

Deconstruction and the New Hermeneutic: Towards A Transcultural Literary Interpretation

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Abstract

As the title implies, this paper attempts an analysis of the interpretative techniques of a literary artifact using the canons of criticism evolving from the early Aristotelian to the deconstructionist through the different stages of the structural linguistic, psychological, sociological, anthropological and the archetypal. As a work of art is made up of several layers, each application of the canons gives more and more meanings. The meaning permeates the entire corpus of the poem and through the layers and the relationship between the stated and the suggested meanings, it progresses to unravel the main theme of communication. The deconstructive process encompasses all the climactic and suggestive communication. Instead of being dominated by the author and the reader, it goes into the literary, the socio-psychological and the archetypal to arrive at a core of meaning. In practice the layers are roughly the text, the context, the inter text, the co-text and finally the subtext. Any sentence as prose or a stanza of poetry can be subjected to this rigorous exegetic process. A prose sentence and a short poem are taken for illustration and analysis. Hermeneutics is circumscribed interpretation; Aesthetics is a literary probing through the linguistic, the intrinsic and the extrinsic. In the context of the new transcultural literary interpretation, the hermeneutic with its circumscription and the aesthetics with its canonical aphorisms, explore the poems in a transcultural milieu.

Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Transcultural, Deconstruction, Anthropology, Archetypal, Deconstruction and the New Hermeneutic.*

In an aphoristic observation that has attained appreciative infallibility, Susan Sontag, the American theatre critic, says that criticism is a tribute paid by mediocrity to genius. It is a eulogy conferring on art a distinction of dynamism against which criticism and interpretation stand dwarfed like pygmies before a colossus. In essence, this Sontag aphorism advocates an evolving interpretative theory that may discover newer and newer meanings ingrained in the text. Alongside this interpretation, which encompasses all new interpretation, any new insight stands a slim chance of being accepted as a breakthrough.

Hermeneutics, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, derives its meaning from the Greek word meaning 'interpretation'. Religious texts should be interpreted according to well-defined and pre-laid restrictions. The term hermeneutics is borrowed from theology into philosophy and then into literature. No new interpretation of any religious text is possible. It may be blasphemous.

Hermeneutics explains the meanings of scriptures which should be understood in a specific manner. Hermeneutics is nuanced interpretation. The concise Oxford dictionary defines 'hermeneutics' as: Concerning interpretations especially of the Bible or literary texts.

Deconstruction, on the other hand, goes into the depths of the meaning of a work, like a scuba diver, prospecting for pearls of wisdom, each enclosed in a cloister. The layers of the work of art are gradually peeled off and as the meaning emerges, the interpretation goes to the very limits of semantic and syntactic probing. When the scuba diver reaches the depths that he can reach, he surfaces with whatever he gets. Greater depths are still possible and when more efficient diving equipment outfits are available greater depths can be reached and more variegated pearls can be had. This instance is the present state of transcultural interpretation, part hermeneutics and part deconstruction. There is no hierarchical gradation in

the methods and they are not water tight compartments. The concise Oxford dictionary defines deconstruction, as "a method of critical analysis of philosophical and literary language, which emphasizes the internal workings of language and conceptual systems, the relational quality of meaning and the assumptions implicit in the forms of expressions". (COD)

Deconstruction progresses in stages and though every stage has something more to say than what the earlier ones had jointly and severally said. The pursuit of meaning continues. There is only delay and no end to it. 'The meaning is postponed' and 'not terminated or exhausted'. This is the background against which deconstruction is used to interpret even the ancient texts- Hebrew, Latin or Sanskrit. Deconstructive linguistic theory is both semantic and syntactic and in addition it exploits the polysemic or the inclusive communication by the text. No new interpretation rejects or negates the earlier ones. The meaning is only enhanced and enriched.

An illustration of this postponement of meaning is, as it is often quoted, in the parable of the greedy farmer who had a goose that laid a golden egg everyday. The farmer ignorantly believed that if he cut it open, he could get all the eggs at once and become rich instantly. He executed the plan only to find the birds stomach empty. Only the goose died. The moral appended to the story is that greed is punished. A modern day interpretation of the story shifts it from greed to ignorance. If the farmer had only studied more about the science of ovulation, he would not have come to grief.

The story does not end here. Further changes in the subtext may bring about more meanings. Though any number of examples can be given one proverbial statement gives a striking illustration. 'The early bird catches the worm', but does it not imply that the earlier worm is caught. The new hermeneutics has rescued interpretation from the clutches of hermeneutic amputation. Feminism fails when women are stereotyped. Archetypical interpretation circumscribes the anthropological.

Freeing interpretation from the shackles of hermeneutical tyranny is in stages as follows:

- **Text:** The text is a syntactic entity with its meaning governed by the structure of the sentence and the words used in it.

- **Context:** Context, with the immediate context and the remote context, the former relating to where it is stated and the latter against what background it is stated. The setting is a state or idea in terms of which it can be understood.
- **Intertext:** It is the shaping of a text's meaning by another text. It reflects the influence or interconnection between similar texts, the connection being achieved either by quotes or by allusions.
- **Co-text:** This is similar to what Harold Bloom recommended, which is the study of linguistic material encompassing the text. This centres round the literary devices, the world view and the literary genre'.
- **Sub-text:** this is the interaction between the author and the reader against the common background of the text. There are more suggestions than statements.

It is the sum total of all responses properly sequenced. It may be roughly called holistic. In academic parlance, it is connecting the dots and arriving at an inference. A few illustrations will elucidate the methodology. One example with which this elucidation will begin is a critical sentence written by Rosenthal on W.B. Yeats. "*Byzantium reorients the earlier poem with a far greater sureness of climactic movement and leaves critics with no handle for pedantic quarrelling about its thought.*" (Reference to Yeats)

At the first glance **the text** poses a number of questions about the meaning of the statement. The text, from the word 'earlier', is a text it can be inferred that the two poems 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'Byzantium' are the ones taken for discussion. There is a reorientation in the approach to the poems and 'Byzantium' being the second poem reorients the progress of thought from the first poem. Obviously, the sentence does not state anything with assurance but there is only a sure climactic movement. From the text, 'the reorientation' fixes the readers' attitude and the word 'sureness' the 'climatic movement'. Once and for all, this settles the significance of the poem and there need to be no pedantic quarrelling about the thought. The text tells us that the reorientation is the progressive movement towards a definite conclusion, though it is premature to conjecture a definite meaning.

The context: The reference to the earlier poem fixes the context and indicates that the two poems are to be studied as a complementary double.

The sailing and the arrival are climactically the progress of the understanding of the poem.

Intertext: The intertext reflects the interconnection between the two poems as process and product. The intertext implies two texts and the word 'reorient' suggest, a new sequence, revealing the position of the reader against the interrelation between the two poems. The movement from sailing to arrival must be a progress because the movement is called climactic. Pedantic discussions are put at rest when the sentence says that 'it leaves no handle for the critics'.

Co-text: This is similar to Harold Bloom's New Historicism which suggests the reading of linguistic material in the situation in the literary form and the world view.

Sub-text: This is the conclusive stage of the readers' interaction with the text which has revealed the image clusters complementing one another and accumulating an experience in a steadily interesting realisation. We arrive at a proper configuration by reconstructing our impressions. It is like solving a jig-saw puzzle or connecting the dots to arrive at the final figure.

An example for the interpretation in the stages is taken from one of the poems of W.B. Yeats, "Mohini Chatterjee". It is from the 1933 collection: 'The Winding Stair and other poems'.

Mohini Chatterjee

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
'pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
'I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything.
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain.'
That he might Set at rest
A boy's turbulent days

Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these,
I add in commentary,
'Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied-
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied-
Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade,
Birth is heaped on Birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.'

The text of the poem can be paraphrased as a narrative spoken in the first person. The voice is that of the speaker and proceeds as a dialogue spoken by the speaker and responded to by the *guru*. "I asked if I should pray and the brahmin replied that every night in bed I must tell myself, 'I have been a king, a slave, a fool, a rascal or a knave and many other roles I have played'. He said that this would set at rest, the boy's turbulent days and I added as commentary that I will, one day, play the role of a lover. Death and life will come in cycles like cannonade and continue till all time is thundered a way.

This paraphrase leaves us with a few questions which when answered will make their meaning clear. Why should I pray and why should a brahmin reply? What is the paradox in a knave, having been his opposite, why should a slave be a king? And what is the meaning of a myriad heads lying on the breast of the speaker. Who is Mohini Chatterjee? And what is the context of the poem? What explains convincingly the concluding line "Men dance on deathless feet"? It is only the context which can disentangle the linguistic knots in the poem. There are two things to be noted, 'boy's turbulent days,' 'old lovers yet may have all that time denied'.

In the above, the former is an unmistakable reference to the tempestuous days of a lover and the latter, 'yet may have ' clearly indicates that all has not been well with his love. Yet there is hope. If 'time denied' him earlier, it is not the end. Time is passing but it will not impair his love or his

youth. ' I spit into his face of Time that has transfigured one'. he says elsewhere. His love for Maud Gonne in her revolutionary days and his being rejected, his love for her daughter after her widowhood and Yeats being neglected by the daughter are all autobiographical elements that add depth and clarity to the sentence. Time increases the libido but takes away the performance. "Wine increases the libido but takes away the performance". (Macbeth Ref).

The interest with reference to Macbeth is suggestive of the intensity of his disappointment. He even underwent an operation for regaining his virility, called the 'steinach operation'. The operation promised a rejuvenation and he sired two children. Yet he could not but brood on his earlier love and hoped that in a succeeding life he would marry her. This is an unchristian belief. But he pretended to believe which Ellman calls 'affirmative capability' as against Keats "negative capability".

It may be asked why so much of biography. It is able to explain the mysteries of life and gives us a new critical term. This reference to his biography spills from the first stanza to the second and thereby helps to connect into poetic space his personal passions.

Context: The context of the poem is a dialogue in which a learned teacher, the brahmin, tells the troubled boy who seeks peace in the midst of turbulence. The mentor's reply clears our doubts about the puzzling words 'grave heaped upon grave'. 'The cannonade may thunder time away' and the deathless feet of man unmistakably points to a spiritual context where the speaker by repeating a chant promises relief from the recurrence of birth and death. The deathless feet imply an eternal soul that passes through several births and deaths till the end of time.

Intertext: 'Brahmin' by definition points to a learned spiritual guru and Mohini Chatterjee is the name of the guru. As allusion, these words refer to the theosophist Mohini Chatterjee, who instructed the poet, the boy seeker in the poem, to repeat a chant which says again and again that a person's life now is only an episode in the recurrent life of the soul.

Co-text: The mystifying references is to the soul having different episodes of which that of a lover is not excluded. The Hindu philosophy which Mohini Chatterjee had taught is a kind of preface to the Hindu doctrine in

which the different births are like so many pearls strung into a necklace by a thread that runs through them. The beads are seen but the string is not seen though it is the one that holds the pearls in the necklace.

The subtext: The sub text finally reconstructs the previous phases to arrive at the perception of the poem. This is the phase where the reader puts the different phases in the proper perspective. It helps the interaction with the poem as a holistic pattern like connecting the dots into an aesthetic and spiritual state of ecstatic joy.

Both by theory and by practice this paper has been able to establish how the deconstructive technique has helped us to probe the layers of communication that a poem can communicate to the reader.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored, in an earnest attempt to unravel the dynamics of literary interpretation, the transition from conventional hermeneutics to the evolving domain of deconstruction. It turns into a testament that the meaning of a literary piece of work is multifarious and each application of decisive body of rules, or principles contributes to a richer understanding via the analysis of literary artifacts. The transcendence of deconstruction, especially, allows us to dive deep into the layers of a literary work, much like a scuba diver seeking pearls of wisdom concealed within each cloistered layer. It underscores the internal workings of language and the nuanced interplay of meanings. Thus, the paper illuminates how deconstruction enriches rather than negates earlier interpretations, contributing to a continuous evolution of understanding.

In addition to this, this paper highlights that literary interpretation is a dynamic and evolving process, embracing both traditional hermeneutics and deconstruction. It encourages us to explore the layers of meaning within literary artifacts, leading to a profound and more recondite understanding of the human experience as expressed through literature. In the realm of transcultural literary interpretation, hermeneutics and deconstruction work in harmony to uncover the rich tapestry of meanings woven into every literary work of art.

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