



## A DISCOURSE ON DECONSTRUCTION

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Jacques Derrida inaugurated the theory of deconstruction in the late 1960s. It became a greater influence on literary studies in the late 1970s. His writings are both continuation and a critique on structuralism. Derrida's rigorous exploration of Saussure defines the two key concepts of structuralism, namely sign and structure. He does this in his much anthologised paper, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science" in 1969. It influences the literary study all over the world.

Deconstruction is a radical destabilization of all earlier movements in literature. It is the most philosophically oriented and the most theorised movement we have known so far. This critical theory is no longer a new phenomenon now. It has been absorbed in contemporary critical thought. Deconstruction teaches many critical concepts and philosophies. These critical concepts add to our understanding of literature with a greater sense of critical perception. Our life and experiences are governed by certain ideologies which are built into our language. It is good for us to see ourselves rid of those ideologies.

Language is not a reliable mode of communication as Derrida defines. Language is fluid and slippery. We can examine the word "tree" as an example. This particular word reaches to a point when it refers to a concept, a signified. One signifier that is uttered refers to a chain of signifiers in the mind. This, in turn, evokes a chain of signifiers in the mind of the person who hears. Every signifier in those chains is constituted by another chain or chain of signifiers. Language does not consist of merely a simple union of signifiers and signifieds. It consists of chain of signifiers.

A marked distinction occurs between structuralism and deconstruction. Language is non-referential in connection to Structuralism. It does not refer to things in world, but only concepts of things in the world. Deconstruction takes one step further in its concepts and theories. It defines language as non-referential because it refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things. It refers to play of signifiers of which language itself is made. Our mind does not contain stable and unchanging concepts, but a continually changing play of signifiers. These signifiers which seem to be stable are not stable in reality. Each and every signifier produces other signifiers in a never ending deferral or postponement of meaning. We may try to find a stable meaning, but it is not possible because we can never get beyond the play of signifiers, that is language.

The examination of mental trace left behind by signifiers is another angle of Derrida's deconstruction. Trace is made of differences by which we make a word. We associate a particular meaning with a particular word because we distinguish between words. If all the objects of the word were made of the same colour, we will not read the word 'red' as red at all. We call a colour red, because it is different from blue and green. Hence, the word 'red' carries with it the trace of all the signifiers. If it does not sound equivocal, Derrida marks of the absence of the presence. As M. S. Nagarajan has clearly pointed out a critique on trace as "an always already absent present"

**(English Literary Criticism and Theory, p-162)**

The characteristics of language are its play of signifiers which continually defer meaning. Any meaning that a word seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from the other. The meaning of a sign is always absent from it. Meaning can be fixed. There is a constant flickering of absence presence at one and at the same time. Derrida coins a word *différance* for the meaning that the language seems to convey. This is called as the master concept of Derrida.

We have to treat language as the only available tool for communication. It does not possess the stability or solidity we assume. Language is flexible. The speakers can improvise and stretch it to suit newer ways of thinking about the world and ourselves. A new concept is emerged by Derrida for the flexibility of the language. It is bricolage. Bricolage is the process of assembling something from the material at hand. In Derridean usage, it refers to the act of borrowing concepts from different sources, and redesigning them to suit one's needs. He demonstrates this activity by putting the words under erasure, that is, first writing them, and then crossing them out. We use and erase language at the same time. There is no escaping from language. We are formed by language. We are created through language. We exist in the language we are born into. Language is used for stretching or distending for our various purposes. The way we understand the world, the way we see ourselves are governed by the language. Our experiences in the world are mediated by language. Language carries along with it the conflicting, ever changing and dynamic system of ideologies.

Language is neither the product of our experience, nor is the medium for conveying our thoughts, but it is the very framework that produces our experiences. Structuralism discovers that our world is created by our language and generated by the stable and innate structures of human consciousness. But post-structuralism rejects this notion of an ordered vision of language and human experience. Language is the ground of being, and the world is the text, which is made an infinite number of signifiers always at play. Human beings are also present in this system of language. The question of subjectivity comes to mind in connection to this critical theory. Who is the human, and what is to be a human being? This is the problem of subjectivity. We are produced by the language we speak. Language is always unstable. The stable image that we have of ourselves is an illusion produced by the culture we inhabit.

Culture is not as stable as we presume, because it is inscribed in language. We are all divided selves full of conflicting beliefs and fragmented by fears, anxieties and unfulfilled hopes. Through language, we internalise the conflicts and contradictions of culture. We do not realise that we are the product of the fragmented language that constitutes our very being. We are invented by our identity which is determined by our culture.

Structuralism has defined a way of conceptualising our experience in terms of polar opposites, which is called binary oppositions. We know what is good by contrasting it with what is evil. These oppositions build hierarchies. The binary oppositions in a work advance the ideology prevalent in it. As per the observation of Derrida, this neat pairing of opposites advanced by structuralism does not work that way. The oppositions overlap and share some common elements. The question of objectivity and subjectivity arise. Language does not operate in a tidy way. It implies contradictions and associations that we carry. It is replete with opposed ideologies. It is through language that we conceive and perceive the world. From deconstructive point of view, this language is a different ground of being from the ones with our system of traditional philosophies.

Every philosophical system in the world has a base. It is a fundamental grounding, an organising principle based on which we try to understand the meaning of the world. Plato's system believes in an ideal and abstract dimension of thought. Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am". For structuralism, it is the innate structure of human consciousness that generates human experiences. Derrida's argument is that these grounding principles produce an understanding of the world. He presents the following arguments in favour of the organised principles of the world:

01. Are the changing concepts remain stable ?
02. Is not the centre that controls the structure?
03. How can we accept the paradox of change?

Derrida calls this philosophic system as "*logocentric*". It places at the centre (centric) of its understanding of the world. A concept termed as logos that orders and organises the world. Derrida presents the concepts of logocentric:

Thus it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality, (is not the part of the totality), the totality, has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre.

**(English literary criticism and theory,p-164)**

Derrida calls this desire for a centre “logocentrism”. “Logos” carries in it the concentration of presence. Logocentrism is the belief that the first and last things the word, the divine mind and the infinite understanding of the God. “Logos” is defined as the rational principle that develops and governs the world. In theology, it is the divine word, incarnate in Christ. Word was the origin of all things. God’s word is spoken. A spoken word is closer to the original thought than the written word. Privileging of speech over writing is phonocentrism. Logocentrism and phonocentrism are both governed by the human desire to point to a central presence at the beginning and at the end. Speech has its full presence, felt and heard at once, while writing is secondary. Therefore, speech is contaminated by the writing. Western philosophy, according to Derrida, has always supported this hierarchy in order to preserve this presence.

The theories on deconstruction are more challenging in the contemporary literary criticism. The theories are inspiring and illuminating for the critical enquiry on the reading and understanding the text.

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