



Deconstruction of the conceptual 'centre' as a post-modern phenomenon

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Abstract

Derrida has remained a pioneer in the field of literary theory for few decades now. His invaluable contribution in deconstruction and his unique way of crumbling down the centre against its Structuralist counterparts has unfurled a new area of literary studies. This paper will highlight the remarkable point stated in the essay and how it blends with the post-modern psyche. This whole corpus will showcase the noteworthy functions of deconstruction and how it exterminated the once established structuralist notions of the society. It has widened our myopic vision and helped us transcend the boundary of long-rooted conventions. This research will aid to comprehend the intricate innuendoes of the theory and will endow us with a comprehensive understanding of the philosophy.

Keywords: deconstruction, structuralism, violent hierarchy, free play, centre, bricolage, binary opposition, metaphysics of presence and structurality of structure

Introduction

The term 'deconstruction' was formulated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida in his seminal book *Of Grammatology*, unveiled several critically influential ideas on deconstruction, mostly taking his cues from the reverent Swiss semiotician and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Deconstruction is a theory which unapologetically questions the significance of 'platonism', its essence, its ideas, its form and its structure. It acts as an 'opposition' to the 'centre' and tries to subvert the 'centrality of the centre' from its very roots, which was once originated in the intellectual mind of the western philosophers.

Derrida delivered a ground breaking speech at the literary seminar titled "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" held at John Hopkins University at Baltimore on 21st of October, 1966. That speech was later recorded in formal writing as a treasure in the field of criticism, known as "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

In the essay, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, he advocated for the 'de-centering' of the centre. At the very inception of the essay, he repeatedly emphasized the term 'event', an imminent 'rupture' and 'redoubling'. Derrida focused on deconstructing the 'structurality of the structure', which would consequently create an inevitable "void" or "vacuum", which be filled by "free play" of linguistic signs and symbols.

'Event' is an impending phenomenon which conveniently leads to "free play" – 'the disruption of presence'. Free play allows the invention of creative concepts, where one structural concept is replaced by another, as these concepts or ideas are ephemeral and transient. In this post-modernist world, nothing is permanent or everlasting, every idea is sliding and making it a way for further fleeting hypothesis.

This eventful rupture is an extravagant process of epistemological shift or disorientation from the central European concept of the centre, where the centre is a 'being' or 'consciousness', which cannot be uprooted and subverted. This deflection of intellectual insight acts as a

harbinger of new philosophical theories.

Deconstruction is the opposition of structurality of structure. In Western Philosophy, the philosophers used to adore the centre, which is abundantly filled with the conceptual ideas like 'God', 'self', 'truth', 'death', 'being', 'consciousness', 'man' and so on. Derrida defined structure as a central Institution—"an organizing principle that allows for limited play", that is, its centre gives pronouncement to structure's structurality, "orients, balances and organizes the structure".

The Occidental world doesn't permit free play of ideas and they vehemently adhere to the central ideas, as they don't allow "absence" of ideas. The centre works as a binding force, which dictates and dominates the coherent world. Centre aids to avert disruption and commotion, where the absence of it would lead to insurgence of pandemonium and upheaval. For example, once 'God' was treated as the centre of the universe, which dictated our lives, but after Nietzsche's declaration of "God is dead!", a philosophical shift began. Another example of de-centering is, in a kindergarten classroom, the teacher acts as a central force, and all the students oblige to the rules and decorum of the teachers, but when she leaves, the whole classroom breaks into incessant conversation, laughing and mischievous antics.

Derrida called the centre as "a transcendental signifier". Deconstruction was introduced as a criticism, a counter force and an act of condemnation against "structuralism" of Claude Levi Strauss. Derrida espoused that "structure has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin": all systematic structures orient themselves around the centre, where at a moment one centre hold the structure. For instance, God in the medieval feudal hierarchy, the king on a chess board, a moderator in a debate competition and a referee in a football match.

The history of the concept of structure can be found as a series of substitutions of centre for centre-Plato's *ideas*, Aristotle's *telos*, Descartes' *ego*, Kants' *transcendental 'I'*, Hegel's *absolute spirit*, all these philosophical elements

exemplify the strength of coherence. Structuralism performs as a monolithic whole, an omnipotent presence, where there is no scope for “freedom” or liberty.

Following Derrida’s line of imagination, Michel Foucault’s pioneering essay, “What is an Author?”, where he sternly repudiated the “author’s authority” and “author’s intent” and quite singularly endowed the readers with power, freedom and liberty of dissecting the text. According to traditional viewpoint, author assumes the “omniscient” position, where his background, his viewpoint, his religion, his culture, his nationality etc. are considered in the purview of analysing the text.

Derrida reprimanded structuralism for its “logo-centrism” or an “ultimate truth”, which has a propensity for seeking ‘centre’ or ‘presence’. He also condemned the “hierarchy” in “binary oppositions”; where the first word has more prominence and significance over the other, like in speech/writing, nature/culture, white/black, male/female, God/man and many more but according to Derrida, one’s identity depends on the presence of the other. White can’t exist of its own if there is no darkness, similarly, God can’t assert power if man cease to exist.

Structuralists believe that speech is superior to writing but Derrida opposed the viewpoint and exclaimed, writing gives clarity to the vagueness of speech, it has a pictorial quality, which speech lacks. Claude Levi Strauss draws the analogy between ‘artist’ and ‘critic’, where he positioned the artist at a superior pedestal over critic. According to his notion, critic comes later, but an artist gives form to his imagination by using pre-existing material, hence, he is an “originator” or a “producer”. In repudiation to his viewpoint, Derrida stated equal social standing of both artist and critic, as none of them works on first hand materials, but rather vulnerably depend on the external material which already exists and are used. In the same vein, Levi Strauss placed nature over culture, just like, for him speech is natural and writing is cultural. Hence, Derrida citing the example of “Incest Prohibition”,² he further elaborated that it is natural and at the same time it is an outcome of culture, so it is a norm and thus, it belongs to both the category of nature and culture.

French anthropologist and traditional structuralist, Claude Levi Strauss, abundantly and categorically used the word “bricolage” to enumerate the mythological pattern of thought. In *The Savage Mind* (1962), he delineated a dichotomy between a “bricoleur” and an “engineer”. A bricoleur is an individual who employs devious and ingenious ways to put pre-existing things together and recombining them in order to make new things. Bricoleur is the “savage mind” who does not use systematic manner of thinking and calculative approach unlike an engineer, who is the “scientific mind”. An engineer is a true “craftsman”, who works in “entirety”, by taking into account the availability of materials. As for Levi Strauss assessment, the bricoleur functions more like mythology, where as, on the other hand, western modern science works more like an engineer.

Derrida’s deconstruction is an “anti-structuralist” approach for the interpretation of the centre. In the conference, Derrida talked about “the history of Metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of metaphors and metonymies” - which clearly indicate that the concept of structure has undergone various pattern of structures. The only constant is the change of the conceptual name, “essence, existence, substance, subject, transcendentality,

conscious, God, Man”.

Derrida was an avid reader of critical theories and philosophies of both ancient classic age as well as of his contemporary writers. He was an admirer of Roland Barthes, Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. In his essay, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, we have profound evidence of his indebtedness to “Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, Freud critique of consciousness and Heidegger destruction of metaphysics”.

Friedrick Nietzsche in his trailblazing book *The Joyful Wisdom*, had ruthlessly denounced the presence and significance of God, which assiduously paved the way for a post-modern world. Nietzsche asserted: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” he dethroned God from his crown position of a supernatural entity, who no longer had means to exert power on individuals. Following his school of thought, Derrida broached the idea that “there never has been any centre. Everything is mythos. Nothing is logos”. Both Nietzsche and Derrida articulated copiously for “Nihilism”.

In *Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes supplant author with the reader. Adhering to the perspective and analysis of W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley in the essay *The Intentional Fallacy*, Barthes warned his readers against giving superfluous attention to the author’s motives like Derrida, Barthes is more interested in analysing the readers purview than comprehending the author’s purpose. He toppled the author as a “scriptor”, who deals with pre-existing materials and not with anything creative. Barthes said “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”. In this case, author is not the superior fountainhead of knowledge, but rather a writer, who employs “language” as his paraphernalia in order to give new form and pattern to his imagination. Thus, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author” and “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures”.

In the book *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida avows that the term “differance” has neither existence nor essence. The alphabet “a” in defferance cannot be discerned in speech but can be apprehended clearly in writing. Similarly, Alan Bass compared difference to Hegel’s “Aufhebung”. Both the words are laid with double meaning and are ‘polysemic’ in nature. “Differance brings the two notions of “differing” and “deferring” together...repeatability and otherness”.³

Derrida said ‘language’ is the foundation of all structures and hence, no specific meaning can be assigned to it. As language can be interpreted in multifarious ways and it absolutely depends on the readers to analyse it. The centre is in constant flux and mutation, where one philosophy overthrows another and none is permanent in its origin. Thus, Derrida’s deconstruction is a post-modernist approach, where everything has multiple meanings and significance.

Derrida alluded “ethnocentrism” in this context. The term “ethnocentrism” was coined by William Graham Summer in 1966. It is a belief through which the norms, values, ideology, customs and traditions of other’s culture is measured against the parameter of one’s own culture. During colonialism, Britain and their English language heralded the top position and dominated and subjugated the other cultures and languages of the world. But during post-colonialism, Britain lost its supreme importance and all the languages gained equal prominence in terms of ethnicity

and cultural values. Here, in this scenario, the focal point has shifted and it got tilted towards another centre.

In this 1966 essay, Derrida assertively proclaimed his famous quote, “the centre is not the centre” but rather a “myth” which is often treated as truth. Heidegger further elaborated this point by dismantling the metaphysics and by quitting “determination of Being as presence”. Peter Barry explicitly stated that rupture or decentering has an order which very systematically overthrew God from its throne and placed “Man” as its new epicentre. These ruptures occurred history of human civilization. World war 1 obliterated any profound advancement in the field of science and human aspiration, Holocaust distorted Europe as the centre of knowledge and dignity. Terry Eagleton exclusively elaborated his notion by stating that western metaphysics have always clung to a single word, a supposed truth in order to avoid any kind of upheaval in a seemingly smooth world. Notions like “God, the idea, the world, the spirit, the self” aids to accomplish the very task of peace and security. Derrida in his hair-splitting essay has insinuated many new concepts and ideas, which never dawned human insight previously. He innovated the term “violent hierarchy”, the means by which the hierarchizing of binary oppositions happen. Levi Strauss prioritizes speech over writing, male over female, light over darkness and nature over culture. He emphasized more on “phonocentrism” and denied giving equal importance to both.

Terry Eagleton explained the progressive western European world in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996): “Western philosophy has always been in a broader sense ;logocentric’, committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word’, presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation for all our thought, language and experience”. But diachronically speaking, the centre gets replaced by another to form an epistemological shift: “the entire history of the concept of structure must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre”. Derrida brutally protested against ideas that aid “ideologies to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not”.

At the very beginning of the text, Derrida cited a quote from Montaigne: “We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things”. Derrida questioned the staunch belief of his contemporary conformist philosophers, who never premonition the arrival of an “event” which would eventually lead to an extraordinarily catastrophic “rupture”. But he unlike others, predicted the arrival of an “unnameable”, and “formless” entity: “The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about-and this is the very condition of its structural specificity-by a rupture with its past, its origin and its causes”.

Conclusion

In post-structuralism, visionaries like Derrida, Barthes and Foucault have broaden our horizon to analyse things through the kaleidoscope of multiple perspective. They proved that nothing is constant and everything is evolving. Things which were once considered the absolute truth are now beyond consideration. Derrida a revolutionary in the field of literary theory and criticism believed in the existence of non-centre. Frantic search for truth, stability and centre should be avoided and we should endeavour more into multiple possible outcome of a single perspective.

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