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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**REINCARNATING THE WORD: INTERPRETATION AND DECONSTRUCTION.**

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**Abstract**

The emergence of deconstruction in the seventies inaugurated a new, and what some believe, a radical way of appreciating literature. After it the analysis of literary texts was transformed, as an entirely different method of studying textuality of literary works was introduced in the academia. Though, by this time, New Criticism had in many ways already paved the way for 'close reading' of literary works, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida introduced new tools of discussing and analyzing literature. He derived his concepts and terminology essentially from Western philosophy, and by applying them with the linguistic strategies employed in literature provided new perspectives on it. In fact, Derrida introduced 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as the cornerstone of his analytical method, and while doing so succeeded in elevating 'ambiguity' to the central principle of interpretation. After this, interpretation of literature acquired a different perspective in literary criticism. It would not be an overstatement to assert that deconstruction made problematics of interpretation as the central aspect of literary study and appreciation. However, this also led to certain problems and contradictions in the critical analysis of literary works. The paper charts the problems and contradictions of literary interpretation in the wake of deconstruction, critiquing many of its fundamental assumptions and focussing on their ramifications for literary criticism.

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**Introduction:-**

Criticism always entails interpretation, but the interpretation never endeavours to replace a literary work, its greatest pretension being to enhance the understanding of a text. Whatever the arguments of structuralists and deconstructionists, criticism remains, implicitly or otherwise, interpretation as well as a normative act--the value of a text being judged against the touchstones of form and content. Form and content are also conceptualized differently by different ages, and these are as contentious as the judgements derived from them. In recent years, however, the critical activity has itself become the subject of study, even being polarized in the words of J.Hillis Miller:

A critic must choose either the tradition of presence or the tradition of difference, for their assumptions about language, about literature, about history, and about the mind cannot be made compatible.

The assumptions of the critic who prefers to write in the tradition of difference are, of course, that of Saussurean linguistics, which avers that

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[In] language there are only differences. Even more important, a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up, but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.

This is a key passage of Saussure's, to which Structuralism and Deconstruction, in many ways a negation of each other, owe their origin. Saussure's dictum that 'in language there are only differences without positive terms' marked in Foucault's term 'an epistemic break' from the earlier concepts about language.

The notion that language partakes of the essence of things it talks about and that it invokes within itself the transcendental reality was universal in the ancient Orient and the Occident. In 'Cratylus,' Plato expresses the idea that the poetic language in particular manifests the primordial relationship that exists between language and reality. Linguistic structures share correspondences with the world we live in. Word incarnates Being (*ousia*) as it also possesses the characteristic attributes (*einai*) of the Being. As Michel Foucault shows in *The Order of Things*, the seventeenth century replaced the mimema theory of language with the concept that language refers to an outer, objective reality. Saussurean linguistics broke with the previous two epistemes to introduce the notion of the self-generating linguistic system, its elements not referring to any objective reality outside, but acquiring meaning in a network of relationships within the linguistic system. Once the premise of language being a system is accepted, it entails an underlying set of rules (*langue*) that generates particular manifestations of it (*parole*).

This model was employed to uncover the langue of myths, rituals and cultures by Claude Lévi-Strauss, of the human psyche by Jacques Lacan, of political and social order by Michel Foucault, and of literary and cultural artifacts by Roland Barthes. Hence, Barthes wrote in 1966:

[Is] not structuralism's constant aim to master the infinity of utterances (*paroles*) by describing the language (*langue*) of which they are the products and from which they can be generated? Faced with the infinity of narratives, the multiplicity of standpoints from which they can be studied, the analyst finds himself in more or less the same situation as Saussure confronted by the heterogeneity of language (*langage*), and seeking to extract a principle of classification and a central focus for description from the apparent confusion of the individual messages.

The structuralist project is expressed in the clearest of terms by Barthes, but within two years it is abandoned when he takes the opposite position:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. When the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' - victory to the critic... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered, the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way, literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a secret, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary, since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law.

It is quite a transformation for a person trying to discover the langue of the narrative. Barthes went to the extreme of stating in 1970:

A choice must then be made: either to place all texts--under the scrutiny of an indifferent science, forcing them to rejoin, inductively, the copy from which we will then make them derive; or else to restore each text to its function, making it cohere, even before we talk about it, by the infinite paradigm of difference, subjecting it from the outset to a basic typology, to an evaluation. — Our evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing.

To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it.

The change in Barthes is an acknowledgement of the failure of the structuralist project to unravel the *langue*, the set of rules that generates literature. Yet paradoxically, the above assertion issues from Saussure's statement: "Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system."

Both referentiality and intentionality are thus rejected, just as in Derridean deconstruction. The seeds of deconstruction were always there in Saussure. The origin, *arche*, *cogito*, as well as the final essence, meaning, or a referent do not matter as far as language, and by implication literature, are concerned.

The deconstructive method came to be applied in the wake of Derrida's deconstruction of the Western metaphysics and his seminal essays on Saussure and Rousseau, but it was in fact the culmination of the Nietzschean scepticism, reinforced by Wittgenstein and Heidegger in no small measure, about language. Nietzsche had asserted that the truth, the final meaning, is 'a mobile marching army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms - truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.'

Although Nietzschean scepticism had been with us since the nineteenth century, why should literary criticism suddenly swing the deconstructive way after the 1970s? Was it simply the brilliant analyses of Derrida about the Western metaphysics, with his avowed objective to bare it of the logocentric bias and his scintillating deconstructive readings of Rousseau and Saussure? Why did the grip of the metaphysics of presence suddenly relax so as to make a critic like Paul de Man declare: Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential abseration.

What made Barthes, a committed structuralist, to abandon his concerted efforts to uncover the Apollonian cosmos under the literary texts, and profess belief in the Dionysian multivocality of literature? Certainly, as argued initially, the foundations of both structuralism and deconstruction were laid by Saussurean linguistics, hence the facility with which structuralists became deconstructionists, though deconstruction refutes the key premises of structuralism that an underlying system or *langue* can be discovered. But the vengeance with which literary criticism has taken to deconstruction invites more convincing reasons.

Though structuralism elicited closely argued theories in anthropology (Levi-Strauss), psychoanalysis (Lacan), social and political order (Foucault), yet in the realm of literary criticism Barthes and Greimas provided theories which were easily argued away. Both Genette and Todorov, younger French structuralists, refrain from making claims about discovering the *langue* of narrative, though they have made efforts to reveal the patterns underlying the narratives of Boccaccio, Henry James and Marcel Proust. Hence Todorov could write with insight:

Structuralism criticism is a contradiction in terms-criticism seeks to interpret a particular work, while structuralism for its part, is a scientific method implying an interest in impersonal laws and forms, of which existing objects are only the realizations. The structural analysis of literature is nothing other than literary theory: however, the latter's objective is not the interpretation of work, nor is there a 'structuralist' interpretation that is better as such than other methods- exegesis is to be assessed according to its coherence, not according to its truth in an absolute sense. The fact is, then, that these two forms of activity, the hermeneutic and the scientific, need as much to be distinguished as to be put into contact with each other. Literary theory (poetics) provides criticism with instruments; yet criticism does not content itself with applying them in a servile fashion, but transforms them through the contact with new material.

Barthes' 'pleasure of the text' (*jouissance*), de Man's 'vertiginous possibilities', and Derrida's juxtaposition of two texts in GLAS, all emerge from the poetics of reading that James Joyce imposes on the readers of his magnum opus, *Finnegans Wake*:

(Stoop) if you are abcedminded to this clay book, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world?

Conventional criticism was befuddled by its encounter with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Raymond Roussel's novels, French *nouveaux romans*, and *nouveau nouveau roman*, for these texts cultivated, rather celebrated, the ambiguities, ambivalences, aporias, paradoxes, uncertainties, differences, traces, deferrals, slippages of language. The autonomy of the text, the self-reflecting, self-generating, self-consuming, poioumenon novel, which does not express anything,

or refer to any essence or reality, are all now the clichés of the novels of Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, Raymond Roussel, Robbe-Grillet and Claude Simon.

The conditions of deconstructive criticism had already been anticipated by the modernist fiction. Psychoanalytic criticism has also influenced its development. One has just to displace the conscious and the unconscious from human mind into language in order to get deconstructive criticism in its search for insights through the contradictions of the expressed word. Deconstruction also highlights an author's inability to master language's structures just as consciousness, in psychoanalysis, fails to keep the unconscious and the subconscious under control.

Lacan developed Freudian theories to conclude that the unconscious is created between the crevices and the chinks of language. He also declared that we are provided the position of the subject only after our entry into the symbolic relations of the linguistic system: The relation of the subject to the other is entirely produced in a process of gap.

The key structuralist assumption that the parole is generated by the langue provides for Lacan's assertion that it is not consciousness that gives meaning to words, but the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations of language. Significance of puns, *double entendres* is accepted. Lacan presents his famous formula of the relationship between signifier and signified thus:

Signifier - S  
signified- s

Lacan reaches the deconstructive conclusion of the supremacy of signifier over signified. A signifier can have many meanings, even contradictory ones (irony), and can be replaced by other signifiers. The signifiers 'float' and 'slide' over the signified. Thus, 'the function of the subject' is defined as 'the effect of the signifier.'

Derrida also arrives at a similar conclusion. He attacks the 'metaphysics of presence', by writing that Western Metaphysics "is the determination of being as presence. It could be possible to show that all the terms related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated the constant of a presence - eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, men and so forth." By defying the age old concept of 'presence', which leads to a decoding of fixed meanings, Derrida is able to express succinctly what becomes deconstructive criticism when applied to texts:

The centre has no natural locus, ... but a function ... in which an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play... everything became a system where the central signified, the original or the transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of difference. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum.

Hence, the objective of interpretation to discover a theme, a vision, is doomed to fail, for there is a free play of meanings, and signified is perpetually deferred as each signified is replaced by another signifier.

Deconstruction thus rejects interpretation's claim to recuperate a univocal meaning from a text; the concepts of theme and vision mislead as each interpretation replaces a text with another text, which is open to another interpretation. It is however two different things to say that no definite meaning exists and that there is an infinite play of meanings. Only three possibilities exist for a text: It can have (i) only one meaning, (ii) more than one meaning, and (iii) infinite number of meanings.

Derrida says that "an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play", which implies that a text can replace any text. Obviously the dictionary becomes the ur-text of all literature. Furthermore, *Ulysses* can stand for *A Portrait* which in turn can replace *Dubliners*. This can be substituted for any literary text. This absurd situation can be avoided only if validity of certain interpretations is accepted. The other two possibilities go against deconstruction's grain.

Interpretation has never believed in a fixed meaning: irony, ambiguity, pun, metaphor and symbol being the elements it works with. But interpretation does have to be valid for a meaningful discussion of literature, even if this is achieved with the illusion of a finite meaning. Even Lacan, who advocated deconstruction and rejected the

transcendental signified wrote: "Interpretation is not open to all meanings. It is not just any interpretation. It is a significant interpretation, one that must not be missed."

Paradoxes and 'blind spots' do not make interpretation futile, but reinforce its necessity. Derrida says : "There are thus two interpretations of interpretation. . . The one seeks to decipher . . . a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay. The other . . . affirms freeplay." But the existence of 'free play' has always been acknowledged; its presence bringing forth interpretations. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: "A thing does not present itself to the hermeneutical experience without its own special effort, namely that of 'being negative towards itself: A person who is trying to understand a text has also to keep something at a distance, namely everything that suggests itself on the basis of his own prejudices, as the meaning expected, as soon as it is rejected by the sense of the text itself."

The antagonisms between interpretation and deconstruction disappear once we realize that both rely on the notion of validity. Moreover, deconstruction does not appear forbidding or radical to readers of modernist literature, in which, as Umberto Eco discusses: "The anecdote sets about growing; discontinuing, plural, mobile, subject to change, pointing out its own fictitiousness, it becomes a 'game' in the strongest sense of the word."

While rejecting the metaphysics of presence, deconstruction introduces the metaphysics of the Incarnate Word again. "There is nothing outside of the text," asserts Derrida, while Lacan writes: "It was certainly the word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation . . . It was the world of words that creates the world of things."

Deconstruction reasserts the Pietist view that meaning is the process of nominalism, which again derives from modernist literature. Modernism rejected Platonic and Aristotelian categories of 'imitation' and 'resemblance', in order to create a kind of literature which would not refer to an outside world (*Finnegans Wake*), but reinforce a textual cosmos as in Borgesian fiction, *nouveaux romans* of Roussel and Robbe-Grillet, and the poetry of Mallarme and Rilke, who declared in 'Sonnets to Orpheus': "GesangistDasein" (To sing is to be).

Deconstruction has thus always been with us, and shall ever remain with us.

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