



Surmounting the Phobia of Metaphysical and Hypothetical harassment of a text: An Exegetical and Magisterial Approach to Deconstruction

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Abstract

The term “Deconstruction” has indeed become a cynosure of everyone’s eye, particularly to the students of English Language and Literature. It has twirled into a hullabaloo and has kept the students of Literature busy in discussing its subsistence. In the lyceum of literary theory, the term has metamorphosed into a *dernier cri*. It is a very abrasive term to follow and is looked upon as *will-o-the wisp* and a *conceptual chimera*. The teachers and experts of literary theory have fastened substantial knottiness and intricacy with this theory of deconstruction. This kind of approach on the part of teachers and experts is very frazzle and cataclysmic for the students who are fledglings in the field of Literary Theory. The present paper attempts to unravel this abstruse hypothetical concept through a magisterial and exegetical approach to it. Further, this paper attempts to make some of the cryptic terms attached to the “Deconstruction” very intelligible that have been employed by Derrida while concocting the theory of deconstruction.

Keywords: Deconstruction, hullabaloo, Dernier cri, Conceptual Chimera, Jacques Derrida

Deconstruction has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual stance or just simply as a strategy of reading. It can be taken as a mode of reading

and interpreting the texts. The theory of deconstruction has really proved a riddle to the students and experts of literary theory, very much arduous to unravel.

The theory and the concept of deconstruction concocted by Derrida is surely a metaphysical and theoretical enigma. It is a terrible concept that appeared to be the most hellacious thing to comprehend. Its use of much loaded critical terminology and its philosophical proclivity makes it a herculean task for the readers to get through its byzantine concepts. According to Anne, B. Dobie, *“The term deconstruction sends many readers running for cover, partly because it is one of the most radical approaches to reading that has happened on the scene, but also because its terminology presents difficulties of its own”* (Theory into Practice 149). It is an admitted fact that the complexity and intricateness attached to the Deconstruction is really vexatious and unfortunate for the fledglings in the field of literary theory. One of the main reasons that make this concept more complex and labyrinthine is the hodgepodge of opinions about it disposed by many theorists. Apart from this, its sweeping and commodious application and range also makes it difficult to conjecture. It is not only used in the criticism of Literature, but also in Philosophy and many other subjects as well. Further, its complex and critical idiom makes it fearful and, hence, difficult to understand. This paper tries to cast off this difficulty and complexity of the concept through an exegetical and magisterial approach to it. The term ‘Deconstruction’ itself has not been excogitated by Derrida. It was antecedent active in dictionary. Derrida only gave it currency. In this regard, Alex Thomson writes, *“...the French philosopher Jacques Derrida did not invent the term ‘deconstruction’- he found it in a dictionary- it was an obsolete and archaic word when he first started to use it in 1960s.* (qtd. in *Literary Theory and Criticism* 298). Derrida actually was fascinated with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, famous for writing *“being and time”* (1927). Derrida took from Heidegger the concept of *‘Destruktion’* or *‘Abbau’* in putting forward his theory of deconstruction. The theory of Deconstruction isn’t a brand-new contrivance. Deconstructive theory was practiced well before Derrida fashioned and made it seminal. The philosophical basis is one of the beneficial subject matter provided to the theory of deconstruction particularly by Fredrick Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Fredrich Nietzsche influenced deconstruction by the below mentioned assertions;

- I. His criticism of the idea of absolute knowledge. He despises the idea of universal truth, that doesn’t exist.

- II. Language is arbitrary.
- III. Truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration.

So from it we can say that once this concept of truth is destabilized or overthrown, there remains nothing. There is nothing that remains to be found out by means of adopting a definite method, whether it reality or social reality even in a text, the concept of truth is destabilized by Nietzsche's philosophy.

Another significant influence came from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger who claimed;

- I. The idea of ontological difference; distinction between being and beings of entities.
- II. Being and the structure of being lie beyond every entity and every feature of an entity that there can possibly be.
- III. Put forth the notion of unconcealment.
- IV. Gave the concept of *Duree* or internal time.

Likewise the theories of infantile sexuality and three structured nature of psyche given by Sigmund Freud are also deconstructive in nature because these theories put to radical extreme the conventional notions of the people about sexuality and psyche. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl, one of the great phenomenologists, is another antecedent to the theory of deconstruction. The slogan of the phenomenology, "*back to the things in themselves*" He stressed on the 'immediately data given to the consciousness'. The age of Enlightenment was also deconstructive in approach because it launched a scathing revolt against the traditional notions, based on falsehood and delusion. Jim Powell is right when he writes in his book '*Derrida for Beginners* (2010) that '*If Derrida has managed to turn much of Western thought on its head, he has done so only by standing on the shoulders of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Saussure*' (13). In this context, Nancy Holland also puts it;" *To deconstruct is to take a text So, we can say that Derrida drew inspiration from these apart along the structural "fault lines" created by the ambiguities inherent in one or more of its key concepts or themes in order to reveal the equivocations or contradictions that make the text possible*". Apart from Derrida, the theorists who are closely associated with deconstruction are: Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and J.Hillis Mille. The group came to be known as the Yale school.

The books that have been written by Derrida related to deconstruction are: *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967) etc. The paper that made him famous for the concept of deconstruction is: “*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*”, in the form of a lecture given to the students of John Hopkins University in 1966 at an International symposium. The lecture is said to be rostrum for Derrida to enshroud and divulge the theory of Deconstruction.

Defining Deconstruction

Barbara Johnson in her famous critical book ‘*The Critical Difference*’ defines deconstruction as: “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”.(5)

In his important book ‘*A Glossary of Literary Terms*’ M.H.Abrams defines Deconstruction as under:

“Deconstruction as applied in the criticism of literature, designates a theory and practice of reading which questions and claims to “subvert” or “undermine” the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish boundaries, the coherence or unity... typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities (55). Sharon Crowley opines that “Deconstruction amounts to reading texts in order to rewrite them” (qtd. In Theory into Practice 162).

Derrida once asked by a Japanese friend to suggest an approximate definition of the term. He replied;

All sentences of the type ‘Deconstruction is X or Deconstruction isn’t X....’

J.A. Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, says that in Deconstruction: *A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying... It may be read as carrying a plurality of significance, or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘stable’, meaning. Thus a text may ‘betray’ itself. (129)* To use the terms

of Peter Barry, we can say that *deconstruction is a kind of “textual harassment” or “oppositional reading”*. *Deconstruction aims to show that the text is at war with itself. Further, we can say that deconstruction is a decentring of any philosophical school of thought, any textual proposition etc.* Jonathan Culler’s words are apt to quote here. Culler says that, “*to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.*” (*On Deconstruction 86*). *Deconstruction attempts to make manifest that a text has no compact unity or ground to present meanings, that the text is only a series of conflicting significations.* In nutshell, we can say by using Paul Riceour’s term that deconstruction is “*hermeneutics of suspicion*”. *It looks at everything with a critical and suspicious eye. Everything is a fish that comes under the net of deconstruction.*

Making an exegesis of Deconstruction:

It is inarguably a bit an uphill task to illustrate Deconstruction. Deconstructing a text, idea, concept or word needs a very trenchant critical propensity. But let’s have a hammering at it. Deconstructive reading to anything can be applied at different levels. It is a measuring rod that is mercurial in character. One can knuckle down deconstructive reading at the verbal, the textual, and the linguistic level. Let’s try to enumerate deconstruction and unravel the knots it is comprised of. As has already been said, that deconstructive reading shows the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the texts and words. If we look at the word ‘clip’, it is an auto-antonym or what we call contronym. It both means ‘to cut’ and ‘to attach’. So, unmasking the contronymous nature of this word is deconstruction of this word. Likewise the word ‘dust’ means both ‘to apply dust to anything’ and ‘to remove dust from anything’. Hence the deconstructionist proposition ‘words are contradictory and have multiple meanings’ is true.

Derrida himself asserts regarding the Deconstruction that ‘it is not a method, but an activity of reading and interpreting the texts’. Deconstruction is however a postmodern approach, advocates certain radical positions regarding language and meaning. Before making an exegesis of Deconstruction, it is very important to know about the structuralism. Structuralism has got a very definite philosophical position and deconstruction sternly opposes these fixed assumptions of structuralism. Deconstruction as a philosophical approach somehow agrees with structuralism that human subjects are culturally constructed, which is against the certain metaphysical assumptions prevailed in western philosophy.

Deconstruction further reveals that reality is largely conceived as something existent, independent of human mind, human cognition, human society and human language. Deconstruction strongly condemns the notion of structuralism that meaning is stable. To illustrate these proclamations of Deconstruction, it is worthy to mention here the greatest epic of Indian culture “*Ramayana*”. The epic can be beneficial here to get an idea about the ‘Deconstruction’. There is a story which talks about ‘Rama’ who according to Valmiki is an embodiment of ‘Tharma(Righteousness). The whole story tells us how Ramayana has go to the forest and finally Sita was abducted by Ravana and that then was a war between Ramayana and Ravana and Sita is taken back by Ramayana and lot of incidents happen in the epic. The epic is comprised of the central character Ramayana.so there is a central meaning that is communicated through this text. Ramayana is a religious text. It is not only a poetic vogue in India. The common meaning, which has been handed for generations can be questioned by different possible other readings .the same Ramayana can be read in other different ways. We can read it as feminist text by emphasising the character of Sita, whether Ramayana has done justice with Sita. Many interesting questions can be raised once we try to consider Ramayana as a text not the religious book.so this possibility of different readings, what makes a text? Deconstruction aims to put forth the notion that the possibility of different readings is already inherent in the text. So it is here important to mention a frequent quoted line from Jacques Derrida’s famous book, *of Grammatology*, “there is nothing outside the text, and language bears within itself the necessity of its own critic. The text is in war with itself. The main purpose of the Deconstruction is to peel down the layers of a text. The text can be compared to an onion comprised of many layers. So Deconstruction aims to go beneath the iceberg and expose the most possible interpretations. In this context, Terry Eagleton comments on Deconstruction;

“Reading against the grain or reading the text against itself; with the purpose of knowing the text as it can’t know itself”.

From the above quoted line, we can say that Deconstruction gauges to go beneath the surface meaning of the text. Deconstructive reading uncovers the unconscious rather than conscious dimension of the text.to make it more lucid, we can say that Deconstruction tries to move away from the operative side to the latent or hidden side of the text. It targets the concealed subject matter of the text. Language has the ability to hold multiple layers of meaning, but

these layers are not apparent and deconstruction is employed to bring the meaning out. To illustrate this let's quote a line from Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet'. The line goes like this: Frailty thy name is woman. This line deconstructs itself. Woman is no longer weak and frail. Hence, the deconstruction of the Shakespearean sweeping comment or dictum. To further illustrate deconstruction let's cite Peter Barry who applies deconstructive reading to Dylan Thomas's poem 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a child in London'. Peter Barry quotes a line from this poem in order to show how it refutes itself. The line goes like this: After the first death, there is no other. According to Barry this line contradicts and refutes itself. If something is called the first, then a sequence is implied of second, third, fourth, and so on (*Beginning Theory* 71). Derrida himself culls out the word "Pharmakon" from one of the dialogues of Plato to show the point of undecidability in arriving at the meaning of the words. both means medicine as well as poison. So, this word puts one in an aporetic situation when one tries to decide its meaning. So, from the examples given above, we have seen what deconstruction or deconstructive reading is. It is a critical process of bringing to fore the dichotomous nature of words, social and textual construct.

Deconstruction criticizes the idealistic overtones structuralism, common universal structures to which structuralism gives the priority. so According to Deconstruction, there are no common universal structures. There are different structures. Deconstruction strongly opposes the basic tenets of structuralism. Structuralism asserts that texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices don't have unambiguously definite meanings, as they don't have very strict and rigid boundaries. Deconstruction sternly questions it. It advocates that every text contains multiple layers of meaning. Deconstructive reading doesn't take heed of the unambiguity rather it wages a war against the text fraught with ambiguity. it doesn't believe in the stability of the meaning of a text. According to Derrida with whom the deconstruction is concerned, the analysis of a text is interminable .it doesn't end somewhere. The interpretation is a long chain of circumstances that doesn't yield but keeps going and going .the nature of language is such that it conceals meaning. A person reading a text can read out only finite meanings based on the context from which the text is read. Deconstruction further came out with the notion of *difference*, the idea of conceptual opposition, the essential opposition and conflictual nature of language. Since every text,

every institution, every phenomenon to be understood is found in language. Language is a fundamental structure.

Derrida while explicating deconstruction talks about certain conceptual oppositions. The most important among them is the opposition between writing and speech. The Deconstructor looks for the ways in which one term in the opposition has been “privileged” over the other in a particular text, argument, historical tradition or social practice. This implies that in the reading of a text, there is a privileged meaning (the meaning known to all) which always surfaces or influences us when we approach a text. The deconstruction keeps an eye on this privileged meaning and makes it a tool to go beneath this privileged layer of meaning. Privileged meaning, as deconstruction supposes to be more true, more valuable, more important, or more universal than its opposite. Since things can have more than one opposite, many different types of privilegings can occur simultaneously. So this possibility actually reveals the conflicts and contradictions in a text and the deconstructions are supposed to be sensitive towards these contradictions that actually make a text. Derrida says;

“Every philosophical argument is structured in terms of oppositions and in this traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful co-existence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruction the opposition is above all, at a particular moment to reverse the hierarchy”

So, the Deconstructionist practices what has been called textual harassment or oppositional reading, reading with the aim unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity.

Defining the terms associated with Deconstruction:

Transcendental Signified: A signified that surpasses this physical world. It is the centre that is not subjected to change, because it is fixed. God, truth, essence etc. are usually thought of transcendental signified. It is beyond or is independent of the play of signifiers which produce other signifieds. Derrida negates the existence of this transcendental signified.

Logocentrism: The German philosopher and anti-Semitic thinker Ludwig Klages coined the term. In deconstruction, the term logocentrism designates the desire for a centre or original guarantee of all the meanings.

Différance: It is a portmanteau word. It is the combination of two words ‘differ’ and ‘defer’. The concept of difference implies that meaning is possible only because of difference and meaning is never final. It always gets postponed.

Aporia: A Greek term denoting a logical contradiction. Derrida used it to refer, what he calls the “*blind spots of any metaphysical argument*”. It is a kind of textual knot which is very difficult to untie. According to M.H.Abrams “it is an insuperable deadlock, or “double bind,” of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are “undecidable” in that we lack any sufficient ground for choosing among them. (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 58)

Free play: the term is used by Derrida in his 1966 essay “*structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the Human sciences*” to denote a centreless universe that emerged after man was dethroned from the centre. Freeplay, Derrida says is the disruption of the presence.

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