

Deconstruction: The Palindrome Of Existentialism

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Abstract

During my first few rendezvous with Deconstruction I used to scratch my brain wondering that deconstruction is an echo of something. And an in-depth probing revealed that life is a chain reaction, one thing follows the other. It appeared that Deconstruction has many similarities with the philosophy of Existentialism and that Deconstruction evolved our of Existentialism. This paper is an overview related with a philosophical outlook towards both the concepts- Existentialism and Deconstruction.

The term Existentialism signifies an attitude nurtured due to a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd word. It rejects the traditional systematic Philosophy as too incomprehensible, abstract and remote from reality. Deconstruction is a term used in Philosophy, Literary Criticism and Social, popularized by Jacques Derrida (a French Philosopher) in the 1960s. It involves the close reading of the text to demonstrate that rather than being a unified whole, every text is full of contradictory meanings. A Deconstructionist believes that language is arbitrary, and that meanings is fully indeterminate and never absolute.

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The two schools of thought namely Existentialism and Deconstruction talk about life and text respectively. Life and text are two key terms of this paper. It is so because of two reasons, one that it is widely believed that life and literature are interlinked and secondly because the dominating discourse in the present day era talks about this life or world as a text and vice versa.

Evolution has been a perennial process in life and likewise in literature. From the logocentric world of God, faith, religion, myths and philosophical works to the present day graphocentric maze of relative or subjective discourses, literature has traveled many a mile. Life has taken a leap from faith to "Nadism." Life has evolved and has been moulded into many shapes since antiquity. In the age of faith, or religion of morality and decorum, we

worshipped God, loathed Satan, and celebrated the victory of good over evil in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The Morality-Mystery plays guided and illuminated people's lives. One looked up to God for one's deliverance. With the advent of Renaissance, Man became the center of the Universe. The late Middle ages hailed Humanism, Scientific revolutions, artistic pursuits and self awareness. The period from 1500 A.D. welcomed the Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, materialistic achievements and the great French Revolution. Literature on the other hand celebrated the luxurious "Balls at Mansfield Park."

However, with the degrading status or moral and social ethos in society, owing to materialistic greed, literature with its satires and social documents, played its role and announced a crusade against the evils of growing industrialization, mechanical existence and political rivalries. It exposed the social struggle, the growing bitterness in the hearts of humankind. For the first time there was global suffering, destruction of men and property and shattering of the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional grid of mankind that made man lament that "God is dead." It was a fatal blow pushing mankind to the web of Existentialism and Absurdity. It is widely accepted that this was the time when human souls all over the world nodded unanimously to the view that faith, religion, science and philosophy and the root of the institutions have failed to justify the value, the meaning and the essence of life. The integrity of human being and life was questioned by writers and thinkers like Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Hardy, Hemingway, Brecht, Camus and others.

As discussed earlier, Existentialism deals with attitude towards life and Deconstruction with the text. Existentialism questions the status of God in the tragic world and Deconstruction deconstructs the author's role in the production of text and its control. Existentialism defines the blurred vision of man in this world and his relationship or lack of one with God. Derrida's Deconstruction aims at the condition and existence of the textual meaning, its place and function, the reader's relationship or divorce with the author. Finding no answer, Existentialism led one to the trap of nihilism and Deconstruction led to a journey through an endless chain of signifiers and signified. Existentialism thus celebrated the death of God, the ruler, the 'logo' of the so called logocentric world and Deconstruction glorified the God-like author's demise with his failure to convey meaning to the text.

Existentialism talks of the world of contradictions. It point out the uncertainties with no final outcome or vision. Sartre for instance, defines existence as "expressible by a minus sign." On the other hand, Deconstruction as a movement of literary criticism aims at and

elaborates the arbitrary and the oppositional elements present in the text, in language and literature. Derrida explains signs as "blacks on bank." with no definite meaning. Derrida's textual universe can be read as saying something different from what it appears to be, contradictory to and subversive of a stable meaning; it also shows that as life betrays a human being, a text too betrays the man, the reader.

Sartre argues that "Existence precedes essence." Man fashions his own existence and only by doing so, he gives signification and essence to the existence. Derrida avers one cannot evaluate, criticize or construe a meaning for a text by referring to anything external to it; so it does not bear any relationship with the author. It is the reader who gives significance to it; like the text is born with the reader (since text is a process of the present, of 'here and now') Similarly. the Existentialist, unable to explain the past and the future, lives in the present and defines his life by choosing from the collage of choices available to him.

The Nihilistic Existentialist reverses the traditional views about God, the divine solace, the faith of man in God, the innocent suffering in life, the subjectivity of the truth, life's absurdity and man's tragic confrontation with life. All this provokes the atheist in man, God's choicest creation. Likewise, Derrida questions the earlier meanings of 'meaning' the logocentrism of western thought the relationship between the author, the text and the hidden meaning. This complexity can be very aptly explained in the words of Robert Frost: "The secret sits, / We dance round in a ring and suppose / But the secret sits in the/ Middle and Knows." Frost's lines seem to suggest how life and literature are ruled respectively by God and the Author.

But the Existentialists and the Deconstructionists seem to have reversed the words of Frost saying and meaning that Man is supposedly always going round and round in a never ending, circle, but the secret remains a secret sitting in the center authoritatively and thus the absolute truth can never be reached at. And that is what Derrida might be implying. Since meaning always evades, why not break the ring? In the text, there is an endless regressive of dialectical interpretations and the reading is without any stable or essential meaning. It possesses so many different meanings that it does not have " A Meaning." It is a ceaseless tension between modes of signification. For the Existentialist on the other hand, life as a brain-teaser, a continuous friction. Every school of thought advocates certain modus operandi to evaluate things. The thinkers such as Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre present the immediacy of the relationships between the interpretive and interpreted, the meanings of being and the

being itself. In order to uncover what is hidden, of disclosing the structures. Heidegger devised the process called Phenomenology. Marcel advocates existentialism and asks man to go beyond the rational, the logic and the present world which is before us to define it. Derrida on the other hand, employs Deconstruction to probe through dismantling. He presents the concepts called aporia, absence, and indeterminacies to explore the unexplored and unearthed meanings. Derrida asks to go through the journey of the textual labyrinth to indulge in a chain of signifiers, the chain of traces, from which the reader finds out a meaning, only to realize that it actually has some other meaning leading further to another and it goes on and on. Sartre explains existentialism as a way of making choices which defines existence. Man's original choice or choices make him construct his own world. That choice however only define the process, the act, but the destination is always unattainable (death and unpredictability always rules). Both the activities are never consummated.

The works of Existentialists like Camus, Kafka, Adamov and Brecht reveal a broken tone, a blurred viewpoint with alienation techniques and fragmented thoughts. Deconstruction is also about gaps, the breaks, the aporia, and disunity. It attempts to make the not seen accessible to sight. In life, for the existentialists, the human soul is lot in the shadows of choices. And the meaning of life slips. In the world of text; the meaning is like a fluid, freely floating and thus always slips. Kierkegaard says that "Faith is essential paradoxical." The world of the text is equally contaminated by absurd oppositional elements which can never be comprehended. Textually, Kafka's text, *The Trial* should be about the courts of the law. But actually the justice described is not legal but is really about desire, the spiritual desire. Like the courthouse, the desire is rhizomatic and never ending. We can see all the concepts mentioned above in the light of the statement from Becket's *Waiting for Godot*: "I am doing." And yet does nothing. Textually, as a play, one expects it to be story,. But linguistically the characters in *Waiting for Godot* say, "We are waiting, therefore/ There must be something we/ Are waiting for." And then we hear them say it is "Pointless to consider whether it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive, because arrival is never seriously in question and even hope is scarcely possible." We see that whether we try to analyze the text existentially or deconstruct it verbally, linguistically or in any other way, the text is always telling its own story, a story quite different from what the man or writer imagines he is creating.

Meaning is not encased in the language but is co-extensive or produced with the play of language itself. All the precursors like Plato, Socrates, Shakespeare searched for the

solution. Pascal explained his anguish when he said, "My mind is always in Apprenticeship and on trial." He also says that, "We burn with the desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the infinite, but one whole ground work cracks and the earth opens to abysses." Here one can relate to the cracks and fissures mentioned by Derrida. Deconstruction has been compared to the earthquake, everything exploding leading to an "abyss." All this ultimately leads to a cry, a "Dread" as described by Kierkegaard who said that "it is the feeling of what can happen to a man when he has made all his all calculations and taken every precaution."

It may thus be concluded that both the schools, Existentialism and Deconstruction, talk about failed calculations, the absurd echoes of life and the fragmented meanings of text. The material and spiritual destruction of life is mirrored in the attitudes of the Existentialists and the Deconstructionists. Existentialists deconstructed the definition of life and screamed about Bad Hope in the end. Derrida gave out the expression that there was no reason for having a center at the first place. Text, like life, is a random play, by chance and by spilling. It is the world where simulacra has become the reality itself. Lines from Yeat's poem convey the feeling very well: "Things fall apart/The center cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is/Loosed upon the world."

This overview explains that the germs of Deconstruction were always present. It is only that circumstances, conditions and time provided the breeding environment for it to flower in its modern parlance. In defining Deconstruction in his work, Derrida stated in "A Letter to a Japanese Friend": "What Deconstruction is not? everything of course! What is Deconstruction? nothing of course!" Isn't one reminded here of Shakespeare's phrase "much ado about nothing"?

References

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