

## DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION: A CRITIQUE ON LANGUAGE

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Generally people understand that literary theory is a body of ideas, and practice of studying literature. Critics often give the value of a particular work based on literary canons, tools and theories. They make judgments through observation as a part of literary criticism. In literary studies, literary theory emerged in academic institutions as a discipline. It has a well defined historical origin.

It was during the early 20th century that several learned scholars and academicians in various European countries came up with the idea that literary studies needed a conceptual plan to achieve an acceptable valid reason. Earlier, literary studies promoted the reading of literature as the expression of society, culture and imagination. For instance, in Chaucer's works one can find the hierarchical social order of the time. In Elizabethan literature, readers could find the reflection of the courtly life of the contemporary people. Shakespeare's sonnets were read and understood with reference to his personal life. However these frames of references are quickly disappearing with the advent of literary theory. The most important concern of this attack was to analyze or study literature in absence of traditional mode of reading by giving a series of references.

Theory like Russian Formalism came out clearly as the first intellectual and academic movement. The Formalists believed in the close and analytical reading of a text. However, this theory failed to impose a complete reform of literary studies. Thus neither Formalism nor any other theory of literature were ever successful in providing valid solution to these problems.

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In the later part of the 20th Century literary theory like Structuralism came into existence with its main emphasis on linguistics. It tries to make literary theory more scientific and rigorous as possible. Structuralism studies the constituents of a text by examining the underlying structures. This mode of study is based on the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on structural linguistics presented in his book *Course on General Linguistics* (1916). Derrida probes into the tenets of structuralism and finds a lot of contradictory arguments in it which is not known to his predecessors. It puts much emphasis on language and structure. It is the structural analysis of language. But Jacques Derrida, the final speaker of the seminar at John Hopkins University in the United States in 31<sup>st</sup> October 1966, delivered a lecture on structuralism. Derrida pointed out that the philosophy of structuralism is rooted in its desire for a stable center. However, there is no stable center. Thus structuralism begins to die as soon as it was born. By using the concept of structuralism, Derrida is trying to dismantle the concept of structure. Derrida strictly rejects and contradicts the structuralism notion. This is expressed in his paper "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences":

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 centre or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin.<sup>1</sup>

Since there is no fixed center, it has created confusions and perplexities between literary work and its interpretation. Whenever any theory is created it contradicts itself and casts into difficult situation which is indefinable. As a result, the interpreters are not independent to do their business because they are governed by a new theory with too rigid rules and principles. This is deconstruction. There is no exact definition for deconstruction but Christopher Norris has given his idea to show that one cannot exactly define what it is, rather mislead us if it were a system or method:

To present 'deconstruction' as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Johnson, also expresses her view on deconstruction which is not destruction of the work of an author but which tries to show the possibilities of having different meaning simultaneously in operation at the work.

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 tearing out of warring forces of signification within the text.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida has coined new critical jargons while discussing about Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics. Saussure gives his view that language can be studied as a structure composed of units called signs. Each sign is made up of another structure -*signifier* (word or letter) and *signified* (meaning or concepts). *Signifier* is the verbal element of a word i.e. the mark we make while writing it or the sound we make while uttering it (e.g. three black marks, C-O-W ). *Signified* is the concept we evoke in the mind of the reader or the listener (e.g. a large female animal kept on farms to produce milk or beef). Thus language is a system of signs . The relation between signifier and signified is purely arbitrary. The real or actual thing is called *referent*( i.e. the real cow) . There is no inherent reason for their relationship because a particular linguistic community constructed and continued to use this link.

However, it was Derrida who extended Saussure's notion on language that signs are meaningful in themselves. They are meaningful through a chain of oppositions that relate signs to each other. Moreover a sign is made neither by reference to some objects of independent thing nor by reference to some signified. It is made by its difference from other signs. Therefore in the system of language only opposite words are relational. The meaning of a word lies in its difference from other words as well as in its relation to each other. Both in spoken and written form, language is identified by the features of differential and relational nature of words. Thus language is a system of relation and differences.

Derrida rejected Saussure's notion of the sign as signifier by disassociating it from the signified. He puts the term signified under *erasure* (*sous rature* in French, a device used to illustrate concept\ meaning of word but require close study) Derrida indicates the concepts are under erasure by drawing a cross mark (X) over them. For example Black, White, Speech, Writing etc. Derrida argues both signifier and signified are not present in the language. For instance, when we look up the dictionary for the meaning of the word 'refer or 'represent' it tries to define the word in a circular and multiple manner .

I) Refer-to mention or speak about somebody or something

II) Reference- the act of mentioning something.

III) Representation- representing , being represented, thing that represents another.

In doing so, one can never come to the final conclusion of signification, yet another signifier is discovered. All signifier points to another signifier in the process of an unending postponement. One will travel a long distance in searching for the meaning. In order to find

out the meaning of the word 'dog' one will use further signifiers like animal, organism, domestic animal, living thing, etc. with more signifier along with the chain of signification. There is no exact, final and stable meaning.

According to Derrida each signifier is composed of an absent signifier based on Saussure's philosophy that meaning is the end result of differences. For example, dog, is a pet animal which is different from cat, cow, goat, horse, etc. Thus Derrida recommended that every word embodies another word. A word has another word within it. Each and every signifier is a chain of differences. All the signifiers are made up of those absent signifier. Here Derrida coined the term *différance* which covered not only the differences between the signifiers but the differential concepts of the signified. Complete meaning is always postponed in language. No one can ever find a moment when meaning is total, exact and complete. Hence words and meanings are never fully present in language because language is a state of dissemination. *Dissemination* is a state of dispersal or fragmentation of meaning where the word itself does not generate complete meaning. Derrida finds that there is no use of the word difference to depict not only difference but also endless deferral. For Derrida, language is composed of unending postponement of the meaning of the words and its possible differences. Therefore the quest of definite meaning is beyond possibility. There is no word or *transcendental signified* (meaning that lies beyond everything) that is equipped with fixed or stable meaning itself. No word can stay outside the game of linguistics deferral and difference. The game of signifiers will never achieve a conclusive meaning.

Derrida further declares that writing and language are the product of difference, different and postponement. He states that all forms of writing is difference. Derrida called the study of difference as *grammatology* (Science of Arche writing).

Derrida has also highlighted the dichotomy existing in speech and writing linguistically and culturally. Saussure made a conclusion that speech is superior to writing because speech is genuine, accurate and reliable. It also concerns only with the person who is speaking at present. On the other hand, writing is implied as something very artificial and indicated as unsound because writing remains alive after the death of the writer also. Therefore speech tends to refer to presence of the speaker and writing refers to the absence of the speaker. Writing always gets less preference to speech.

For this Derrida coined a term called *Phonocentrism* to mean privileging of speech over writing. Speech has the feature of presence where the audience and listener get the truth of what the speaker says. However, Derrida suggested that this truth or reality is built on the idea of center, *logos* or God word. Derrida again referred to this as *Logocentrism* or the

*Metaphysics of Presence* ( the notion that there is a *transcendental signified*, a god- word that underlies all philosophical talk and guarantees its meaning )the central or the presence is seen as truth or God word. He notices the whole principle of western philosophy as firmly grounded on this metaphysics of presence. Derrida further argues that God is a figure having some kind of truth, essence and origin which Derrida called *Transcendental signified* . But there is no *transcendental signified* because there is no fixed meaning. However, there always remain a *trace* (residual meaning). Everything in this world including text, word and whatever it is, the opposite is always there as a trace. Thus the whole world existed and established from this notion of truth. Henceforth, Deconstruction seriously questions the concept of a stable center.

Derrida also noticed that absence is something very unavoidable present condition. Some signs are always absent in the act of speaking or writing. Hence, the absence of sign is a repeatable phenomenon. But communication is made possible only by the repetition of signs. The speaker (addresser) received a word or phrase same as the listener (addressee). Derrida expressed this:

It (written communication) must be repeatable, iterable in the absolute absence of the addressee or the empirically determinable entirety of addressees.<sup>4</sup>

Writing is considered as a sign or representation and can be added to speech. It is a sign that is used in the absence of the speaker. Writing functions as an additional sign system that makes something complete. Therefore it is secondary to speech in the hierarchical order of things. Derrida called this *supplement*, completeness of something which makes the addition of something or substitution of something.

Besides, Derrida also says that signs do not ever signify things or objects. The structuralists believed that the signifier and signified are not connected to each other. There is no underlying relation between the object and the particular word . The relation between the *signifier* and the *signified* is arbitrary. Therefore, signs need something else to make up the deficiency or to substitute continuous dependency on that which is required to complete something existing lack. It is only supplement that fills the necessary part of the whole. Hence some signs are to be put as extra signifiers. But Derrida argues that this signifier is also not sufficient. It requires another signifier to complete itself. Thus the signifiers ever remain deficient. They are always defined through the addition and substitution of other signifiers. Signifiers always perform the task of necessity and abundantly present in spite of the deficiencies. It can also substitute the absence of the speaker. Furthermore, a sign is an

indicator of absence and presence because it signifies some other absent signifier which makes us aware of the absent signifier. This phenomenon of frequent shifting of signifiers lead to signification itself. Derrida usually deals with the two fold meaning of essentiality and excess to describe how supplement is changeable and constantly shifting from one signifier to another. Thus supplement is an ever changing signifier.

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 evoked 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 supplement at the source”<sup>5</sup>

But the repeatable nature of sign is equal to speech as well as writing. The signs never come to an end whenever there is repetition in them. In fact written and spoken signs are repeated in accordance with necessity. For instance, there is a sentence- John is a boy. This sentence does not refer to a ‘boy’ name ‘John’. Some people might have used the signifier ‘John’ before the speaker. It is not necessary to find the first user of this signifier and none of us are interested in its origin too. This simply means that anyone can use the term ‘John’ in various contexts and people will understand that John is the name of a person.

Thus, written and spoken forms are those that depend on the repetitions of signs and contexts in order to fill our requirement at anytime. However, the primary status is given to speech. It illustrates the fundamental feature of deconstructive strategy for the analysis of hierarchical order of things. Both the elements of written and spoken form of language are constitutive part of the whole thing. So, speech and writing are not contradictory to each other but rather each contains the other. Therefore, they cannot be termed as binary opposition.

Next, Derrida focuses on the nature of text which required a precise and exact interpretation. Language created 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. What we have in the form of a text is indeed, an endless process of a sign system where the signifiers are constantly shifting resulting in full of vague, equivocal, absences, traces and multiple

meaning of other texts. Derrida thus declares that 'there is nothing outside the text'<sup>6</sup> because any reader will discover this process of shifting signifiers within text or in any piece of writing. There are many learned scholars and writers who give comment on Derrida's notion of text. Here is Geoffrey Bennington, the translator and commentator of Derrida's works who proclaims:

Text is not quite an extension of a familiar concept, but a displacement or reinscription of it.

Text in general is any system of marks, traces, referrals.<sup>7</sup>

Text is thus a definite area of study, rather a system of traces and endless references. On the other hand text is completely based on *differance*. It is due to *differance* which functions as the source of writing. Bennington gives another comment on the nature of language:

Deconstruction does not have a place for language over here, and a world over there to which it refers... There is no essential difference between language and the world, the one as subject, the other as object. There are traces.<sup>8</sup>

So, Derridian deconstruction illustrates the text's indecidability. Textuality deals with how a text means and not what it means. Derridean deconstruction tries to explore the ramification of textuality. It includes words, meaning and knowledge provided by the text. Thus, any mode of reading shows the slippery nature of language. Therefore, reading is an activity where the reader himself indulges in the game of language. The reader will interpret meaning with the help of devices like *differance*, *supplement*, *trace* etc. what the reader might have not been there in the author's mind. However, the theory of Deconstruction will present us with at least some problems. First, it is an attempt to abolish anything in the world external to the text or anything privileged within it that will help us to determine its meaning. It is an anti mimetic, free-play thesis. Secondly, it is the attack or apparent attack on the text condemned as being incomplete, and to self-contradiction because of its unforeseen implications. This is because reading and interpretation must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language he uses. Thirdly, Deconstruction deals with the problem of establishing under these circumstances criteria for interpretation of the text which do not simply reflect the ingenuity of the critic as he plays about in inter-textual space, and so can meet the charge of irrelevant subjectivism. Finally, if Derridean Deconstruction is to be accepted, all literary interpretations which respect the nature of language are condemned to indeterminacy.

Is it a kind of a culpable retreat from the problems of modern society, as observed by Gerald Graff ?(a kind of textual fiddling while Rome burns ) or is it a form of sophisticated

escapism denying literature any power to engage with 'real' experience or a kind of institutional skepticism which acknowledges only the infinite play of textual inscription? These are the questions that may ultimately lead to another question, as asked by Susan Sontag, Is interpretation a revenge of the intellect upon art ?

## REFERENCES

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