

Deconstruction and Mysticism

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Introduction

Deconstruction, the term designates a theory and a practice of reading, a method of criticism and a mode of inquiry which tries to break down the assumption that the system of language is based on grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meaning of a literary text. (M. H. Abrams). Further he says, a deconstructive reading sets out to show the 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. The origin of the term lies in Martin Heidegger's concept of *destruktion* (destruction) and *abbau* (dismantling). But deconstruction doesn't mean any kind of destruction of the text. It is the dominated mode of signification which is destroyed in a text where the signifying system claims the unequivocal position in the production of meaning from the text. We can verify this point mentioning the definition given by Barbara Johnson, who in her book "The Critical Difference," published in 1980, writes:

"Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction...The deconstruction of a text doesn't proceed by random doubts or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another."

This famous definition of Barbara Johnson shows the tasks of a deconstructive reading where as a deconstructive reader, we will have to find out the conflicting forces of signification in the text. This way we will have endless possibilities of meaning of the same text. There would not be a fixed meaning of a text according to this practice of reading in a literary text. The meaning is always 'deferred' or postponed as Derrida coins the portmanteau term "*différance*" to say how the meanings of a text are dependable upon 'difference' and 'deferred' or 'postponement' when a reader reads the text.

Whenever the term "Deconstruction" comes into discussion, it is the name of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida that comes to our mind. He delivered a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, titled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which is considered the major event in the field of deconstruction. Derrida writes in this essay: "Something has occurred in the concept of structure which could be called an 'event.' This event's exterior form would be that of a rupture and a redoubling." This way the idea of a structure propagated by structuralism in the field of linguistics is broken down in this essay. Moreover, Derrida raises question against the idea of 'centre' and 'centrality'; he says there is no centre although the human civilization believed in a theocentric world from the ancient

time. He says about the idea of a centre “A centre is both a centre and not a centre.” Derrida through this essay shows us that centre can be anywhere and it can be nowhere. He rejects the “logocentric” world in this case and starts believing in the linguistic world as he says, “There is nothing outside the text.”

This paper will deal with the treatment of mysticism in deconstruction. Here we will try to use the ideas of Derrida about the undermining of metaphysical thinking nourished by the human beings from the time immemorial. Mysticism is an area of metaphysics and this paper will try to show how that world can be deconstructed using the ideas of deconstruction like ‘aporia’, ‘decentring’, ‘trace’ and ‘dissemination.’

Deconstruction and Mysticism

‘Mysticism’ refers to a spiritual quest for the hidden truth or wisdom and the beliefs that there can a union with the divine or God who is a supposed symbol of the absolute truth that can be found through inner or esoteric meanings of religious doctrines and spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, and chanting. These practices are designed to heighten the spiritual awareness among the humans who from the ancient time have believed in mysticism and the existence of God. Evelyn Underhill provides a concept of mysticism in her book “Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness” (1911): "Broadly speaking, I understand (mysticism) to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards a complete harmony with the transcendental order." In our attempt to define mysticism we encounter absolute truth, revelation, spirit, God, divine Fire, Source, innate tendency, harmony, and transcendental order. These elements are to be found in most of the mystical belief systems across the world where the communities have their own kind of mysticism or the beliefs in spirituality. One thing is common among them, which is the idea of a supreme being that is termed by Derrida as the ‘transcendental signifier’ which has been positioned at the centre of the human consciousness from the ancient time. Humans have believed that this signifier has all the power to control the universe and whatever the reality we have is also a creation of this signifier and there is neither a reality nor an existence outside of this signifier. The ordinary world is thought of only as a superficial one because beneath the day to day observable world of phenomenon there lies a deeper or more fundamental existence that is “God” who is the epitome of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth, and the truth. But deconstruction doesn’t believe in all these ideas because there cannot be an ultimate reality or the truth in the human world; it is just the construction of human brain to keep them away from facing the multiple truths of the world. The spiritual truth that we have already mentioned epitomising God is nothing but a creation of the human minds which have made hundreds of myths for their race to believe in and worship falsely because of the imposed superiority upon them. Derrida breaks down all the stereotypical ideas about the centrality of God in the human consciousness showing us that the world in reality is constructed of language and the ideas of human civilization as well. Actually there is nothing but texts that is what Derrida advocates by which he means to say that the entire tissue and structure of our lives or the nature of our lives including history that we also know textually. The text contains everything that matters and nothing else exists anywhere. This already shows that we cannot really have a metaphysical world of ideas to control our lives. We humans are the creators of meanings but that meanings are never fixed as the mystics believe because two ideas work simultaneously in this regard- ‘difference’ and ‘deferred’ - one borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure and the other one is of course used

by Derrida himself to show the endless chain of signifiers in the production of meaning as he says that a sign cannot be understood independently. It leads us to successive signs unlike the traditional (Saussurean) idea of self-sufficient or self-contained sign.

Mysticism is sometimes taken by sceptics as a sort of creating obfuscation though mystics suggest that they are offering clarity about the idea of the superior God. Here comes the hierarchical system of thoughts because mysticism places the God at the topmost level but deconstruction denies any kind of hierarchy in this case. The speech of God is thought of as the truth in all the mystical belief systems but Derrida says that we cannot underestimate the position of written words of our world. He believes that there should not this kind of hierarchy in our belief system which is traditionally built around the mystical adherents of the people. Mysticism is generally considered as experiential and holistic. Deconstruction raises question that if mysticism is experiential and holistic, why we cannot prove the existence of God. How could we say that God exists everywhere? And at the same time there is this idea that God is at the centre of everything. It is not possible if we think rationally using deconstructive ideologies. Humans cannot really experience the God as any other phenomenon of the ordinary world. It is the world of metaphysics which is in action in a way in this case but deconstruction directly rejects this presupposition of the Western thought about the metaphysics of presence.

Deconstructive Reading of a Poem of Mystical Elements

There are a lot of poems with mystical elements and in them we find the overarching figure of a supreme being who is supposed to know everything and can give solutions to all the problems that we the humans have in our lives. But question comes when we do not really find an answer that we expect from God. We construct our own answer from God to satisfy ourselves but we cannot really say that is the ultimate answer. To discuss these points from a deconstructive point of view we can analyse the following poem:

WHY?

I watch the sun rise in the sky

I ask God the question, why?

Why is there hatred in the world?

Why are there starving boys and girls?

Why is there addiction everywhere?

Why are there people not willing to share?

Why is there prejudice and fear?

Why are there people not willing to be near?

I say, God please tell me why.

*Then he whispers me a simple reply,
You must experience bad to know the good
You must do right just as you now know you should
You must love me, yourself, and everyone
You must spread hope, faith and love until your life is done
You must do unto others as you want them to do to you
You must persevere in all you do
All these things you must embrace
And God assures, everything will fall into place.*

- (Emma)

Deconstruction opposes the authoritarian meaning of a text that a criticism conventionally tries to establish. In this case we have an authoritarian meaning of the poem that is- questioning God about the brutal reality of earthly life; why there are hatred, addiction, starvation, prejudice and fear among the human beings. Deconstructive reading applies the concept of ‘aporia’ to discuss such irresolvable impasse of the text. We cannot really come to the conclusion why these things keep happening and why are people prone to them. If they are rational being why cannot they avoid those ill ideas in their lives. Deconstruction would ask question what is ‘rational’ for the humans; is it superior to the idea of ‘irrational’, the opposite of that previous idea. Generally the idea of ‘irrationality’ is underestimated by the common human consciousness but deconstruction would say that should not happen because without the concept of rationality, the concept of irrationality cannot exist. They bear trace of one another. These binary ideas cannot give us absolute solution when again we come to the discussion of this poem “Why?” where we cannot really have a fixed meaning as thought by the conventional critics of literary criticism like the New Critics. Actually the meaning of the poem is disseminated in many alternative ways like- maybe the human civilization in the twenty first century has become blind to their rational thoughts and judgement for which there are hatred, starvation, addiction, prejudice and fear; or maybe the development of technology has victimised the human consciousness as nowadays without the help of technology the humans cannot really do a thing; or maybe some kind of evil power is working behind all the disasters of the century as Yeats supposes in his poem “The Second Coming.” We cannot really say what it is. Rather we are left in the undecidable world of conflicts. But the poem shows that there is a solution of all these in the hands of God who speaks in the poem giving the speaker the best solution one could have. ‘One needs to know the bad to know the good’ that is what the God suggests creating the hierarchy between the two concepts ‘good’ and ‘bad’ but deconstruction would say how could we define good or bad; we can never draw a line between the two concepts. They are always left in a condition of undecidability, to use deconstructive concept.

Although the God assures that everything will fall into place in the end of the poem but we have not yet seen the balanced world that we always hope for. That is the reason for the emergence of atheism to subvert the promises of the so called God, created by the human imagination, making him the agent of the mystical world to rule over the human consciousness. Deconstruction criticises this metaphysics of presence advocated by the Platonists for whom there was a transcendental signifier (God) who created all the concepts. But what we find in deconstruction is that the humans are the ones who create ideas, not an agent from a metaphysical world with all the perfection. Deconstructive reading breaks that foundation of god centred ideas and comes closer to the text, because of the textuality of human ideas. This poem bears witness to that idea as we read in between the lines (critical reading of Derrida) to enter the labyrinth of meanings as practiced by deconstructive critic like Paul de Man who talked about the conflicting forces within the text and also that a text “simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode.” This is what we have in the text of the poem where we can find conflicting forces like God and human, good and bad, love and hatred, life and death, right and wrong etc. and these forces are dominant in the text as well as in the human consciousness but we need to accept that they are mere human construct using words rather than the overarching speech of a supreme God. The second part of the poem which starts with “You must experience bad to know the good,” show us the whispering words of the God but they are actually the words used by the poet in the text to console herself from the desperation of all the questions asked from the beginning of the poem. This way the centred position of the supposed God is displaced in a deconstructive reading as we have proved the constructed textuality of the poem using language although the poet is found to be engaged in speculation about the existence of God.

Conclusion

The deconstructive reading of the poem “Why?” has proved that there cannot be a transcendental order in the real world because we can never have the Utopia that the God promises us. We can only have interpretations of the words in a text which is unravelled by entering of each textual labyrinth. The texts are what we need to be familiar with rather than a false world of mysticism where we can never have any kind of truth. Mysticism believes in an imagined metaphysical reality that we have in Hinduism, Sufism, Christianity and Buddhism. The mystics perform rituals to follow the traditions of their beliefs but they can never find ‘the truth’ or achieve ‘union with God’ although some people believe that they have experienced that. Deconstruction has already given us that there can never be an absolute truth as believed by most of the mystics across the world. There are only signifiers and signified in the production of multiple truths in the real world. We cannot accept the vague world of mysticism whereas we have the linguistic world among us to think about and interpret in multiple ways finding the endless chain of significations. This way ‘logocentrism’ is discarded in a deconstructive reading and the age long hierarchies are abolished from the human consciousness but mysticism still prevails. There are still people across the world devoting themselves in mystical beliefs without knowing the ideas of deconstruction.

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