to limit the play of the structure. At the center the substitution and transformation of structure is forbidden. The center is the governing principle of the structure. Deconstruction has attempted to explore the subversion of oppositions and hierarchies on any text. In other words, one can say that deconstruction is a kind of reading a text. It means not to destruct the work of an author but to show the different meanings at work in language.

Key words: Deconstruction, marginalization, psychoanalysis, structuralism, aporia.

Introduction:

With the passage of time literary theory continued to grow more philosophical and objective, and it shifts its emphasis from the author to the text and the reader in the contemporary literary theory. While discussing Derrida's deconstruction, it is important to analyze social structure of Derrida's time and the important philosophers who influenced Derrida and helped him in formulating his deconstructive strategy. Regarding the background that is essential in framing Derrida's career is his nationality of being a Jew. Firstly, it is his sense of belonging to a marginal deprived culture and the tradition of Jew. This experience of marginalization has influenced him in the development of the theory, deconstruction. Another important factor which influenced Derrida to the finding of his deconstructive analysis is his association with *Tel Quel*, an influential theoretical journal published in 1960 to 1983. *Tel Quel* published varieties of interesting articles by poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Foucault, Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes. Derrida's association with the journal and its members laid an important foundation for making him one of the greatest philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century. The next important factor which became the foundation of Derrida's philosophy is his reading of his past philosophers. It was a fact that

Derrida read the books of many great philosophers line by line and contradicted their statement. However, some of the philosophers really influenced him. It was because of the influence of the great philosophers like Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Husserl, Derrida was on the list of the great contemporary philosophers. Sigmund Freud, the Austrian Physician was generally known for Psychoanalysis. Matthew Sharpe quoted what Derrida said to show his close association with psychoanalysis 'putting into question the primacy of consciousness'.¹

Derrida examined the emergence of the metaphor of writing through the texts of Freud: *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Derrida himself had acknowledged deconstruction's close connection to Freudian psychoanalysis and other philosophers and linguists. In the book, *Understanding Derrida* Matthew Sharpe expresses: 'From the very early on, Derrida hence acknowledges a filial debt owed by deconstruction to psychoanalysis. Alongside, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure and Levinas, the theory inaugurated by Freud stands as one of his primary (re)sources.'²

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has been the subject of controversy in contemporary literary theory. Jacques Derrida, the successor to structuralism has developed a wonderful and groundbreaking theory, Deconstruction. Derrida, the central figure of post structuralism, sets out a deep study on structuralism, where he finds some inherent weaknesses on it. Derrida first questions on the way how structures are made. Structuralism views that various references are needed in understanding a work of art. On the other hand, Derrida argues there is no such reference because nothing is fixed, exact, and finite in the true structuralist sense. Derrida adopts notion of Saussure's 'difference' into difference which Derrida asserts a combination of difference and deferral. Meaning is deferred endlessly to anything within language and constantly postponed. Understanding the meaning of any text is impossible because of the variations in meaning. Hence, one cannot assign fix meaning to a particular text.

The word 'deconstruction' was derived by Derrida from Heidegger's concept of *destruktion* which is the desire for the loosening up of the old tradition of Ontology. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'one distinction between the Heideggerean method of "destruction" and Derrida's "de-construction" is the latter's attention to the minute detailing of a text, not only to the syntax but to the shapes of the words in it'³ Defining deconstruction in any definite word or sentence will be misleading because one gives definition only when something is definite. Since nothing is definite, a definition is meaningless. Christopher Norris writes: Any attempt to define 'deconstruction' must soon run up against the many and varied obstacles that Derrida has shrewdly placed in its path...Deconstruction is not... a 'method', a 'technique', or a species of 'critique'.⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the translator of Derrida's book, *Of Grammatology*, suggests that, 'in deconstruction a text is an open-ended entity with no absolute final meaning. She encapsulates the meaning and method of deconstruction in her translator's introduction of the book, *Of Grammatology*.'⁵ According to Derrida, all philosophical thought is based on the idea of a center which is a Truth, an Origin, an Idea, and an Essence which generates all meaning. This is clearly expressed in the book, *Of Grammatology*: The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix -- if you pardon me for demonstrating so little and for being so elliptical in order to bring me more quickly to my principle theme-- is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word. It would be impossible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence.'⁶ Deconstruction has attempted to

explore the subversion of oppositions and hierarchies on any text. In other words, one can say that deconstruction is a kind of reading a text. It means not to destruct the work of an author but to show the different meanings at work in language. Barbara Johnson writes: 'Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction'. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis', which etymologically means 'to undo'. The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself.'⁷ In the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", Derrida points out several concepts about the nature of structure which is as old as an episteme. Derrida writes: Structure-or rather the structurality of structure- although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring, it to a point of presence, as fixed origin.'⁸

The center also plays an important role in orienting, balancing and organizing the structure. Nobody can conceive an unorganized structure. The organizing principle of the structure is to limit the play of the structure. At the center the substitution and transformation of structure is forbidden. The center is the governing principle of the structure. Derrida says: 'Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is paradoxically, within the structure and outside it.'⁹ The center is within the structure but also outside the structure. The dual nature of the center is what Derrida called contradictorily coherent. He further says: 'center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus'. The concept of the center is problematic to the structuralist view of language. The structuralist assumes that the center is the origin of all things. Within the underlying system the existence of center is possible, which Derrida called 'full presence'. The center cannot be replaced by other elements.

Derrida envisages that philosopher since Plato and even the work of Saussure and Levi-Strauss are all fascinated with yearning for a stable centre. But Derrida could find no central rule in their works. Derrida believes that these philosophers prefer speech to writing. Derrida called this bias attitude as logocentrism. Deconstruction subverts the traditional mode of reading and certain notions on language or text have been taken for granted. Deconstruction focuses on language but ignores the limited area of language. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the translator of Derrida says: 'A certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and

if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture emerges.’¹⁰ Derrida examines Saussure’s view on language. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs that consists of a signifier, signified and referent. Saussure also gives preference to speech over writing. Derrida made a series of arguments with Saussure. Saussure considers signified as more important than the signifier. The actual sound provides us an entry to the intangible meaning in accordance with Saussure. In his view, sound is something external thing and meaning is internal. Derrida argues on this point that metaphysics of presence fulfill the idea of an origin or central or logos as presence within. Saussure declares a natural or arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. So, his view is supposedly free from a centrality. Saussure’s implication is that there is a relationship between the signifier and the signified. Derrida called this as metaphysics of presence. Everything in this world including text, word and whatever it is, the opposite is always there as a trace. Each sign is only a trace of another and no sign is complete without supplement. The notions of trace, difference and supplement are applicable to texts too. So in a text many meanings co-exist. The text has become a point where many meanings from various readings interact and mingle together. Therefore the factor of aporia is always there. An aporia, the Greek word for a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty: once a system has been “shaken” by following its totalizing logic to its final consequences, one finds an excess which cannot be constructed within the rules of logic, for the excess can only be conceived as neither this nor that or, both at the same time—a departure from all rules of logic.’¹¹ Thus, the whole world has been establishing in this notion of truth. Henceforth, deconstruction seriously questions the concept of a stable center. In order to find the meaning we move from one signifier to another signifier. The signifier is the cardinal point of the signified because without a signifier there would not be a signified. The signifier exists at this game of absence and presence of the signified. So, this process will never end. Hence, Derrida evokes the result of the seeking signified beyond the supplement is what “One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source”¹² Derrida focuses on the nature of text which required a precise and exact interpretation. Language creates the whole universe in every respect. Language is acquired in a textual form that have established in the phenomena of difference. Nothing is exterior to the game of language because language has possessed typical feature of difference. Therefore, no reader can come to the conclusive meaning about actual things or identity because language has got an inherent uncertainty leading even to contradictions

and unstable meaning for its distinctive features of traces, postponement, absences, arbitrariness and endless deferment. Derrida thus declares: ‘there is nothing outside the text’¹³ because any reader will discover this process of shifting signifiers within text or in any piece of writing.

Conclusion:

Jacques Derrida initiates deconstructive strategies in literary criticism in one of his books, *Of Grammatology*. The main argument of deconstruction has already been explored by Derrida in a paper called “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”. The seminar has often been marked as the emergence of deconstruction in literary criticism. Consequently, learned scholars and academicians started analyzing how words are capable of producing multiple meanings. Derrida’s deconstruction has resulted in opening up further possibilities of analysis. With the emergence of this theory, the critical theories that existed in the past have become absolutely irrelevant. Any definition or theory is no longer relevant after deconstructive reading. The original form is always a construct and it can always be deconstructed. Deconstructive mode of reading a text has revealed the indefinite and uncertain nature of a text’s meaning. It has shown that the meaning of a text is really indeterminate and has a number of conflicting possible meanings. Derrida’s critique of structuralism has paved the way of further possibilities of analysis. The deconstructive approach of reading subverts the traditional mode of reading a text. After the arrival of this kind of reading, the critical theories are no longer relevant. Besides, literary theories such as, Feminism along with Gay and Lesbian studies and recent studies like New Historicism and Cultural Materialism are also irrelevant after the application of Deconstructive analysis. Even Marxism as a literary theory has become irrelevant.

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