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## Exorcising the Fear of Theoretical and Conceptual Opacity: An Illustrative and Definitive Approach to Deconstruction

**Bilal Ahmad Dar**  
Ph.D Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Aligarh Muslim University, India

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### Abstract:

The term 'Deconstruction' has become a *dernier cri* in the arena of present Literary Theory. It is a very perplexing and vexing concept to follow. It is thought of as a conceptual chimera. The teachers and experts of Literary Theory have attached much complexity with this theory of deconstruction. This kind of approach on the part of teachers and experts is very disturbing and unfortunate for the students who are abecedarians in the field of Literary Theory. The present paper attempts to simplify this arcane theoretical concept through a definitive and illustrative approach to it. Further, this paper attempts to disambiguate and simplify some of the esoteric and recondite terms that have been used by Derrida while devising the theory of deconstruction.

**Keywords: Deconstruction, *Dernier cri*, Conceptual Chimera, Abecedarian, Arcane, Disambiguate, Esoteric, Derrida.**

The theory and the concept of deconstruction devised by Derrida is really a conceptual and theoretical brain-teaser. It is a much opaque and obtuse concept to comprehend. Its use of much loaded critical terminology and its philosophical proclivity makes it very complicated and difficult for the readers to get through its labyrinthine concepts. According to Anne, B. Dobie, "The term deconstruction sends many readers running for cover, partly because it is one of the most radical approaches to reading that has happened on the scene, but also because its terminology presents difficulties of its own" (*Theory into Practice* 149).

There is no denying the fact that deconstruction is a very complex and difficult concept to fathom, but the way this difficulty and complexity is taken by the experts of Literary theory is really vexatious and unfortunate for the beginners of Literary Theory. One of the main reasons that make this concept more complex and byzantine is the olio of opinions about it given by many theorists. Apart from this, its wide application and scope also makes it difficult to extrapolate. It is not only used in the criticism of Literature, but also in Philosophy and many other subjects as well. Further, its complex and critical idiom makes it fearful and, hence, difficult to understand. This paper tries to drive away this difficulty and complexity of the concept through an illustrative and definitive approach to it.

The term 'Deconstruction' itself has not been coined by Derrida. It was already present in dictionary. Derrida only gave it currency. In this regard, Alex Thomson writes, "...the French philosopher Jacques Derrida did not invent the term 'deconstruction'-he found it in a dictionary-it was an obsolete and archaic word when he first started to use it in 1960s. (qtd. in *Literary Theory and Criticism* 298). Derrida actually got inspired by Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Destruktion' or 'Abbau' in putting forward his theory of deconstruction.

The theory of deconstruction is not a novel invention. Deconstructive theory was practiced well before Derrida fashioned and made it seminal. The concept and theory of deconstruction or deconstructive thinking has been anticipated in the theories given by many theorists who belong to different subjects. The theory of relativity given by Einstein is deconstructive in nature because it changed the thinking of people about time. Likewise the theories of infantile sexuality and three structured nature of psyche given by Sigmund Freud are also deconstructive in nature because these theories put to radical extreme the conventional notions of the people about sexuality and psyche. The age of Enlightenment was also deconstructive in approach because it rebelled with the help of reason against the traditional notions which were based on falsity. The philosopher Friderich Nietzsche and the linguist Saussure also inspired Derrida in devising the theory of deconstruction. Jim Powell is right when he writes in his book '*Derrida for Beginners* (2010) that 'If Derrida has managed to turn much of Western thought on its head, he has done so only by standing on the shoulders of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Saussure' (13). So, we can say that Derrida drew inspiration from these antecedent theories, philosophers, linguists and movements in devising his path breaking theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction and Derrida are nowadays used in collocation. Apart from Derrida, the theorists who are closely associated with deconstruction are: Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and J.Hillis Miller. This group is pejoratively called as 'Yale Mafia'.

The books that have been written by Derrida related to deconstruction are: *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967) etc. The paper that made him famous for the concept of deconstruction is: *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*. This paper was presented by Derrida in John Hopkins University in 1966 at an International symposium. It is at this symposium Derrida bursted the bubble of both Structuralism and the Western Philosophy.

### **Defining Deconstruction:**

In her translator's preface to *Of Grammatology* (1967) Spivak writes, "To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell....." (Ixxvii)

Defining deconstruction is a bit daunting and peeving process for it has a wide range of meanings in different subjects. Many theorists and dictionaries have defined deconstruction in

different words and stances. According to online Concise Oxford Dictionary, “Deconstruction is a form of critical analysis that emphasizes enquiry into the variable projection of the meaning and message of critical works. Webster’s online Dictionary defines deconstruction as, “A philosophical or critical method which asserts that meanings, metaphysical constructs and hierarchical oppositions are always rendered unstable by their dependence on ultimately arbitrary signifiers”. So, from the definitions given by different dictionaries we can say that deconstruction of any literary work, any philosophical opinion is simply its deep analysis, critical anatomizing or serious dissection. Derrida himself did not define deconstruction. When asked by a Japanese friend about the definition of deconstruction, Derrida didn’t supply an answer.

Deconstruction is not a method of reading. It is just a deep critical analysis. Deconstruction is not a deliberate and intentional approach; texts etc. deconstruct themselves on their own. According to M.H. Abrams, “Deconstructive reader neither initiates nor produces; deconstruction is something that simply “happens” in a critical reading (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 58). Many theorists have defined deconstruction in their own ways. These definitions of many theorists are highly helpful in understanding deconstruction. According to Terry Eagleton, “It is often referred to as ‘reading against the grain’ or ‘reading the text against itself’ with the purpose of knowing the text as it cannot know itself” (qtd. In *Beginning Theory* p.68). Barbara Johnson in her famous critical book ‘*The Critical Difference*’ defines deconstruction as:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with ‘destruction’. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’, which etymologically means ‘to undo’...The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.(5)

In his important book ‘*A Glossary of Literary Terms*’ M.H.Abrams defines Deconstruction as under:

Deconstruction as applied in the criticism of literature, designates a theory and practice of reading which questions and claims to “subvert” or “undermine” the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish boundaries, the coherence or unity... typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities (55). Sharon Crowley opines that “Deconstruction amounts to reading texts in order to rewrite them” (qtd. In *Theory into Practice* 162).

Deconstruction or deconstructive reading is a critical process of subverting the false bases of social constructs, sweeping comments, totalizing narratives, textual claims to ultimate meaning; logo centric thinking, unjust binaries; and the claims of western philosophy about the

existence of transcendental signified and metaphysics of presence. John D. Caputo also says the same thing about deconstruction in the following words:

Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility. Indeed, that is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. That is what deconstruction is all about; it’s very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction is. In a nutshell...Have we not run up against a paradox and an aporia [something contradictory]...the paralysis and impossibility of an aporia is just what impels deconstruction, what rouses it out of bed in the morning (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* 32)

Hence, from the whole range of definitions given by many deconstructive theorists, we can say that deconstructive reading tries to uncover the covert contradictions of any text. It brings to limelight the internal contradiction of the texts. It unmasks the unconscious elements of the text. Deconstructive reading bursts the bubble of the texts under study. J.A. Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, says that in Deconstruction:

A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying... It may be read as carrying a plurality of significance, or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘stable’, meaning. Thus a text may ‘betray’ itself. (129)

To use the terms of Peter Barry, we can say that deconstruction is a kind of “textual harassment” or “oppositional reading”. Deconstruction aims to show that the text is at war with itself. Further, we can say that deconstruction is a decentring of any philosophical school of thought, any textual proposition etc. Jonathan Culler’s words are apt to quote here. Culler says that, “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.”(*On Deconstruction* 86). Deconstruction attempts to make manifest that a text has no compact unity or ground to present meanings, that the text is only a series of conflicting significations. In nutshell, we can say by using Paul Ricoeur’s term that deconstruction is “hermeneutics of suspicion”. It looks at everything with a critical and suspicious eye. Everything is a fish that comes under the net of deconstruction.

### **Illustrating Deconstruction:**

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things- texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need-do not have definable meanings and determinable missions...<sup>[1]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> John D. Caputo in “*Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*”(P.31)

Illustrating 'deconstruction' is a bit difficult and vexing task. For, to make a deconstructive reading of any text, idea, concept or word, one needs to have a sharp critical faculty. But let's have a bash at it. Deconstructive reading to anything can be applied at different levels. One can apply deconstructive reading at the verbal, the textual, and the linguistic level. Let's try to illustrate deconstruction. As has already been said that deconstructive reading shows the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the texts and words. If we look at the word 'clip', it is an auto-antonym or what we call contronym. It both means 'to cut' and 'to attach'. So, unmasking the contranymous nature of this word is deconstruction of this word. Likewise the word 'dust' means both 'to apply dust to anything' and 'to remove dust from anything'. Hence the deconstructionist proposition 'words are contradictory and have multiple meanings' is true.

As we know, Deconstructionists also assert that meaning of the text is not stable and final. It is arbitrary and contingent. Meaning of text changes with the passage of time. To illustrate this let's quote a line from Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet'. The line goes like this: Frailty thy name is woman. This line deconstructs itself. Woman is no longer weak and frail. Hence, the deconstruction of the Shakespearean sweeping comment or dictum. To further illustrate deconstruction let's cite Peter Barry who applies deconstructive reading to Dylan Thomas's poem 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a child in London'. Peter Barry quotes a line from this poem in order to show how it refutes itself. The line goes like this: After the first death, there is no other. According to Barry this line contradicts and refutes itself. If something is called the first, then a sequence is implied of second, third, fourth, and so on (*Beginning Theory* 71). Derrida himself culls out the word "Pharmakon" from one of the dialogues of Plato to show the point of undecidability in arriving at the meaning of the words. *Pharmakon* both means medicine as well as poison. So, this word puts one in an aporetic situation when one tries to decide its meaning.

So, from the examples given above, we have seen what deconstruction or deconstructive reading is. It is a critical process of bringing to fore the dichotomous nature of words, social and textual construct.

### **Defining the terms associated with Deconstruction:**

Derrida has used many terms in his speeches and books in order to show the contradictory nature of texts, to highlight the biased nature of the Western Philosophy, to show the plurality of the texts, and to emphasize much more about the texts and textual constructs. Some of the terms that are repeatedly used in deconstructive theory are defined as under:

1. **Aporia:** It is a kind of textual knot which is very difficult to untie. According to M.H. Abrams "it is an insuperable deadlock, or "double bind," of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are "undecidable" in that we lack any sufficient ground for choosing among them. (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 58)

2. **Différance:** It is a portmanteau word. It is the combination of two words ‘differ’ and ‘defer’. The concept of difference implies that meaning is possible only because of difference and meaning is never final. It always gets postponed.
3. **Dissemination:** it is one of the important terms used by Derrida in his theory of deconstruction. *Dissemination* (1981) is a book written by Derrida. In simple terms dissemination means dispersal or spread of something on a large scale. In deconstruction, it purports to say that nothing has a single meaning. Every word has plurality of meanings. The concept of dissemination is similar to the concept of polysemy. The word ‘bank’ serves an apt example of both dissemination and polysemy.
4. **Erasure:** It simply means erasing a word, sentence, or phrase. In a deconstructive theory it involves the process when we say something and immediately unsay it. It involves an attempt to rewrite and self-correct oneself. Many texts do involve this process of erasure. In devising this term, Derrida got inspired from Heidegger’s concept of ‘*Sous rature*’ which means under erasure. Erasure is akin to a figure of speech called epanorthsis. It is a figure of speech that typifies the serious and emphatic word replacement. A sentence like: Thousands, no, millions! is an apt example of both erasure and epanorthsis.
5. **Logocentrism:** This term has been coined by the philologist Ludwig Klages. In deconstruction, it means that Western Philosophy is based on logos or centre. Logocentrism limits the free play of meanings.
6. **Phonocentrism:** Privileging of speech and sound over writing is phonocentrism.
7. **Supplement:** This term has been used by Derrida to highlight that nothing is independent. Supplement means both an addition and support. Hence, we can say writing is supplement to speech, woman is supplement to man.
8. **Trace:** In simple terms, it means the vestige of something. In deconstructive terms, it means the presence of an absent signifier. According to Anne. B. Dobie, “It is the illusory effect of meaning that is left in a signifier by other signifiers that is, what it is not. It is Derrida’s term for all the non-present meanings whose differences from a signifier give a statement the effect of having meaning in itself (*Theory into Practice* 359).
9. **Transcendental Signified:** A signified that is beyond this physical world. It is a fixed and ultimate centre of meaning. God, truth, essence etc are usually thought of as transcendental signified. Derrida negates the existence of this transcendental signified.

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