



Jacques Derrida: Breaking the Dome of Rigid Interpretation

Dr. Sunil Garg Assistant Professor of English
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Govt. College, Jagdishpura (Kaithal)

Abstract

Jacques Derrida has been hailed as a precursor of introducing new way of reading and interpreting literature and literary theory. His works enable us to understand that nothing is decidable because many meanings can exist at one time. In traditional mode of reading, a reader believes that language is capable of expressing ideas without changing the meaning. But for Derrida, any language has not provided definite and stable meaning, therefore, only text is the source of meaning. His deconstructive reading subverts the idea that text has a fixed and unified meaning. Derrida's writings influenced literary critics in American Universities and the members of Yale School including Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller. They became prominent figures in the contemporary literary theory. The present paper is an attempt to study the ways of Derrida's deconstructive strategy. Derrida is mainly concerned with the problematic nature of all stable centers. Everything in this world is based on the idea of a center which is a truth, origin and God word etc. which generates all meaning. The deconstructive approach of reading subverts the traditional mode of reading a text. After the arrival of this kind of reading, the critical theories in the past have become absolutely irrelevant.

ISSN 2454-308X



Derrida has derived the philosophy of deconstruction from structuralism. It is the root of deconstruction. Structuralism emerged as a significant approach to critical analysis of literary texts in the later half of twentieth century. It studies the constituents of a text by examining the underlying variant structures which is based on the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure's work on structural linguistics. His structural linguistics formed the basis of structuralism. However, the concepts of structuralism are deconstructed as there are certain issues which are not clear in structuralism. Structuralism depends on structures and structures depend on centers. No structure can be conceived without a center. However, Derrida argues that there is no stable center. And if there is no center, there cannot be any structure. So structuralism collapses by its own implications. This is Derrida's deconstructive devices or strategy. Deconstruction means not to destruct the work of an author but to show different meanings at work in language. Therefore, it has created confusions and perplexities between literary work and its interpretation. Whenever any theory is created it contradicts itself and casts into difficult situation of interpretation or *hermeneutics* which is not definite. It has shown that the meaning of a text is really infinite and has a number of conflicting possible meanings. The critical theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Gay and Lesbian studies and recent theory like New Historicism and Cultural Materialism are absolutely irrelevant after the application of deconstructive analysis.

Derrida's deconstructive style of reading subverts the previous assumption that a text has an unchanging and definite meaning. He focuses mainly on language and argues that the traditional reading of a text makes a number of false assumptions. For Derrida, any mode of reading shows the slippery nature of language. Therefore, reading is an activity where the reader himself indulges in the game of language. The reader will interpret meaning with the help of devices like *differance* (difference and an endless postponement), *trace* (residual meaning) and *supplement* (addition or substitution word). What the reader might have not been there in the author's mind. It is because of the underlying inherent contradiction of language which is the medium of literature. So, we can say that



deconstruction is a form of linguistics analysis of the text. In a sense, we cannot arrive at an absolute or fixed meaning for any text.

‘Deconstruction’ is a method of close reading of a literary text which has been initiated by Jacques Derrida. It has originated from Derrida’s study of Saussure’s structuralist poetics. Derrida minutely examines Saussure’s view on language. Derrida extended Saussure’s notion on language. According to Saussure, signs are meaningful through a chain of oppositions that relate signs to each other. The meaning of a word lies in its difference from other words as well as in its relation to each other. Both spoken and written forms are languages and they are identified by the features of differential and relational nature of words.

Derrida has highlighted the dichotomy existing in speech and writing linguistically and culturally. Saussure has 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. For this Derrida coins a term called *phonocentrism* to mean privileging of speech over writing. Speech has the feature of presence where the audience and the listener get the truth of what the speaker says. However, Derrida suggests that this truth or reality is built on the idea of a center. Derrida refers 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 guaranties its meaning). He notices that everything is firmly grounded on this *metaphysics of presence*. But there is no *transcendental signified* because there is no fixed meaning. However, the *signifier* remains in the form of a *trace* (residual meaning).

Each sign is only a *trace* of another and no sign is complete without *supplement* (additional or substitution word). The same notions of *trace*, *differance* and *supplement* are applicable to texts, too. So, in a text many meanings from various readings intertwined one another. Therefore, the factor of *aporia* (a path that leads no goal) is always there.

Next, Derrida focuses on the nature of the 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. 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’² because any reader will discover this process of shifting *signifiers* within text or in any piece of writing.

So, Derridean deconstruction illustrates the text’s nature of indeterminacy. It tries to explore the ramification of *textuality*. He is always concerned with the ‘between’. With what is between the two things has always been Derrida’s key thought. For this, he used the word ‘hymen’ to refer to a moment of indeterminacy. It is neither inside nor outside. Derrida also uses the word *bricolage* to mean indecisiveness of language.

For Derrida, any mode reading shows the slippery nature of language. Therefore, reading is an activity where the reader himself indulges in the game of language. The reader will interpret meaning with the help of devices like *differance*, *trace* and *supplement*. What the reader might have not been there in the author’s mind.



Deconstruction is against the grand narrative. Every construction or grand narrative has always a center, without that center nothing can be constructed. So, deconstruction tries to deconstruct the construction of grand narratives. It is an activity of close reading where the free plays of binary oppositions are revealed. Thus, Derrida subverts the traditional hierarchical order of things.

Deconstructive notion has revealed the text's nature of indefinite and uncertain meaning. It has shown that the meaning of a text is really infinite and has a number of conflicting possible meanings. Derrida's critique of structuralism has resulted in opening up further possibilities of analysis. The deconstructive approach of reading subverts the traditional mode of reading a text. After the arrival of this kind of reading, the critical theories in the past have become absolutely irrelevant. Besides, literary theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Gay and Lesbian and recent studies like New Historicism are also irrelevant after the application of deconstructive analysis.

The above discussion concludes that the critical theories in practice are quite beside the mark in deconstructive analysis. As Derrida seriously questions the idea of a stable center, there can never arrive at the final conclusive meaning. There is always ambiguity when one is aware of the centrality of the central term. The study of deconstruction reveals the indeterminate feature of language. Therefore, any reader can meet the factor of irrelevance in any discourse. When we apply the techniques and methods of deconstruction to any work of literature, the original form is deconstructed. For Derrida, language is an endless process characterized by *differance*. Alan Bass writes:

Derrida is difficult to read not only by virtue of his style, but also because he seriously wishes to challenge the ideas that govern the way we read. His texts are more easily grasped if we read them in the way he explicitly suggests- which is not always the way we are used to read.³

After a serious examination of Derrida's deconstruction and the principles and practices of deconstruction, one can find that nothing is fixed, determinate and relevant. If anyone strictly follows deconstruction, literature would cease to give pleasure in reading. In spite of the complexities in deconstruction when one considers it as an academic intellectual exercise, the reader can have another taste of literature.

References

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* trans. Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
2. Patricia Waugh, Ed. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
3. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2007).
4. M.S. Nagarajan, *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History* (India: Orient Longman, 2007).
5. Asha Kanwar, ed. *Literary Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2001).
6. David Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A reader*. Ed. 2nd (India: pearson, 2003).