Philosophical Truth Deconstructed: A Reading of *Tata Niranjana*

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Deconstruction is on the side of the yes,  
of the affirmation of life.  
Jacques Derrida (2007: 51)

Deconstruction is as much an intellectual and political movement as a position within philosophy. From the very beginning deconstruction has been taken as a term for a specific philosophical project identified with the special proper name Jacques Derrida. The impact of that name, plus the project associated with it, has had a profound effect on the humanities and the social sciences, with recognition from the start that such disciplinary designations are automatically questioned by the practice of deconstruction. Indeed, so significant is the effect of deconstruction that both as a strategy and as a mode of inquiry it has acquired a life of its own. It has outlived Derrida, even though Derrida lives on within it. While Derrida himself has insisted that deconstruction is not a theory unified by any set of consistent rules or procedures, it has been variously regarded as a way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning. A recent documentary, *Derrida: The Movie* flashed a tagline that it would change not just ‘the way you think about everything, but everything about the way you think’.

Derrida's critique of transcendental truth has involved a demystification of presence or identity. By demonstrating that the idea of presence depends upon language, which simultaneously stands for and stands in the place of the things words represent, Derrida argues that presence is always elusive and relational- not the ground of truth but the illusion produced by the endless substitution of signifiers with which we (hopefully, but futilely) try to capture it. Moreover, there is no “truth” or “reality” which somehow stands outside or behind language: truth is a relation of linguistic terms, and reality is a construct, ultimately religious, social, political, and economic, but always of language, of various linguistic registers. Even the human self, in this view, has no pregiven essence but is a linguistic construct or narrative. Identity, whether of the human self or of objects in the world, is no longer viewed as having a stable, fixed, or pregiven essence, but is seen as fluid and dependent, like linguistic terms, on a variety of contexts. Hence a deconstructive analysis tends to prioritize language and linguistic operations in analyzing texts and contexts. One effect of the demystification of presence- and one of the strategies by which Derrida has achieved this demystification-is the deconstruction of binary oppositions. Derrida points out that oppositions such as those between intellect and sense, soul and body, master and slave, male and female, inside and outside, center and margin, do not represent a state of equivalence between two terms. Rather, each of these oppositions is a “violent hierarchy” in which one term has been conventionally subordinated, in gestures that embody a host of religious, social, and political valencies. Intellect, for example, has usually been superordinated over sense; soul has been exalted above body; male has been defined as
superior in numerous respects to female. The project of deconstruction, then, is not to reverse binary oppositions but to problematize the very idea of opposition and the notion of identity upon which it depends. Deconstruction therefore undermines identity, truth, being as such; it substitutes endless deferral or play for these essences.

Philosophy, which has always been sought as a powerful medium to clarify and systematize the concepts on which we depend on making sense of the world everyday, is the best point for deconstruction to begin with. Deconstruction does not entail an outright rejection of philosophy, or of the commitment to reason, clarity or truth, but it exposes this bitter truth that the ideals prescribed by philosophy cannot be rigorously secured and sustained. Because philosophy does something that is a resistance to any fixed definition, a point at which it is impossible to say, for example, whether something is or is not, a state of perpetual deferment. This resistance is very necessary for the survival of philosophy; this is what makes philosophy both possible and necessary. But, at the same time, it devastates all the philosophy’s noble attempt to answer such questions, once and for all.

The literature plays an important role in the enactment of deconstruction because it paves the way for the disruption of philosophical assumptions in which deconstruction is primarily interested. Deconstruction emerges as a powerful medium through which we find ourselves in a position to trace the limitations of philosophy: those things which philosophy cannot tell or more precisely will not tell us. Deconstruction tries to expose the blind spots of philosophy through literature. This literature-cum-philosophy would not be pure philosophy because if it were, then Derrida would be condemned to play the same role played by philosophers, and thus falling into the trap of same barriers.

Bijay Mishra’s play Tata Niranjana (On the Bank of River Niranjana) explores and validates this very role of literature’s performance in deconstructing the blind spots of philosophical truth. In order to enunciate this noble job of literature the playwright takes Buddhism and its philosophical ideals into his consideration. Buddhism like any other philosophy formulates certain rules and truths, which if followed severely, have the capacity to redeem whole mankind from the maya of worldly affairs. Desire (Kamana) is the root cause of all evils. The end of desire is the end of suffering. We must overcome it with all our powers to enjoy the eternal bliss of redemption. For the proper and systematic approach to tackle kamana Buddhism recommends Sangha, a suitable place where an ideal environment would be provided to meet this hard and fast end. Sangha is a sort of purgatory where all the desires are burnt to cleanse the body. As this Sangha aims to grant salvation (nirvana), individual identity and liberty must be sacrificed.

The setting of this play is that time when Gautam Buddha is, perhaps, relishing the accomplishment of his hard penance. This is the heyday of Buddhism. Sangha has established itself and has got the full authority to exercise its powers to bring the desired (kamana) result. Various Bhikkhus are entering into the full protection and strict life style of Sangha, in order to put an end to desire (kamana). Bhikkhu Neellohit and Bhikkhuni Ichhamati are those who too want to be educated and well versed in the system/truth propounded by Tathagat and well managed by Aananda, the chief disciple of Buddha. In the very opening scene these two people, Neellohit and Ichhamati, have been presented to us in contrary terms. He is weak by continuing the hard and fast rules imposed by Sangha. He is the man who follows the norms strictly without questioning it. He is not having his own perception and totally depends on the path shown by others i.e. Buddha. On the contrary she has been presented in terms of intense physicality, vibrant and full of life. She is the symbol of celebrated life, fervor of flesh which is completely
unfazed by outside restrictions. She has the capacity to transcend the barriers imposed by philosophical preaching. She is the consciousness itself, eternally flowing. She is trying the best to persuade her companion not to follow any set of abstract rules unless it is not tried and tested in his own experience. She asks him not to follow the Buddhist version of truth as only truth. She is against the established Buddhist version of truth. She does not repudiate physical pleasures altogether. On the contrary she invites him to have physical pleasure. The momentary surrendering of both the selves into One. This bliss has no parallel.

But this ‘against the grain’ idea is heavily thwarted by Aananda. To him this very physical enjoyment and pleasure is transitory. There is no permanence. Time will destroy it in no time. Presently Time is almighty but he is in his way to evolve something that will defeat Time. This can only be done when there is no desire at all. This state is a state of light, full of consciousness, and eternity itself. In this kingdom there would be no question. It would be the realm of all answers. Ultimate truth. As Aananda puts it, “There all questions have ended. Even the source of desire and wish has come to an end”(139). Perhaps it is the reign of absolute logocentrism, ultimate signified where all the questions come to an ironic end. This is the realm of stability and inanimate calm. There is no ripple of life. Lifeless. Abstract. But the question is: is it worthy enough to be opted?

At this crucial juncture, the power/philosophy/truth (Aananda) intervenes and tries to use its veto. He tries to disclaim the ideas put by Ichhamati (literature). They are facing each other. Ichhamati reveals her question to Aananda, “What is more desirable than suffering, more important than suffering” (149)? Unfortunately he has no answer because he has never thought of it. So far his philosophy has solely concentrated on the ending of suffering. It could not think beyond suffering. His mind is not free enough to think of it. It is fettered by received ideas/truth, and he succumbs to same old memorized Buddhist formulas. He and Neellohit speak like a trained parrot: The end of desire is the end of suffering. Surrender yourself before Sangha and Dharma. You will get salvation. You will be liberated from old age, suffering and death. Prabhu is the ultimate avatar of Truth. There is no rebirth of Him/Truth (ibid).

But she is not a parrot. She is the mistress of discerning mind. She is unfazed by this philosophical tyranny. She laughs. She mocks this prescribed and advertised truth and again fires another bullet, “Desire! What is this? What is its form (149)? This question startles Aananda and shakes the very foundation of Buddhist truth. Such a pure and naked question! How can it come to anybody’s mind? But the logocentrism does not accept this question and uses its panacea to expel her. She should be exiled and punished from this Platonic Sangha. She accepts it readily for suffering is another form of truth. Neellohit is still drowned in the enchantment of Sangha and says, “Don’t you see, how fearless they are by winning over suffering”(150). But she snubs him, “Nobody can give you fearlessness, Neellohit. You will have to search yourself”(ibid). It requires the exploration of soul which is statutory prohibited within the provinces of Sangha. Though it claims to provide salvation, but a regimented one, restricted and without creativity. Freedom (internal and external) is snatched. In another sense there is no difference whether you get salvation or not. From time immemorial man has been a slave to various agencies like religion, philosophy, and truth. Man has been reduced to become like an institutional animal. Sangha is performing the same heinous crime.

In order to understand the full implication and importance of her questions, the playwright calls upon the savior Mahatma Buddha in the witness box. Ichhamati may be termed
as a potent lawyer, who has full command over herself; who knows the blind spots of his fixed and stable form of truth. The pure and naked questions of her shatter the very ivory tower of Buddha. Her questions compel him to go for fresh findings. He will have to reconsider and reformulate his old philosophy (truth). Whatever has been told so far are not in a position to bear the pangs of new and fresh curiosities. They should be altered. Buddha too realizes the shortcomings of his truth, that’s why he thinks that these questions could arise in anybody’s mind. He knows this bitter fact that his own Sangha does not allow any space for such type of discursive thoughts. And those who dare to go for any discursive idea will have to quit Sangha. But, is it the only solution? Perhaps no. What a pity! Institutionalized truth is exercising its full power over individual liberty and freedom. Even the individuality of Mahatma Buddha as a human being is under the domination of this Sangha. Sangha (truth) is breeding power, a power that has the capacity to silent the voice of any dissenter whether Ichhamati or Mahatma Buddha. As Aananda pronounces, “For the prosperity of Sangha, for the welfare of Bhikkhus, hereafter you have taken a vow to remain silent forever” (184). This is nothing but the sheer depiction of that established truth that breeds Foucauldian power.

Gautam Buddha wishes to see/visit the bank of Niranjana where he once got this truth to redeem the whole mankind. Unfortunately this tried and tested knowledge/truth does not have the potentiality to sustain or bear the arguments of Ichhamati, so he has to start from the very beginning. He has experienced the fact that truth cannot remain stable or fixed. Truth is like water; the water of Niranjana. The water of Niranjana becomes the potential symbol of consciousness; eternal consciousness which flows like water. If it remains stagnant, it will be polluted, stained and tarnished. As far as the activities of Sangha are concerned, it has committed a serious crime by curbing the mind of individuals. That’s why it should be destructed to let the individual mind behave like the water of Niranjana (consciousness). Whenever man is in deep trouble, he should take recourse to his unique consciousness. It alone can save him and nothing else. He makes an earnest request to Aananda to pen down these new fresh insights, but Aananda cannot do this for they go against the established truth propagated by Sangha. On this juncture Buddha makes an emotional appeal to destroy the very existence of Sangha (the propagator of established philosophical truth). Then he heads to meet his ultimate destiny i.e. Death. And his last words remain undelivered.

Aananda is the only man who could know this, but he will not share it with the outside world. Here he becomes a worldly man who is not able to end his own kamana to perpetuate the existence of Sangha; the desire to destruct the role of Sangha to show common humanity the light of philosophical/institutionalized truth. He declares that in his last times Prabhu Tathagat repeated the same teachings. Only his way will bring about the welfare to mankind: Through Sangha man will search his path of salvation. Without Sangha man has no existence. Prabhu is the last Buddha, ultimate truth, and there is no rebirth of him.

What is this? Isn’t it the tyranny of philosophical/institutionalized truth? Yes it is. Philosophy will simply ignore this. Philosophy won’t allow it. But literature has the capacity to perform this noble job. And deconstruction provides a vantage point through which we undermine this philosophical enterprise of establishing truth and only truth. Deconstruction is a way of thinking which takes concepts and ideas which we have taken for granted to reorganizes them, upsetting the relationship between them. It strips the concept of their customary authority, not to dismiss them but to do something different. It is the rebuilding the architecture of the
intellectual currents in which we dwell, but also a way in which we find that dwelling never seems simple or straightforward again.

**Works Cited:**
