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**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DERRIDA'S *STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY*
IN THE DISCOURSE OF HUMAN SCIENCES**

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ABSTRACT:

Derrida's Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences tries to put the arguments of the most contemporary thought. He talks about classical thought, event, structuralism and Post structuralism, signifier and signified, and two interpretations of interpretation. He slightly touched his own principle and talks many issues related to Levi Strauss arguments. The paper tries to give the glimpse of Derrida's View on post structuralism

Key words: *Levi Strauss, signifier, signified, bricoleur, interpretation*

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Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences is a key text in post structuralism. It was first delivered at John's Hopkins University Baltimore in 1966, in the course of an international seminar on structuralism. Ironically Derrida's lecture subverted the certainties of structuralism by questioning the very concept of structure. Structuralism itself was an attempt to evade the metaphysical assumptions of western philosophy. Just as the modern physical sciences replaced philosophical speculation about the nature of matter with more empirical description, philosophical reflection about the nature of man was to be superseded by sciences like linguistic and anthropology. Derrida argues in this lecture, as well as his major work *Of Grammatology* that Saussure and Levi Strauss relied on problematic metaphysical assumption in setting up their enterprises, and thus had not succeeded in freeing themselves completely from the philosophical difficulties they were attempting to avoid. Derrida agrees to the structuralists that metaphysical assumptions can no longer be genuinely believed. But the structuralist attempts to get beyond metaphysics are not successful because these attempts still show latent metaphysical strains entitled by retaining as "natural" such opposition as those between nature and culture, inside and outside, speech and writing, identity and differences, and engineers and bricoleur.

Derrida sees in modern times a particular 'event' which constitutes a radical break from passed ways of thoughts. He associates this break with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the psychoanalysis of Freud. The event concerns the 'de-entering' of the western intellectual universe. Before this event took place, the existence of a norm or center in all things was taken for granted. In the work of Derrida the term 'center' is used to represent "a point of presence, a fixed origin" which imposes a limit on the play of the structure in which it is placed. Derrida also uses a range of other terms, including 'origin', 'end', 'arche' and 'telos' as roughly equivalent to centre. According to Derrida in western thinking, the authority that fixes meaning is generally

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concealed as existing in a structure and thought to be the precise centre which itself escapes structurality, that is to say, not subject to the play of signification. In other words certain aspects of understanding are taken to be self-evidently true. Thus the concept of the center or foundation of knowledge or meaning is an immovable moves, on which structure of beliefs or understandings have been thought to be based or securely ‘centered’. ‘De-centering’ desroys notions of self-evident and absolute grounds in knowledge. Therefore there is the recognition in modern thought of what Derrida calls” the structurality of Structures”

While offering the critique of the ‘transcendental signifier’ attached to metaphysical thinking Derrida concedes that we cannot attack metaphysics without the concepts of metaphysics because we have no language, no syntax and no vocabulary alien to metaphysical concepts. He demonstrates this by showing how the concept of the sign introduced to attack metaphysics is itself tainted with metaphysics. The structuralists’ concept of the sign is that of a signifier attached to a signified. The binary opposition of signifier/signified breaks down on the realization that the signified of a signifier can be shown to be just another signifier which in search of signified encounter yet another signifier and so on.

Derrida goes to examine some of the concept of the French ethonologist Claude Levi Strauss in order to show how important hierarchical opposition breaks down during the course of the discourse central to the nature/culture opposition. ‘Nature’ is that “which is universal and spontaneous, not depending on any particular culture or determinate norm”. ‘Culture’ on the other hand “depends on a system of norms regulating society and is therefore capable of varying from one social structure to another”. Levi-Strauss came to consider the incest prohibition in human society that it was at one and same time universal (i.e. natural) and social prohibition (i.e. cultural). Derrida argues that this scandal that Levi-Strauss encounter in the interrupted system of concepts which sanctioned the difference between nature and culture.

Levi-Strauss defines mythical thought as “ a kind of intellectual bricolage” a definition which depends on the bricoleur/engineer opposition. The bricoleur is one who uses the means at hand and one who is ready to adopt anything to his job. The engineer on the other hand insists on using precise tools, readymade and appropriate for the job in hand. Derrida calls the concept of the engineer” a theological idea”, that is to say we have to imagine that the engineer equipped with all the appropriate tools must drop from heaven. If we cannot believe such engineer, the very idea of bricolage is threatened because “the difference in which it took on its meaning decomposes”

Levi-Strauss is aware that in his study of myths there is a back, absence of original myth, as Derrida puts it “the epistemological requirement of a centre”. As a result, Levi-Strauss says his book on myth itself is a myth. Derrida adds that this absence of a centre or an origin is applicable to all signifying system and he calls this absence as “supplementarity” .a supplement is an essential extra added to something complete in itself.. But the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a back in what was supposed to be complete in itself. The

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supplementary character of simplification is therefore seen as the result of a back which must be supplemented.

From all these argument Derrida concludes that there are two kinds of interpretation. One has the nostalgia for a sign free from free-play or “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play”. The other kind of interpretation is “no longer turn toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond Man and Humanism”. Though Derrida has often been as urging as to choose the second kind of interpretation, to affirm the free play of meaning, he acts here that one cannot simply or effectively choose between the two interpretations of interpretation. This is because there is no longer any authoritative center to which to appeal for validation of our interpretation. The consequences of this are impossible to predict but we must endeavor not to be among those who “turn their eyes away when faced by as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself”. Something new and monstrous is being born.

The strategy used by Derrida in revealing the metaphysical foundation of the concepts of Saussure and Levi Strauss has come to be known as “Deconstruction”. The term as subsequently become synonymous with a particular method of textual analysis and philosophical argument involving the close reading of works of literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistic and anthropology to reveal logical or theoretical incompatibilities between the explicit and implicit plans of a discourse in a text and to demonstrate by means of a range of critical techniques how these incompatibilities are disguised and assimilated by the text. In one of his typical analytical procedure, a deconstructive reading focuses on binary oppositions within a text, first to show how those oppositions are structured hierarchically, second to overturn the hierarchy temporarily, as if to make the text say the opposite of what it appear to say initially; and third to displace and reassert both terms of the opposition within a non-hierarchical relationship of “difference”. Later Derrida coined the word “Differance” to designate both a passive difference already in existence as the condition of a signification and an act of deferring or differing which produces differences. Deconstruction is a refusal to assign an ultimate meaning to the text.

Reference

Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play" (1966), as printed/translated by Macksey & Donato (1970)