
Derridean Deconstruction: A Note

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Abstract: Deconstruction is a form of philosophical and literary analysis. It is an outcome of the works by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in 1960s. Deconstruction questions the fundamental conceptual distinctions, or “oppositions,” in Western philosophy through a close examination of the language and logic of philosophical and literary texts. By the close reading of the texts it demonstrates how any given text generates contradictory meanings, rather a unified, logical whole. This paper aims at introducing the basic mechanisms of Deconstruction it textual analysis.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Binary, Category, Logos, Logocentrism, Writing and Difference.

Every discourse, even a poetic or oracular sentence, carries with it a system of rules for producing analogous things and thus an outline of methodology.

-Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), is a towering personality in the Western philosophy. He is the one who exposed the metaphysical aspects that encompassed the Western thought and rejected its mono-centrism and advocated pluralism. After Jean Paul Sartre it is only Derrida who could influence the global philosophies in every aspect. His theory of Deconstruction caused a stir in the philosophical world in the 1960s. Many traditional philosophers have severely attacked Derrida. However, Derrida continued to challenge the Western metaphysics, which he termed as ‘white mythologies’. As the critic Nicolas Royle said we should know Derrida as we are living in the age of Derrida.

No other thinker had ever ruled the philosophical world as thoroughly as Derrida did. He propounded fundamental concepts in every discipline, ranging from philosophy to architecture. His texts demystify the existing thought structures in all the areas like linguistics, writing, life, death, ethics, religion, literature and politics. Thus, Derrida became the defining figure of our time. As Royle put it, asking why Derrida is like asking 'Why culture? Why Education?

Derrida made a sensational entry into the field of philosophy in 1967 with his three books, *Of Grammatology*, *Speech*

and Phenomenon, Writing and Difference. Since then, he had written more than 60 books. Besides these, he had published many hundreds of pages of seminar papers. With his works he not only gained worldwide fame but also became a vital factor in the emergence of the intellectual movement called Deconstructionism. Deconstruction greatly influenced the world philosophical scene. In a way, Derrida brought Western philosophy from its upside-down state to normal state. By being influenced by the thinkers like Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Saussure, Derrida made a fundamental attack on Western philosophical centers. He challenged the idea of the Western reason. He refused to accept that all the rationality that had been practiced until now was the product of a specific historical context and that it was the ultimate center of all contexts. Derrida was critical of Western technological rationality. Like Heidegger he too believed that the task of any philosopher in the modern age is to attack this technological reason.

Derrida's deconstruction, which was popular in the Western world in the 1960s, exposed the inherent contradictions in the then popular Structuralist movement and rejected it. In fact, Derrida opposed the formations of centers and binaries and it resulted in the emergence of Post-Structuralism. Structuralism is based on structures. Structures depend on centers. Derrida attacked on these fixed structures. Derrida's arguments against Structuralism became popular as Post-Structuralism. Post-Structuralism considers forms of

knowledge such as history, Anthropology, Literature and Psychology as textual constructs. It means that knowledge is formed not only through concepts but also through words.

In Derrida's view, all Western philosophy is based on a center or source. This center can be anything like truth, an ideal, essence or God. The notion that all meaning emanates from a center has persisted in the Western world for centuries. For example, Christianity and Christ have been the center of the Western world for almost 2000 years. This concept applies to other cultures as well. In Derrida's view, Western philosophy has been constantly talking about reason, truth, idea etc. In that process it had absolutized them and declared other aspects as secondary. It also attributes unlimited value to reason, rationality, meaning, logic, language and identity.

The traditional Western philosophy considers other aspects like differentiation, signification, repetition, and writing as worthless and secondary. It has built itself upon the overwhelming sense that all terms outside of this first category in binaries it had developed irrefutably assert truth. In that process it was formed as a scheme or project and established itself as an authorized center in the determination of truth or meaning. Derrida attacked precisely this center for which he was criticized the orthodox philosophers. This attack on Derrida is conspicuous in the infamous Cambridge event, in which a good number of conservative thinkers opposed the decision of the Cambridge

University to confer honorary doctorate on Derrida in the 1990s.

As it is stated earlier, every culture in the world has its own center or centers. As a result, the cultures outside these centers are pushed to the peripheries. They are seen as unimportant, secondary and even suppressed. Understanding things from one center leaves other things unimportant. For example, in patriarchy, man is at the center and woman is reduced to the status of the Other. The Other is always placed in a state of dependence. Derrida radically opposed this binary. Derrida identifies several pairs of opposites that have persisted in the Western tradition since the time of Plato. In each case he explains how a center is formed and how it defines the other aspects. Derrida's deconstruction aims precisely at the overthrowing this centrality.

The concept of Deconstruction simultaneously influenced all most all branches of knowledge. Especially, Deconstruction has radical consequences to literature and literary criticism. Derrida explains how writing rejects the author's intended meaning because of the multiplicity inherent in language. He rejected the notion that author is central to textual interpretation. To prove it he analyzed the canonical works of the philosophers like Plato and Rousseau. Critics say that after Derrida analyzes a text, it is no longer possible to look at that text as it was looked earlier. Derrida's constant work is not only to analyze a text in its depths but also to reinterpret it from margins. In his view, there are no self-

sufficient units of meaning in a text. In fact, the individual words in a text can be known only in the larger structure of the text or language.

According to Derrida, a critic's job, in textual analysis is not to reconstruct what the author has thought and expressed. Doing so is nothing but *Doubling Commentary*. It means that the critic is doing what the writer had already done. It is a kind of attempt to reconstruct the non-textual reality and make another copy of the previous text. In contrast to this, the task of textual analysts is to create another new text. In this sequence the text is deconstructed rather than reconstructed. It is in this context that Derrida came up with the statement 'There is nothing outside the text' which has led to many misunderstandings. In this context Derrida says:

The writing is in a language and in a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his dis- course by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them by only letting himself after, a fashion and up to a point be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain n relationship, unperceived by the writer. Between what he commands and what he doesn't command of the pattern of the language that he uses. This relationship is not certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of strength but a significant structure that critical reading should produce.

Of Grammatology (P-158)

According to Derrida, writing is mostly related to language. The traditional metaphysical approach to textual study has led to many misconceptions about the nature of text. A traditional textual analyst believes that the text reflects the author's feelings as they are without any change. Also, in the same order he sees speech as primary and writing as secondary. In his view, the author decides the meaning of a text. Deconstruction rejects this method of reading a text. By drawing concepts from Psychology and Linguistics, Derrida challenged the Logocentrism.

In the Greek, the *Logos* refers to word, reason, truth, logic and law. In the view of Plato *Logos* can be seen as a transcendent grounding principle of order and reason which gives meaning to discourse. *Logos* implies a source of origin from which speech emerged. The origin may be an idea, spirit or God. At present logocentrism is seen primarily as a Derridean term. Derrida questions it as it privileges the *logo* as a central principle of philosophy. The difference between speech and writing is very vital here. Logocentrism considers thought as essential that is mediated for the purpose of discourse, first through speech and then through writing. In this context speech is seen as original signifier of meaning, whereas writing is considered as mere a signifier of a signifier. This process is nothing but viewing speech as primary human communication and writing as secondary. Thinkers from Plato to Saussure believed it strongly, which was

deconstructed by Derrida in many of his writings.

In an attempt to deconstruct a text, the critic uncovers the subtext of the text. In this process of uncovering, the 'implicit' or unintended meaning of the text is revealed, rather than the outer meaning of the text. It is not surprising that this meaning is not the meaning that the author intended, but a meaning that is completely opposite to the meaning of the author. It is also possible to take some sentences from any source in the text and prove how those sentences fundamentally contradict the rest of the text. In some cases, even one word can change the total meaning of a text.

Derrida often mentions the metaphysical elements that remain in the texts of classical philosophers even if they think they have overcome them. Derrida analyzed the metaphysics, which covers from philosophical terminology to everyday practical language. He says that the attempt to discover the 'original' meaning of the text is a futile exercise. Finding it is impossible as there is no such thing called 'original meaning'. As Borges said a text too is like the river of Heraclitus. We cannot read it with the same meaning twice. Meaning is constantly flowing like mercury. In fact, the person using the language fails to fully express his intended meaning. The same situation exists in texts. As mentioned earlier, the author never fully discovers his intended meaning. The unconscious 'traces' of the text negate what dictates its meaning. These traces frustrate the author's attempt in the text. These traces defy the

author's deliberate attempt to determine the meaning of a text. Derrida extended his philosophical deconstruction to literature also. He had shown the play of meaning in certain avant-garde writers like Stephen Mallarme, Francis Ponge and James Joyce

Derrida never endorsed deconstruction as a method. He felt that to accept it would be nothing but pushing the deconstruction into the traditional philosophical school that has been persisting since the time of Plato. That is why he hesitated to define the word. Therefore, deconstruction cannot be reduced to a method.

For a long time, there had been an opinion that Derrida ignored Marx as he never intervened in the Marxist debates. However, in 1991, Derrida's lecture at an international conference called 'Whither Marxism' at the University of California put an end to that criticism. Derrida's speech at this conference was published in a more extensive form as a book titled *Specter's of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993). The book is a kind of Derrida's political manifesto. Although Derrida was not a Marxist, he claimed to have been influenced by a Marxian consciousness that is open to self-examination or self-criticism. This type of Marxism is different from authoritarianism. Derrida declared that it is impossible for the emergence of Deconstruction in the pre-Marxian period. In that way, Deconstructing is an heir to certain spirit of Marxism. Going a little further, Derrida also considered

deconstruction a more radical form of criticism than Marxism.

In the context of his reflection on the spirit of Marxism, Derrida explains how the liberal democratic systems are increasingly in crisis and identifies unemployment, economic crises, conflicts in the free market, nuclear arms race, ethnic conflicts, mafia governments, inequality in international law as weaknesses of liberal democracy. According to Derrida, it was in the context of these crises that liberal institutions tried to exorcise the 'Marxist demon',

Derrida mentions the need to create a 'New International' with an old Marxist consciousness in the background. Derrida felt that the 'New International' should be created to eliminate the ongoing gap between ideals and realities, as well as to question liberal ideals and respect the international legal principles, human rights, etc in liberal democracies. In his theory of deconstruction, Derrida sought to create a new era of development with democratic ideals and emancipatory goals in the new century. 'Be Free' is the motto of Derrida. He considered this slogan to be the basis for democracy to come. It's no surprise that no other philosopher has influenced and changed the world's way of thinking so much in the last 50 years like Derrida. Derrida's work was described by Hélène Cixous as the greatest ethico-political warning of our time.

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