

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF  
TOUCHSTONE AND DECONSTRUCTION THEORY**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*This paper focuses on the basic set of rules of the critical theories i.e. touchstone and deconstruction theory. It exemplifies the different concepts in the respective theories. It also takes note of key words and terms in the concern theories. The theories have been selected keeping the variations in the root, terms, and methods of the theories into mind. The theories have been critically analysed taking the base and the functions of the theories into consideration. The present paper also explores the steps and ways of analysing work of art under the particular critical theory and special care has been taken to simplify the same. Finally, the theories have been summarised in to the various limitations and features of the said theories.*

**INTRODUCTION:**

Literary criticism began in the nineteenth century. It hovers between description and evaluation. We come a cross the application of two models; the critic as scientist i.e. explanation and the critic as historian i.e.

***National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....*** comprehension. Traditional criticism tends to be author-centred but the popular view of literature is determined to a large extent by Romantic notions of uniqueness and individuality where authors are praised for developing new strategies, or for anticipating future techniques known as modernity.

It is nature of human being or a society that it always longs for new knowledge and this thrust of knowledge causes the earlier gained knowledge to turn old. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle etc, all above mentioned critics brought several theories to prominent like biographical approach, sociological approach, Formalistic approach, etc. These all literary theories or approaches are nothing but the different measures to fathom the meaning of literature. Likewise two new theories were brought to prominence to uncover the hidden meanings.

#### **MATTHEW ARNOLD'S TOUCHSTONE THEORY:**

Arnold's objective approach to criticism and his view that historical and biographical studies are unnecessary was very influential on the new criticism. His emphasis on the importance of tradition also influenced F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.

Eliot is also indebted to Arnold for his classicism, and for his objective approach which paved the way for Eliot to say that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality, because it is not an expression of emotions but an escape from emotions.

Arnold's argument is that when dogmatic religions fail to provide ethical and spiritual consolation to people, poetry will have to be as source of consolation and comfort. For that poetry has to become serious and it can perform this function only to the extent to which it remains a criticism of

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life. After assigning a serious social function to poetry Arnold says that only poetry of high excellence will be able to perform its vital social function. The reader should know what is good poetry? and here lies the crucial role of the critic. Arnold is critical of the existing methods by which poets are judged; the two common methods-‘Historic estimate’ and ‘Personal estimate’ are, according to hi, fallacious. Arnold then proposes a new method of evaluating poetry. He suggests that we would have always in our mind lines and expressions of the great masters of poetry, and that we should apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. He writes, “Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar, But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them will in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them”. By taking a few passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, he points out how they impress alike by the poetical quality. So they all ‘belong to the class of the truly excellent’. He concludes, “critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete example;- to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very high quality, and to say: The characters of high quality of poetry are what is expressed there.

Arnold is unable to suggest any concrete criterion by determined; he considers ‘tact’ or taste as a sure enough guide. According to Arnold, the qualities of the highest kind of poetry can be found in the matter of poetry and also in its manner and style. Arnold says, “the best poetry is characterized by truth and seriousness to t an eminent degree”.

#### **ARNOLD'S LIMITATIONS:**

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1. For all his championing of disinterestedness, Arnold was unable to practise disinterestedness in all his essays. In his essay on Shelley particularly he displayed a lamentable lack of disinterestedness. Shelley's moral views were too much for the Victorian Arnold. In his essay on Keats too Arnold failed to be disinterested. The sentimental letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne were too much for him.
2. Arnold sometimes became a satirist, and as a satirical critic saw things too quickly, too summarily. In spite of their charm, the essays are characterised by egotism and, as Tilotson says, 'the attention is directed, not on his object but on himself and his objects together'.
3. Arnold makes clear his disapproval of the vagaries of some of the Romantic poets. Perhaps he would have agreed with Goethe, who saw Romanticism as disease and Classicism as health. But Arnold occasionally looked at things with jaundiced eyes.
4. Arnold's inordinate love of classicism made him blind to the beauty of lyricism. He ignored the importance of lyrical poems, which are subjective and which express the sentiments and the personality of the poet. Judged by Arnold's standards, a large number of poets both ancient and modern are dismissed because they sang with 'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art'.
5. It was also unfair of Arnold to compare the classical works in which figure the classical quartet, namely Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido with Heamann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, and 'The Excursion'. What is ancient Greece to many of us? Historians and archaeologists are familiar with it, but the common readers delight justifiably in modern themes. What a reader wants is variety, which classical mythology with all its tradition and richness cannot provide. An excessive fondness for Greek and Latin classics

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produces a literary diet without variety, while modern poetry and drama have branched out in innumerable directions.

6. Arnold's lack of historic sense was another major failing. As we have seen, later critics praise Arnold, but it is only a qualified praise. Oliver Elton calls him a 'bad great critic'. T. S. Eliot said that Arnold is a 'Propagandist and not a creator of ideas'. According to Walter Raleigh, Arnold's method is like that of a man who took a brick to the market to give the buyers an impression of the building.
7. **As all great work cannot be just classic or to be classic in frame doesn't stand synonym to the great judgement.**
8. In an age when cheap literature caters to the taste of the common man, one might fear that the classics will fade into insignificance. But Arnold is sure that the currency and the supremacy of the classics will be preserved in the modern age, not because of conscious effort on the part of the readers, but because of the human instinct of self-preservation. In the present day with the literary tradition overburdened with imagery, myth, symbol and abstract jargon, it is refreshing to come back to Arnold and his like to encounter central questions about literature and life as they are perceived by a mature and civilised mind.
9. This theory has set limited criteria for work to be great where as great works do not require any criteria. All great work cannot be of same type and cannot be squeezed or fixed in the same frame of classical great works.

#### **DECONSTRUCTION:**

**Post-Structuralism** (which is often used synonymously with **Deconstruction** or **Postmodernism**) is a reaction to structuralism and works against seeing language as a stable, closed system. It is the critic's task to

**National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....** decipher, to seeing literature as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence, or meaning". **Jacques Derrida's** (dair-ree-DAH) paper on "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (delivered in 1966) proved particularly influential in the creation of post-structuralism. Derrida's critique of structuralism also heralded the advent of deconstruction that--like post-structuralism--critiques the notion of "origin" built into structuralism. In negative terms, deconstruction--particularly as articulated by Derrida--has often come to be interpreted as "anything goes" since nothing has any real meaning or truth. More positively, it may be posited that Derrida, asks for rigor, that is, a type of interpretation that is constantly and ruthlessly self-conscious and on guard.

In addition to Jacques Derrida, **key** poststructuralist and deconstructive figures include Michel Foucault (fou-KOH), Roland Barthes (bart), Jean Baudrillard (zhon boh-dree-YAHR), Helene Cixous (seek-sou), Paul de Man (de-MAHN), J. Hillis Miller, Jacques Lacan (lawk-KAWN), and Barbara Johnson.

### **Key Terms:**

**Aporia** (ah-por-EE-ah)- a moment of undecidability; the inherent contradictions found in any text. Derrida, for example, cites the inherent contradictions at work in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's use of the words *culture* and *nature* by demonstrating that Rousseau's sense of the self's innocence (in nature) is already corrupted by the concept of culture (and existence) and vice-versa.

**Différance** - a combination of the meanings in the word *différance*. The concept means 1) *différer* or to differ, 2) *différance* which means to delay or postpone (defer), and 3) the idea of difference itself. To oversimplify, words

*National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....* are always at a distance from what they signify and, to make matters worse, must be described by using other words.

**Erasure (sous rature)** - to highlight suspect ideologies, notions linked to the metaphysics of presence, Derrida put them under "erasure," metaphorically pointing out the absence of any definitive meaning. By using erasure, however, Derrida realized that a "trace" will always remain but that these traces do not indicate the marks themselves but rather the absence of the marks (which emphasize the absence of "univocal meaning, truth, or origin"). In contrast, when Heidegger similarly "crossed out" words, he assumed that meaning would be (eventually) recoverable.

**Logocentrism** - term associated with Derrida that "refers to the nature of western thought, language and culture since Plato's era. The Greek signifier for "word," "speech," and "reason," logos possesses connotations in western culture for law and truth. Hence, logocentrism refers to a culture that revolves around a central set of supposedly universal principles or beliefs" (Wolfreys 302 - see *General Resources* below).

**Metaphysics of Presence** - "beliefs including binary oppositions, logocentrism, and phonocentrism that have been the basis of Western philosophy since Plato" (Dobie 155, see *General Resources* below).

**Supplement** - "According to Derrida, Western thinking is characterized by the 'logic of supplementation', which is actually two apparently contradictory ideas. From one perspective, a supplement serves to enhance the presence of something which is already complete and self-sufficient. Thus, writing is the supplement of speech, Eve was the supplement of Adam, and masturbation is the supplement of 'natural sex'....But simultaneously, according to Derrida, the Western idea of the supplement has within it the idea that a thing that has a supplement cannot be truly 'complete in itself'. If it were complete without

**National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....** the supplement, it shouldn't need, or long-for, the supplement. The fact that a thing can be added-to to make it even more 'present' or 'whole' means that there is a hole and the supplement can fill that hole. The metaphorical opening of this "hole" Derrida called invagination. From this perspective, the supplement does not enhance something's presence, but rather underscores its absence" (from Wikipedia - definition of supplement).

**Trace** - from Lois Tyson (see *General Resources* below): "Meaning seems to reside in words (or in things) only when we distinguish their *difference* from other words (or things). For example, if we believed that all objects were the same color, we wouldn't need the word *red* (or *blue* or *green*) at all. Red is red only because we believe it to be different from blue and green (and because we believe color to be different from shape). So the word red carries with it the trace of all the signifiers it is not (for it is in contrast to other signifiers that we define it)" (245). Tyson's explanation helps explain what Derrida means when he states "the trace itself does not exist."

**Transcendental Signifier** - from Charles Bressler (see *General Resources* below): a term introduced by Derrida who "asserts that from the time of Plato to the present, Western culture has been founded on a classic, fundamental error: the searching for a transcendental signified, an external point of reference on which one may build a concept or philosophy. Once found, this transcendental signified would provide ultimate meaning. It would guarantee a 'center' of meaning...." (287).

### **DECONSTRUCTION IS PROFOUNDLY HISTORICAL:**

It sees temporality as intrinsic to meaning, in that meaning can only be structured against that which is before it, which is structured against that which is before that. Meaning is that which differs, and which defers. The claim is not that there is no meaning -- that is a misunderstanding of deconstruction: the claim is



*National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....* that what we take to be meaning is a shifting field of relations in which there is no stable point, in which dynamic opposing meanings may be present simultaneously, in which the meaning is textually modulated in a interweaving play of texts. Meaning circulates; it is always meaning by difference, by being other. The meaning-through-difference creates or draws on 'traces' or 'filiations', themselves in some senses historical.

Deconstruction is also historical insofar and it functions etymologically, turning to the root, often metaphorical, meanings of words for an understanding of how they function within the web of differentiation which spans the chasm of the non-human over which we constantly live.

As deconstruction works on (in both senses of 'works on') the web of differentiation which spans the chasm of the non-human over which we constantly live, it is intrinsically and deeply human and humane. It is affirmative of the multiplicity, the paradoxes, the richness and vibrancy, of our life as signifying beings. If it seems to deny affirmation, it is because it knows that affirmation is always, intimately and compellingly, itself, only in the presence of and by virtue of negation. To fully live we must embrace our deaths.

If deconstruction seems to oppose Humanism, it is because Humanism operates by substituting the concept 'man' for the concept 'God' (or 'order', 'nature', 'Truth', 'logos', etc.) and so placing 'man' as the unproblematic ground of meaningfulness for human life. It should be clear, however, that 'man' is then a hypothesized centre, substituting for another hypothesized centre, in the history of metaphysics. Deconstruction wants to clarify the instability upon which such a concept is grounded.

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One can and indeed must work with ideas such as 'centre', 'man', 'truth', but must work with them knowing their instability; to do so is, in deconstructive terms, to place them "under erasure."

### **DECONSTRUCTION AND ASSUMPTIONS:**

**Différence:** a term coined by Derrida (from **differ** and **defer**): a word is known not through what it is but through its **difference** to other words, its ultimate meaning is always **deferred** or postponed (as when looking for a meaning of a word in a dictionary you are always lead to another word and so on) **Deconstruction** is textual analysis that begins with the assumption that since there is no **transcendental signifier** then a text would lack **presence** (it does not have meaning in isolation but must be differed and deferred). Therefore, no text can simply mean one thing as all meaning is based on difference. It is neither is destruction nor devaluation of a work of art.

### **STEPS TO A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING:**

1. find the binary operations in a text
2. comment on the values beyond these operations
3. reverse there binary operations
4. dismantle previously held beliefs and worldviews
5. accept the possibility of multiple meanings
6. allow meaning of text to be undecidable

**Deconstruction Again:** To deconstruct means to question. Deconstruction questions everything that is metaphysical, everything that cannot be derived from *physis* - everything that is just based upon appearances and assumptions. This process of deconstruction is a natural one; it belongs to the scientific method. The new aspect of this kind of

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deconstruction which poststructuralism is about is that it goes much deeper, much more beyond the surface of illusion that we have created or that reality has created for us.

Deconstruction means to question everything, question every single bit of information. Everything that is superficial, everything that is just loosely attached to some concepts but not really proven, the act of proving itself - nothing is to be spared. Deconstruction reveals the structures behind the structures, it reveals some mechanisms that are hidden, it explains them. Deconstruction is supposed to create transparency.

Transparency means creating a sharpened awareness, creating a deeper understanding for certain processes, for certain facts. Facts! Can we really determine facts? Or can't we just approach them, working with probabilities and possibilities and uncertainties? But though we think we could know everything - what a deeply 'scientific' belief.

No, deconstruction will not find the final answers. All philosophic ideas have been modified or dis'proven' by subsequent philosophers. So if history doesn't come to an end during the next years or decades, this approach of deconstruction will be succeeded by another variant of revealing the truth. The quest for the truth never ends; it just changes its face. And the search will never come to an end, never arrive at a final result - for we have no choice but to trust our senses. We are dependent on them; our means of investigation are our limitation.

The aim of deconstruction is not chaos, it is solidification of our knowledge - if we become aware of our limitations, and we can value our options much more. It is us who have to live in this world. We name the things that we perceive. Those names have to be exposed as what they are: Just names, artificial and metaphysical structures. They are images and

*National conference on comparative Literature: Changing Multidisciplinary perspectives....* represent a form. They are constructions that create the illusion of knowledge, the illusion of familiarity, the illusion of truth. We have to know the flaws of our means to be able to see behind the masks of reality. But naming is creating.

**In deconstruction the basic structuralist principle of difference is located ontologically as well as semiotically:** At the very point of beingness of every thing there is difference -- or *différance* -- because only through *différance* is one thing not another thing instead. *Différance* comes before being; similarly, a trace comes before the presence of a thing (as anything which is itself by virtue of not being something else, by differing, and that which it differs from remains as a trace, that whose absence is necessary for it to be); so too writing precedes speech -- a system of differences precedes any location of meaning in articulation. See my summary of Derrida, *Différance*.

#### **DECONSTRUCTION DECLINES THE STRUCTURALIST ASSUMPTION:**

Deconstruction, as do other post-structural theories, declines the structuralist assumption that structural principles are essences that there are universal structural principles of language, which exist 'before' the incidence of language. (The emphasis on the concrete, historical and contingent in opposition to the eternalities of essence reveals one of deconstruction's filiations with existentialism.) All 'principles' of existence (i.e., of experience) are historically situated and are structured by the interplay of individual experience and institutional force, through the language, symbols, environment, exclusions and oppositions of the moment (and of the previous moments through which this one is constructed). Structures are historical, temporary, contingent, operating through differentiation and displacement.

**Deconstruction believes just in text than outside:**

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There is no outside of the text; everything that we can know is text, that is, it is constructed of signs in relationship. This claim does not mean that there is nothing outside of language: the claim refers to the realm of human knowledge, not to the realm of concrete existence (elusive as that might be). Deconstruction does not deny the existence of an independent, physical world.

All texts are constituted by difference from other texts (therefore similarity to them). Any text includes that which it excludes, and exists in its differences from/filiations with other texts.

**OPPOSITES ARE UNITED:**

Opposites are already united; they cannot be opposites otherwise. Nor can they be a unity, and be themselves. They are the alternating imprints of one another. There is no nihilism without logocentrism, no logocentrism without nihilism, no presence without absence, no absence without presence, and so forth.

**The deconstructive activity is ceaseless:** It can never be resolved in a dialectic (that is, there is no synthesis), 1) but is always reaching back to a pattern of operations, antitheses, displacements and so forth, each 'behind', or 'before', or logically, ontologically, referentially, hierarchically, temporally or semantically or etymologically, etc, 'prior to' the other, and 2) alternating between the poles of antitheses or opposite. Like the form of mathematics called topography, deconstruction studies surfaces, as there are no depths, however firmly we may think we see them: there are only twists, (con)figurations, (re)visions.

**In short.....**

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- Deconstruction deals primarily with the text and not with any of the outside considerations such as author, the real world, audience, or other literature. Meaning, **Deconstructionists** subject texts to careful, formal analysis; however, they reach an opposite conclusion: there is no meaning in language
- **Deconstruction:** This approach assumes that language does not refer to any external reality. It can assert several, contradictory interpretations of one text. Deconstructionists make interpretations based on the political or social implications of language rather than examining an author's intention.
- Deconstruction one of the most influential movements in the intellectual history of the Western world. Starting in the 60s its all – pervading influence has not been limited to literature and literary criticism alone.
- There are certain basic problems in giving a precise definition of deconstruction. Deconstruction has its origin in philosophy, in the writings of the French of philosopher Jacques Derrida. In the broadest sense deconstruction can be seen as radical critique of the Western epistemology.
- Deconstruction is primarily a textual strategy, and as a strategy of reading, it is inseparable from the rhetoric it uses.
- Deconstruction can also be called as an extension of and as a reaction to structuralism.
- The traces of the absent signs in the sign present constitutes what Derrida calls erasure: what is said is erased by the traces. Derrida uses the term ‘free-play’ to suggest that writing is only a play of differences without any centre.
- Derrida suggests that the nature of language make s any kind of presence impossible, as the absences. Keep disrupting it. Hence

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writing is the interplay of absence and presence, which is the freeplay of differences.

- Differings is the one not being the other. Deferring is something being delayed or postponed. Deconstruction tries to debunk such notions of truth, origin, unity and meaning and affirms the indeterminacy of meaning.
- In Derrida's view, every text affirms and negates its meaning at the same time. Deconstruction is not concerned with dismantling the structure of the book, but tires to demonstrate how the text itself has dismantled its structure.
- Deconstruction is not a 'method' in the sense of systematic pursuit of the text. It does not deploy any system of rules or principles to explore a certain fixed meaning of the text.
- On the contrary deconstruction believes that a text does not have any fixed meaning, but has potentials for meanings and admits several interpretations into a 'free play' of meaning.
- Deconstructive activity is ceaseless. It can never be resolved in a dialectic. Deconstructing offers the possibility of a continual revolution in literary criticism.
- Derrida sees signifying force in the gaps, margins, figures, digressions, discontinuities, contractions, and ambiguities of a text. When one Writes, one writes more than (or less than, or other than) one thinks.
- The reader's task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant"

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