

Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction: An Overview

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Deconstruction, Method of philosophical and literary analysis, derived mainly from the work of Jacques Derrida, that questions the fundamental conceptual distinctions, or “oppositions,” in Western philosophy through a close examination of the language and logic of philosophical and literary texts. Such oppositions are characteristically “binary” and “hierarchical,” involving a pair of terms in which one member of the pair is assumed to be primary or fundamental, the other secondary or derivative; examples include nature/culture, speech/writing, and mind/body. To “deconstruct” an opposition is to explore the tensions and contradictions between the hierarchical ordering assumed in the text and other aspects of the text’s meaning, especially its figurative or performative aspects. The deconstruction “displaces” the opposition by showing that neither term is primary; the opposition is a product, or “construction,” of the text rather than something given independently of it. The speech/writing opposition, according to which speech is “present” to the speaker or author and writing “absent,” is a manifestation of what Derrida calls the “logocentrism” of Western culture—i.e., the general assumption that there is a realm of “truth” existing prior to and independent of its representation by linguistic signs. In polemical discussions about intellectual trends of the late 20th century, deconstruction was sometimes used pejoratively to suggest nihilism and frivolous skepticism. In popular usage the term has come to mean a critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought.

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. There are many learned scholars and critics who criticize deconstruction for not providing valid solutions to the premises and concepts raised by it. However, it is true that deconstruction challenges traditional concepts of reading a text. In literature, deconstruction is a method of analysing a particular literary text. The deconstructive tactics are carried out by the close analysis of literary meanings of literary texts. But there are some internal contradictions of the text itself and these contradictions reveal two or more possibilities of meanings. As a result, the readers sometimes meet the complexities in interpretation

Jacques Derrida initiates such deconstructive strategies in literary criticism in one of his books, *Of Grammatology* (1967). 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 analysing how words are capable of producing multiple meanings. The inquisitive learners investigate on how words mean many meanings simultaneously. Since words can produce multiple meaning the interpretation seems to

be beyond language. This situation can be defined as deconstruction. But there is no exact definition for the word 'deconstruction' in literature.

Christopher Norris has given his idea that one cannot exactly define what it is; rather mislead us if it were a system or method. He writes:

To present 'deconstruction' or 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.

Actually the word 'deconstruction' is derived from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of destruction, which is the desire for the loosening up of the old tradition of Ontology (the study of ultimate reality through the revelation of its inner contradictions and development). In spite of such derivative concept, Derrida expresses in a letter written to one of his Japanese friends: 'all sentences of the type deconstruction is X or deconstruction is not X, a priori, miss the point'. So, 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. Here, 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'.

And 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*. She says:

Deconstruction seems to offer a way out the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality□ thus placing it in the abyss... it shows us the allure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom.

In other words, deconstruction is an activity of a close reading that involves the decentralization of the problematic nature of all centers in the existing concepts of the world. There is always the problem with the center because everyone has the tendency to create the center. 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 - eidos, archè, telos, energia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth.

Since there is no stable center, deconstruction changes completely the ways one thinks about the existing concepts. For instance, for more than two thousand years western culture has been centered on Christianity. In doing so, Christianity is central and other religions are marginalized. Similarly, when religion like Buddhism or Islam or Jainism, or Hinduism is at the center, Christianity will be marginalized. Likewise in a patriarchal society, man is central, obviously woman is marginalized. In a society where Marxism is prevalent, proletariat is central and bourgeois is marginalized. This process will go on so long as we try to centralize something.

Binary oppositions bring forth the desire of a center where one term is central and other marginal. Moreover the center wants to fix the play of binary opposites. Binary opposites are the pairs of opposite things and concepts like nature/culture, white /black, god/man, faith/reason, speech/writing etc. According to Derrida, one can access to reality through concepts, quotes, categories and human mind functions by creating binary oppositions. Out of these oppositions, one is privileged and other is marginalized. For example, when Christianity is at the center, all other religious views are repressed and marginalized. Actually, the formation of such an icon is an attempt to fix the free play of opposites. These icons are made by the particular community or a society as a part of social practices social conventions, rules and regularities, rites and rituals etc. that attempt to fix the play of opposition. Derrida writes:

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that how that things - texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need- do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy.

In a sense, deconstruction is a kind of political practice because it always stands against the imposition of laws, ideas, etc. which are considered as 'grand narratives'. 'Grand narratives' are the ideas and theories which are universally accepted. 'Grand narrative' is the grand ideology that controls the individual or beliefs. It also tries to impose their authoritative ideas on the readers.

When we apply deconstructive tactics in reading a text, the meaning will be self contradicted. Deconstruction advocates that a text cannot have single authoritarian meaning. Whenever a signified emerges, it resolves into another signified. It depends on the configuration of texts and this process goes on endlessly. There is no central thing that can fix the play of opposites. Thus, deconstruction emphasizes mainly on the nature of fixity in human thoughts. It is against centralization, institutionalization and totalitarianism. In spite of such complexities, we always have the tendency to construct the central term and repress the other which is different from the central term. Therefore, Derrida writes:

Whenever it runs up against a limit, deconstruction presses against it. Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility.

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. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim of to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself.

The tactics of deconstruction are carved out of structuralism. Structuralism is the most important concept from which Derrida derived his idea of deconstruction.

Deconstruction arose as a rupture, a break away from what the structuralist thinkers saw that anything could be studied through its underlying structures. 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.

Since the evolution of this earth, these are many general facts, truth and other things that human beings consider as true. But when one investigates minutely, he can find something that is not known before. For instance, 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 fulfil 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.

Derrida further examines how Saussure sets up a binary opposition between speech and writing and favours speech to writing. According to Saussure, speech is common, natural, absolute, complete, and direct and immediately implies to the speaker. But, writing partly conceals language which is used only in the absence of the speaker. Saussure argues further that speech represents

inner meaning; on the other hand, writing represents speech. Therefore, Saussure makes conclusion that speech should be the objective of linguistics. He states 'the spoken form alone constitutes the object'. 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 refers to something very artificial and indicates as unsound because writing remains alive after the death of the writer also. Therefore, speech tends to refer to the 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). 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 remains a trace (residual meaning). Derrida writes the strategy of trace:

The value of the transcendental arche [origin] must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of the arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure. It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin,...it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.

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 believe 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 which the existing relationship cannot provide. 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. It can also substitute the absence of the speaker. Besides, 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 process of signifiers lead to significations 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 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”

Next, 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. 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: ‘there is nothing outside the text’ because any reader will discover this process of shifting signifiers within text or in any piece of writing. Text is thus a definite area of study, rather a system of traces and endless references.

Derrida reveals how writing can be seen as central in Saussure’s own view on language Saussure has given his view that there is arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. For example the sound ‘bat’ remains an independent entity only because it is different from ‘rat’, ‘cat’, etc. So, language is a system of differences. A signifier is what it is, due to its difference from other signifiers in the same language. It is similar in the case of signified also. The signified ‘rat’ has no meaning in itself but only its difference from other concept such as ‘mice’, it gains its identity. There is no fixed origin in the system of differences in language. For example, when one looks up the meaning of the word ‘tree’ one would find series of references and its difference from ‘herb’, ‘shrub’ and ‘plant’. Hence, one would never arrive at a fixed, stable signified or meaning that provides an origin for the whole system in language. Derrida continues his argument that Saussure while describing language is a system of difference; he himself used writing, a graphic system.

Derrida has introduced a wonderful term differance in 1968 while discussing Saussure’s structural linguistics. It is a combination of the meaning in the word differance. It refers to delay or postpone (deferral), the notion that words and signs can never fully express what they mean. But they can be defined through additional words from which they differ. So meaning is always deferred or postponed through an endless series of signifiers. Finally, it refers to the idea of difference itself. It sometimes refers to as spacing (arrange at interval). It concerns the tendency which differentiates

words from another, making it different entities. In doing so, binary oppositions and hierarchies are appeared which generate meaning itself.

Derrida states ‘differance is neither a word nor a concept’ because words and concepts are always different from other words and concepts. It is only this difference that gives their meaning. Despite this view, he again states that ‘differance provides the circumstance of possibility and impossibility of meaning and hence he remarks, possibility of conceptuality’.

Hence, differance covered not only the differences between the words but also the differential between the concepts of the signified. Therefore, complete meaning is always postponed in language. No one can find a moment when meaning is total, exact and complete. Hence substances or entities are never fully present because language is a stage of dissemination. Dissimination is a state of dispersal or fragmentation of meaning where the word itself does not give complete meaning. For example, the word ‘animal’ derives its meaning more as a function of how it differs from ‘living organism’, ‘creature’, ‘organism’, ‘beast’, ‘brute’, ‘monster’, etc. So, the word ‘animal’ does not have a certain stable meaning. Therefore, Derrida has no use for differences in language in closed system or static structure. He coins the term differance to express not only difference but the endless deferral. In this context Derrida states:

We will designate as difference the moment according to which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of difference.

Such a concept of differance means the relation of entities is conceived again as not based on identity of language i.e. word or signified. It is based on difference between themselves, a difference that is resolved into a difference within. Words and concepts are themselves different from other words or concepts and this difference gives their meaning. There is neither absence nor presence in the sign system of language. There is the only play of difference because the sign operates as a ‘trace’ and not as a self present sign. Thus meaning is delayed, postponed and ever deferred. Therefore:

Derrida put in brackets or under erasure, the concept of meaning, neither affirming nor rejecting but suspending it, suspending logic, reason, truth, to leave space for activities, as yet perhaps virtually inconceivable.

Thus, differance is one of the important features of speech and writing. According to Derrida, writing is a system that exhibits the three features i.e. difference, trace and supplement. Language is an endless process characterized by differance. Christopher Norris in his *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* sums up what Derrida sets out to demonstrate in the following terms: that writing is systematically degraded in Saussurean linguistics, that this strategy runs up against suppressed but visible contradictions and that by following those contradictions through one is led beyond linguistics to a grammatology or science of writing and textuality in general.

Derrida’s notion on differance is expressed by Miller in his essay, “Tennyson’s Tears”. Miller views signs repeat differently in different contexts. Therefore, they never come to a fixed stable point. It has no distinction rather always postponed and endlessly postponed. Hence, Deconstruction is a

retracing from one figurative language to other figurative languages. No one can rely on the meaning of a word. There is a crisis in the heart of any word. Miller succeeded Derrida in revealing how a text's meaning collapses upon close examination because language is an ever equivocal and forever slippery.

With the advent of deconstruction, the traditional mode of reading with a series of reference is subverted. Earlier literary studies promoted the reading of literature as the expression of society, culture and imagination. For instance, in Chaucer's works one could find the hierarchical social order of the time. In Elizabethan literature, readers could find the reflection of the courtly life of the contemporary people. But these frames of reference are quickly disappearing with the arrival of deconstruction. However, deconstruction fails to impose a complete reform of literary studies. It does not give a valid solution to interpret a text; rather it gives unending distinction of language. So, whenever any definition or theory is constructed it contradicts, itself and put into bewildered situation. In spite of the controversies in reading a text, deconstruction raises certain issues. In the first place, it is an attempt to discard anything outside the text and anything privileged within the text that help in determining the meaning. Next, it is always engaged in a free play of binary opposition. Deconstruction is an attack on the text, considering text as incomplete and it is self contradictory due to its different features of trace, difference and supplement. Lastly, deconstruction deals with this complex strategy as criteria for interpretation of a text.

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