

Post-Structuralism & Deconstruction as an Integral Part of Literary Theory: An Overview

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Abstract:

The paper is prepared to explore the theoretical practice of 'post-structuralism', its close affinity with structuralism as well as its later development as a 'deconstruction in the flux of our world-wide theoretical perspective of language and literature. The term 'post-structuralism', which is chiefly related with the basic tenets of structuralism, its semantics and syntactics, gets profoundly discussed from various representations, including lingual, psychoanalytical, the feministic and literary arena. The evolution of post-structuralism, key terms deeply related with this practice, all noted theoreticians, their contributions and views are all followed with details as far as practicable. On theoretical aspects, a scholarly attempt has been made on the prospects and praxis of this theory, as it stamps an imprint of practicability and usefulness in the purview of literature. A kaleidoscopic observance to uphold the philosophical constructs behind the structure of symbols, signs and language and its multilayered representations, irrespective time and place, is adopted for a larger concept of 'humanity for humanity's sake'.

Key Words/Phrases: Deconstruction, psychoanalysis, structuralism, socio-cultural semantics, dissemination, phenomenology.

Having its genesis in late 1960's, the term 'post-structuralism' is both a continuation of, and a rebellion against the structuralism that made its commencement in France in the 1950s. Chiefly based upon the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the post-structural theory reveals the fact that the meaning of any text is, by nature, unstable and deferred; any authoritative claim of explanation or meaning in a text is deconstructive and perennially analytic. Identical with theory of Deconstruction, the post-structuralism bears its ideological concept, which is rather concerned with textual meaning and interpretation of a literary text. Two proponents involved with this practice are Roland Barthes, noted for his *The Pleasure of the Text*, and Jacques Derrida, author of his pioneering work *Of Grammatology*, respectively.

Post-structuralism pursues the Saussurean perception that in language there are only differences without positive terms, and shows that the *signifier* (word) and the *signified* (meaning) are not only oppositional but plural, always pulling against each other with a number of *binaries*. **Secondly**, the critics of it fix upon the surface features of the words ---similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning. **Thirdly**, they seek to show that the text is characterized by disunity rather than unity. **Fourthly**, they concentrate on a single passage and analyze it so intensely that it becomes impossible to sustain a 'univocal reading' and the language explodes into 'multiplicities' of meaning. **Fifthly**, post-structural theory always voices that meaning is inherently unstable, whereas structuralism emphasizes on understanding, which is conceivable and possible, when the codes and conventions of a literary text are analyzed.

Basic contrasts that strike the key notes between structuralism and post-structuralism are to draw the boundaries of meaning and concepts in language. Although the base of post-structuralism is built upon the Saussurean structuralism, they differ from each other in terms of timelines; while the structuralism evolves round the 1920s, the post-structuralism is a variance of 1960s onwards. On primary level, the structuralism is used to reach at a system through which the 'grammar' between the form and the meaning of a text can be analyzed and

explicated for the readers' sake. Contrarily, the post-structuralism aims at the impossibility of concluding any determinate meaning; they avow that each text is fully couched in contradictions and different connotations that preclude any attempt to restrict it to a single definite interpretation.

In post-structuralist theory, Roland Barthes takes a leading role to bridge the lacuna between structuralism and post-structuralism. In his book *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes is of the view that 'metalanguage' which is the second order language system of post-structuralism, fulfils the first order meaning or explanation of the structuralism. In his significant essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes differentiates the concepts of *plaisir* (pleasure) and *jouissance* (bliss) and both of them are essential for textual reading. He further theorizes that texts are either '*readerly*' (lisible) or '*scriptible*' (writerly). A readerly text involves the passive participation of a reader while a writerly text is associated with active participation of the reader for the production of meaning. As a crucial exponent of both structuralism and post-structuralism, Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* announces 'the textual independence'--- a critical idea where the death of the author is substituted by the birth of the reader.

As a consummate theorist of deconstruction, Jacques Lacan stands out to be the most comprehensive and evocative. His postulation is that the human unconsciousness is structured like a language. Next to unconscious level comes the 'ego' that is also yoking together various fragments, the meanings of which are largely not unitary rather binary. A psychic toll is sure to happen, if the dissimilar fragments reside within the same ego. Chief forte of the Lacanian psychoanalyst is to exhibit the dictum 'no contradictory, no psychology', as it was popular in Shavian ethics, 'No conflict, no drama'.

Equally exemplary is the psychoanalytic French critic Julia Kristeva, who explores the relationship between a number of binary oppositions within Western Culture in her work *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Here she deals with the relationship between the *orderly* and the *heterogeneous*, between the conscious and the unconscious, and between the normal and

the poetic. She suggests that semiotic material is irrational while the symbolic element is reasonable and logical. Kristeva's feminist concept of '*écriture féminine*', although broadly devised by the French feminist Helene Cixous as 'women's writing', is also included in this context where she associates the *semiotic* with the *feminine* and the *symbolic* with the *masculine*, to resolve the binaries of the conventional ideas behind the sexes---male and female, or man and woman. She further goes on to ascertain that the triumph of semiotic over symbolic language would ultimately fulfill the aims of post-structuralism.

Michael Foucault, another influential French critic, now associated with post-structuralism, began his career by embracing Marxism. In his *Discipline and Power*, Foucault argues that power is not simply repressive power; rather a tool of conspiracy by one individual or institution against another.

The main aspect of post-structuralist theory is deconstruction, for which Jacques Derrida has been primarily responsible. The term 'deconstruction' is very closer to the original meaning of '*analysis*' which etymologically means '*to undo*'. The purpose of deconstruction is to provide numerous interpretations of a single text by bringing into focus of the reader the warring forces inherent within the text. Derrida, as well known as propagator of deconstruction theory, observes, "reading is transformational". Derrida's essay *Structure, Sign and Play* is the first critique of post-structuralism and it was he who initiated the technique of close reading of a text, as there is nothing outside the text (*il n'y a pas de hors texte*). In order to concretize this abstract theory, Derrida has analyzed several texts of Western philosophy by Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, Heidegger, Saussure, Lacan, Foucault etc. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida propounds the concepts of 'logocentrism' (thought formed upon true desire) and 'phonocentrism' (dominance of speech over writing). As alternatives to these, Derrida has used two other terms--- 'difference' and 'supplement' respectively with a view to convey the fusion of the two senses of the French verb "différer":

‘to defer’ and ‘to be different’. Again ‘supplement’ comes from the French word ‘suppleer’, which means ‘to supplement’ as well as ‘to take the place of’; hence the relationship between speech and writing is unstable and constantly shifting. Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction divides criticism into two categories--- *metaphysical* (having a fixed meaning) and *deconstructive* (having multiple meanings). Resultantly, meaning is the outcome of difference and this process of difference is endless. Meaning is never present in the sign, simply because the sign refers to another sign which is not there. This implies that meaning is never fully graspable, and the final meaning is always postponed (deferred). It is again Derrida’s formation--- ‘there is nothing outside the text’ ---suggests that all history, identity and reality is available only through their textualization. According to Rebecca Goldstein, “*In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, ‘virtual texts’ constructed b readers in their search for meaning.*”

Eventually the influence of Derrida’s theoretical practice is heavily felt on American critics, especially Paul de Man. In his *Rhetoric of Blindness*, a critique of Derrida’s *Grammatology*, de Man deconstructs Derrida’s own reading of Rousseau with a logical approach. In *Blindness and Insight*, de Man works out a complex theory that critics achieve insight at the cost of critical ‘blindness’, showing how closely integrated are the two binaries of human senses. In *Allegory of Reading*, he further endeavours a deconstructive view of figurative and rhetorical strategies in Nietzsche, Proust and Rilke, and contests that literary language is fundamentally self-reflexive and, those texts are deconstructive themselves.

Other theorists like Geoffrey Hartman, Barbara Johnson, Harold Bloom and J. Hills Miller follow almost the same path as set up by Derrida in terms of post-structuralist perspectives. In *The Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson deconstructs Roland Barthes’ analysis of Balzac’s *Sassarine*, while Geoffrey Hartman in his *Saving the Text* and Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* make the same voice with only a logic how instinctive one remains to write or to read a great piece of literature. J. Hills Miller is one of the most

prominent in the field of deconstructions. He applies deconstructive analysis to prose fiction, saying “all reading is necessarily misreading”. (*Practice of Misreading*)

In its close relation with Deconstructive approach, the post-structuralism is thus a language-oriented theory and shares the view of Ontological uncertainty. In present days, albeit the post-structuralism along with its latent offshoot ‘deconstruction’ has been severely criticized because of its negative approach to literary criticism, its innovativeness and varied explications have been widely accepted and acknowledged by even the Reader Response criticism. This theory is closely related to postmodernism. Also argued that the impact of existential phenomenology is so greatly felt upon it that the post-structuralists are often regarded as ‘post-phenomenologists’. This is often regarded as a gnostic doctrine of the text to which Derrida plays the master role in its total flourish. In other words, it retains the post-Saussurian definition which is fully divulged by the critic Raman Selden in ‘Contemporary Literary Theory’: *Post-structuralism is a fuller working out of implications of structuralism.*

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