

TAGORE'S WHERE THE MIND IS WITHOUT FEAR: A REVIEW**Dr. Shailaja B. Wadikar**

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“As institution, the author is dead.”¹ This view of Roland Barthes in his famous essay “The Death of the Author” marks a new phase in criticism paving the way for the subversion of the traditional humanistic view. The author is replaced by the reader. In the interpretation of literature, the attention is focused on words, phrases, and sentences that constitute a text. M.H.Abrams, in his work *The Mirror and the Lamp*, noted this distinction as subjective or expressive criticism and objective or expressionistic criticism. Paying heed to the author’s intention, his biography and historical scholarship while evaluating his/ her work is considered a mistake, termed as “intentional fallacy” by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley.

In the approaches such as formalist, new critical, structuralist, deconstructive, etc., literary work is viewed as self-sufficient and therefore, an autonomous object. The basis of literary analysis is not just theme, plot, characterization, technique, etc., but

words, phrases, sentences, images, symbols, etc., also.

The three approaches, that is, the formalist, the new critical, and the structuralist, are not just water-tight compartments. Actually, they are complementary to each other and therefore, can also be seen as the extension of each other. All of them indicate language/code-centered, text-oriented criticism based on the close reading of the text. Formalism laid the foundation for the decontextualised, objective study of the text. Practical criticism (the British term) or new criticism (the American term) and structuralist criticism are the parallel developments that flourished between the 1930s and the 1970s. In formalism, the focus is on the explanation of the aesthetic effects that result from the special use of language and literary devices. In new criticism, it is on the explanation of a connotation, or to use Allen Tate’s term, ‘tension’, and in the structuralist criticism

it is on the interpretation of phono-/lexico-/grammatical constituents of the text.

The Euro-American developments in the first half of the 20th century are challenged by Jacques Derrida in the later half of the 20th century in his “Theory of Deconstruction.” His essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” read at a John Hopkins’s University symposium is a radical interpretation of Saussurean theory.

“Deconstruction designates a theory and practice of reading which claims to ‘subvert’ or ‘undermine’ the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a text. Typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself inevitably dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meaning into an indefinite array of multiplex, incompatible, and undecidable possibilities.”²

Actually, Saussure’s sign is the foundation of Derrida’s views as he has based his theory on his challenge to Saussure’s concept of ‘signified’ and ‘signifier’. In doing so, he has not only challenged Saussure but the metaphysical assumption that formed the basis of European criticism since the time of Plato.

At some point in the late 1960s, structuralism gave birth to ‘post-structuralism’. Some commentators believe that the later developments were already inherent in the earlier phase. One might say that post-structuralism is simply a fuller working out of the implication of structuralism. But this formulation is not quite satisfactory, because it is evident that post-structuralism tries to deflate the scientific pretensions of structuralism. If structuralism was heroic in its desire to master the world of artificial signs, post-structuralism is comic and anti-heroic in its refusal to take such claims seriously. However, the post-structuralist mockery of structuralism is also a self-mockery; post-structuralists are structuralists who suddenly see the error of their ways.³

Linguistic signs, for Saussure, are related to signifier and signified. They refer to each other and not to external objects. As a result, language becomes self-referential. Derrida subverts Saussure’s basic view by stating that signifiers do not carry with them well-defined signifieds as meaning is always fluid. In such case, the Saussurean concept

of transcendental signified proves faulty and finds no place in Derridean theory.

The terms related to deconstructionist approach are “the transcendental signified” “logo-centrism” and “phonocentrism”. “Logo-centrism” indicates the presence, that is, truth or meaning behind the “logos”, that is, a form or a word, while “phonocentrism” designates the superiority of the spoken form over the written form. Derrida is deadly against both these concepts, as he rejects the basic idea that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth which has been accepted since the western metaphysics up to Saussure. Similarly, he objects the superiority of the spoken form over the written form by stating that the original form, that is, the spoken word for the pre-Derridean critics, is not necessarily the purest form.

The key concepts in deconstruction are “binary oppositions”, “metaphysics of presence”, “arche-writing”, “supplementation”, and “differance”. Derrida’s theory is based on the view that the establishment of one center of unity is based on the rejection of the previous one. So, the center is decentered, now. When we think about one center, it is noticed that there exists the opposing one. To these centers, Derrida uses the term, “binary oppositions”.

According to Derrida, in these centers, one has privilege over the other. However, the hierarchy has to be subverted as one has meaning or significance due to the other. In “the metaphysics of presence”, Derrida aims to put forth the variety of interpretation which exists in absent or abstract form. In “arche-writing”, he opposes the view that speech is prior to writing. Writing for Derrida is not just the symbols inscribed on the page. It is, on the other hand, “a free play of signs”, meaning thereby “undecidability” in any system of communication. So, it is superior to speech. To the question “what is prior to what”, he argues that writing has been in existence in the form of picture before speech. For all these forms of communication, Derrida uses the term “arche-writing”.

“Supplementation”, in Derrida’s opinion, is the unstable relationship between the hierarchies. Varying interpretations of the same text can be given by reversing the hierarchy and new insights can be achieved. For Derrida, vice is supplementary to virtue, bad to good, darkness to light, and so on.

According to Derrida, the text cannot have a unique meaning as opposite of it is always present there as a “trace”. So, we have to form our interpretation on the principle of “differance”, that is, on the

idea, that one concept carries various meanings. Therefore, we have to go on deferring, that is, delaying our interpretation.

Thus, it is observed that all concepts, introduced by Derrida for the interpretation and appreciation of literature revolve around his opposition to Saussure's concept of "signified". In that sense, it can be stated that Saussure's structuralism is the foundation of Derrida's deconstruction.

Deconstruction: Analysis of a Text

In deconstruction, it is assumed that a text has multiple interpretations. It is expected that the text has to be read again and again and, thus, needs to be reinterpreted for countless times. "To deconstruct is to do and undo ceaselessly; to undo is not the same as to destroy but rather it is akin to de-center, to constantly destabilize what has been done and to rigorously demystify what is received in the name of knowledge. To deconstruct is to examine minutely in order to dismantle conventional hierarchies in the given system to arrive at an exactly opposite position."⁴

While analyzing a text, the first thing that the deconstructor asks to do is to find the binary opposition to expose the preconceived assumptions upon which our interpretation is based. In order to get rid

of the prejudiced beliefs, we have to reverse the hierarchies so that we can read the text with our new angle, new dimension, and new perspective and dismantle the previously held world views. In other words we can see the "*Horizons and Beyond*."⁵ To find the binary oppositions quickly is not possible. The remedy for this problem suggested by the deconstructor is to suspend our first interpretation and to shift our attention to another from a different perspective. This process of changing allegiance from one interpretation to another is an on-going activity, based upon "difference", in which we will open "ourselves to a never-ending process of interpretation, one that decrees that no hierarchy or binary operation is right and no other is wrong."⁶ Still we have to keep in mind:--whatever interpretations or meanings we give, are undecidable, since our hierarchy will be reversed by another interpreter.

Where the Mind is without Fear

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where the words come out from the depth of truth;

**Where tireless striving stretches its arms
towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has
not lost its way into dreary desert sand
of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee
into ever-widening thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, my father,
let my country awake.**

(Tagore, Rabindranath. "Where the Mind is without Fear". *Gitanjali*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2004, 33.)

Binary oppositions are at the bottom of the deconstructionist analysis of the text. But to find out clear-cut oppositions seems impossible here. So, we have to rely on the implied ones.

Heaven (bliss) / hell (chaos);
freedom / slavery;
mind without fear / fearful mind;
head held high / head bowed down;
knowledge is free / knowledge is not free;
truth / untruth, lie;
broken up / united, bound up;
tireless striving / lethargy, dullness,
inaction, docile nature;
perfection / imperfection;
clear stream of reason / irrationality;
ever-widening / ever-narrowing;
awake / asleep.

Outwardly, the poem is a prayer. It expresses Rabindranath Tagore's magnitude of thought which demands his country's redemption. The poet expects that his countrymen should be fearless persons. They have to move in society with self-respect and confidence. In this country, education should not be the monopoly of the rich and the affluent. The world should not be divided on the basis of caste, class, colour, religion, creed, region, etc. The countrymen should be honest and truthful. They have to strive tirelessly to achieve perfection in all their undertakings. The reason of his countrymen, while striving for perfection, should not lose its way in the desert of dead habits, that is, outdated customs and traditions. His countrymen's mind should be led forward into ever-widening thought and action, that is, they have to think nobly and act globally. In such a state of sound reason and righteous action, Rabindranath Tagore wants his country to awake. By the grace of God, it will turn into a heaven of freedom.

In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida states: "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."⁷ So, there is no ground for attributing a decidable meaning, or even a finite set of determinately multiple meanings. Further, Derrida, while

speaking about the binary opposition, asks to invert the hierarchy. However, he does not stop at this reversal or subversion. He goes on to destabilize the hierarchy so as to leave the meaning in a condition of undecidability.⁸

From the above mentioned perspective, if we reverse the situation in the Tagorian poem, the poet seems to analyze the factual condition of his country. India was ruled by England. Exploitation, oppression, suppression were the characteristics of this nation. So, the Indians, in their own motherland, behaved with fearful mind. They were lacking in self-confidence and self-respect and were leading a life of slavery. Knowledge in India was not for one and all; it was the monopoly of the aristocratic class. There was the schism in the society. It was divided on the basis of caste, class, colour, creed, religion, region, etc. A truthful path was not followed by majority of people. As a result, they could not achieve perfection in whatever they did. People did not give up their out-dated customs and traditions; they did not have any “visions and re-visions”. Ultimately, the ‘heaven of freedom’, Rabindranath Tagore speaks of, remained a dream for ever.

No doubt, the poem is a prayer by Tagore to the Almighty to create the heaven where he expects his countrymen

to realize ‘freedom’ in the true sense of that word. Pondering over the country’s hell, its sad state of affairs, one feels that the interpretation is justified. Things have gone awry and the vested interests have created hurdles in transforming the dream into reality. Actually, what has happened in India is:

**...the rabble with their well-worn creeds,
Their large profusions and their little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo, freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land, and waiting justice sleeps.**⁹

The injustice done to the Dalits and their massacre in the Renaming Movement of the Marathwada University, Aurangabad after the name of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the burning example of the fact that India, as stated by V. S. Naipaul in “*A Million Mutinies, Now*”,¹⁰ is still the land of morals and mutinies, for dreams turn into nightmares and reveries into fits of hallucination. The inhuman treatment given to the Dalits during this movement brings to notice the naked reality that our country is still “...*a Wounded Civilization*”.¹¹

From this perspective, the incident of Renaming Marathwada University as

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University (BAMU in short) exhibits the deconstruction of the Indian social and political activist's dream. While commenting on the ghastly killings by the establishment, that is, the opponents of this Renaming Movement, Famu Shinde succinctly says:

A fear comes out shrieking

From the Bhajan

The cymbals kinship

Is crushed by cymbals

The Night's saint have turned to

Foeman at dawn

Abhangas vomited only gunfire.¹²

This resembles, in tone and meaning, the prophetic lines

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity,

of W. B. Yeats from his revolutionary, epoch-making poem, "The Second Coming".¹³

In deconstruction, the term used for such contradiction is 'aporia'. "It literally means an impasse, and designates a kind of knot in the text which cannot be unravelled or solved, because what is said is self-contradictory. It perhaps corresponds, therefore, to what the British critic William Empson, in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) designated as the seventh type of verbal difficulty in

literature, namely that which occurs when there is an irreconcilable conflict of meaning within the text."¹⁴ Here we move from the idealism of prayer to the realism of a factual statement.

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