Lecture 19

Poststructuralism: Jacques Derrida

Hello friends and welcome back to this series on literary theory. As you will remember, we had discussed the writings of Roland Barthes in our previous lecture. We had talked about them as a kind of bridge connecting structuralism with the poststructuralist thoughts of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault who were two of the brightest figures associated with the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s. In this lecture we will take up for discussion the theoretical concepts proposed by Derrida before moving on to Foucault in our next lecture.

Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida whose dates are 1930 to 2004 was born in Algeria but did his higher studies in Paris. There he had as his peers people like Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser. Derrida and his concept of deconstruction became a global phenomenon following the 1966 lecture he delivered in John Hopkins University in America which was published under the title "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Humanities". Subsequently, his seminal text, titled *Of Grammatology*, was published a year later, in 1967, and established him as a key thinker of the twentieth century.

Derrida's career was marked by a wide ranging eclecticism as he produced commentaries on works of Plato, Husserl, Heidegger, Marx, Saussure, Austin. Levinas, Barthes and the list goes on. Derrida also generated a profusion of innovative ideas including deconstruction, metaphysics of presence, différance, trace, pharmakon, phallogocentrism, and so on and so forth. But it is precisely this eclecticism and variety that poses a problem when we try and learn about Derrida

within the short span of a single lecture. This problem gets compounded in a course on literary studies because most of Derrida's ideas are rooted within the context of Western philosophy which makes it difficult to seamlessly translate them into tools of literary criticism and theoretical understanding of literature. My effort to discuss Derrida would however not attempt to understand his ideas in an exhaustive manner within its original philosophical context. Rather, my effort would be to explore how Derrida's concepts transform the structuralist method of literary criticism.

So to start with let us again look at the meaning-making process of a text. As we just discussed, the concept of an author standing outside the text and yet guiding the meaning of the text is a widespread idea. Derrida describes such concept of an external source of meaning making as a "transcendental signified". According to him, such an idea of a "transcendental signified" or external authority establishing the meaning of the text – be it an author, or be it God – creates an illusion that the language structure has a centre which fixes the meaning of all its constituent parts.

Now if we follow Saussure's argument, as Derrida does till a certain point, we will know that meaning is generated from within the language structure or langue that underlines the specific parole of a text. In other words, meaning cannot be poured into the text or fixed by an outside entity like an author for instance. This leads Derrida to conceive of language as a structure without any transcendent centre. According to Derrida, this idea of a centerless structure sets in motion an indefinite play of meaning. This is what Derrida describes through the term différance which he created by fusing together the sense of two French words, one meaning "to differ" and the other meaning "to defer". Now since this may sound slightly complicated, we will proceed gradually here.

So, according to Saussure, a signifier gains its meaning through its relation of difference with other signifiers. Say there is a signifier A and in order to study its meaning we try to explore its oppositional relationship with the signifier B. But the signifier B itself is again not an entity with a fixed meaning. It too derives its meaning from the difference that it shares with signifier C, which in turn is related in opposition to signifier D, which again gives way to signifier E, F, G and so on ad infinitum. The meaning of a signifier which is born out of difference is thus eternally deferred or delayed within a language structure as we keep moving across a chain of signifiers or constituent elements of the language system. So now that this is clear we will not have any problem in understanding Derrida's explanation of how différance works. This quotation is from his book titled *Positions*

> The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element" […] being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.

This passage is basically a reiteration of the structuralist notion that the constituent part of a structure is not simply a self-contained element within itself but derives its identity from other elements through a relationship of difference. But the notion of "traces" that Derrida introduces

here takes the argument beyond the ambit of structuralism. So let us try and understand what the concept of traces means here.

Traces

This notion is a simple one in itself. What Derrida is saying here is that because each element gains its identity with reference to other elements within a structure it carries a spectral or a ghost like presence of all of those other elements which help define its identity. This ghost like presence is what Derrida calls traces. So for instance, since every signifier is basically constituted of the difference it shares with other signifiers, it is informed through and through by traces of these other signifiers. This is why Derrida says "There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces".

So how does this make Derrida a poststructuralist? Well, in the structuralist scheme of things, meaning was not eternally deferred because signifiers were made sense of by arranging them in binary opposites like man/woman, light/dark, reason/madness, and so on. The first term in each of these binaries represents what Derrida calls presence, and the second term in each of these binaries represents a corruption or distortion or lack of this presence. So if light represents the presence, darkness represents its lack. If "reason" represents a presence, then madness represents its corruption. If you think back at our discussion of Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth, then you will remember that there too we had encountered two sets of binaries, one dealing with sexual reproduction within the family structure and the other with autochthony. And there in each of the two binaries the first term represented the assertion of a presence whereas the second term represented its denial or absence or lack. Now in this scheme of things the terms representing presence are treated as self-contained elements which signify an immutable identity.

It is only the second term which represents an identity made of negative traces of the first term. This prioritization of presence is what Derrida calls the **metaphysics of presence**.

Now what Derrida argues is that though Saussure came up with the radical idea that meaning is not made of positive identities but only of differences and negative relations, he did not carry it through. Thus in the kind of structuralism that we find inaugurated by Saussure we still find the notion of certain terms signifying various forms of presence which are treated as immutable and self-contained. For Derrida on the other hand, there is no such presence signified by any element within a structure, or, more specifically, by a signifier within a language system. This is because within a structure, which is guided strictly by the rule of difference, there can be no positive presence, and as we have already mentioned that any presence from outside the structure cannot influence the meaning-making process within it. Therefore, according to Derrida, all signifiers are made of differences and on a deep inspection reveals that they are constituted only of shadowy traces of other signifiers.

This notion of every signifier dissolving into traces of its differences with other signifiers has a profound impact on how Derrida approaches the meaning-making process of a text. For Derrida, the signifiers within a text do not yield any sharp or specific meaning but rather leads the reader to an aporia. This is a Greek term which means impasse or a lack of resolution. So a Derridean reading of a text typically opens up an impasse in terms of meaning and within the context of literary criticism this particular way of approaching a text is what is identified as **deconstruction**.

But you may think at this point that literary criticism should be all about “decoding” meaning and therefore to adopt a reading strategy which ends up in an impasse of meaninglessness makes

absolutely no sense at all. However, my answer here would be that the aporia that deconstruction opens up is not exactly a dead zone of meaninglessness. On the contrary the impasse leads us to a deeper appreciation of the complexity of relation that both underlines and undermines the meaning-making process. Let me try and explain this with the help of an example which will also help clarify the concept of deconstruction.

Deconstructing the man/woman binary

The example that I want to explore here is the man/woman binary. Now if we approach this binary from the structuralist perspective then we get a binary that is sorted into an opposition between presence and absence. The man represents the presence and the woman represents the absence or the site of lack. More specifically, the mark of presence that a man bears is his protruding genital which is lacked by a woman. Now here it is important to note that within the patriarchal society a man's genital or phallus is of tremendous symbolic significance, and therefore, as we shall see when we do psychoanalytic criticism, the structure of a patriarchal society can be described as a phallocentric structure. But coming back to the man/woman binary: the presence of the phallus makes man the immutable term in the equation and this term acts as the origin that generates the identity of the second term that is woman. So man defines woman through negation. Woman is a distorted man or a non-man. In fact, this positing of man as the origin and then deriving woman from it as its negation is perfectly illustrated in the biblical myth of Adam and Eve…where Eve the first woman is both born out of the first man, Adam, and is at the same time radically different from him. So the term woman is not a self-contained and

immutable signifier but rather on inspection gives way to the trace of the other signifier “man” which constructs it differentially.

However, in the process of sexual procreation, man is always invariably born of a woman, and this allows us to think of the notion of origin and presence within the man/woman equation differently. That is to say that one can argue that the presence is actually marked by the woman’s womb which is also the source of origin. In this argument, the concept of man therefore both “originates” from woman and represents the lack of presence that the woman signifies. In other words, man signifies the non-woman. Now what deconstruction tells us to do is not to reject one interpretation of the man/woman binary and pick the other. Rather, it tells us to place these two opposite ways in which meaning can generate from within the man/woman equation one over the other. And this leads us to the following points:

1. Since both the terms man and woman can be constructed as terms denoting presence, we need to be skeptical about the notion of this presence as immutable or natural. Indeed, there is nothing “natural” about the notion of presence here because otherwise there could not have been two contradictory ways of thinking about the presence. We therefore need to move away from interpreting the binary in terms of presence versus absence.
2. In place of a presence versus absence binary what we encounter in the man/woman equation is différance. This means each of the term is haunted by the spectral absence of the other term. So whenever we try to scrutinize either the term “man” or “woman” they dissolve into traces of other terms which define them through difference.
3. This play of difference results in a deferral of meaning as neither the term man nor the term woman possesses a definitive identity. Rather, we are regularly and incessantly pointed to the absent other. This is how we arrive at the deconstructive impasse or aporia.

So now that we have become familiar with how the process of deconstruction operates, let us read from Derrida a little. And though he is usually held to be a difficult philosopher I think we will have no problem now in understanding the general drift of his argument. In the book *Positions*, Derrida explains that "the general strategy of deconstruction" firstly involves a realization that when we are confronted with the structuralist binaries in the form of man/woman or light/dark or reason/madness, "we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis,* but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other […], or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment." So for instance if we look at the example of man/woman binary that we have just discussed extensively, we will have to start by realizing that within a specific socio-political context within which this binary operates … for instance the context of patriarchy…. the two terms are not treated as equals. The binary involves a "violent hierarchy" where man has an upper hand over woman. Deconstruction would start with overturning this hierarchy.

But how do we do that? Derrida writes that "we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple". So if we go back to our own effort at deconstructing the man/woman binary we can identify this double gesture or double writing in the two narratives that we had set forth one centred on man as the origin bearing the mark of presence in the form of the phallus and the other centred on the woman as the origin bearing the mark of presence in the form of the womb. These narratives have overlapped to form a sort of doubly inscribed text where the latter woman-centric layer of writing threatens to overturn or cancel out the meaning of the other layer of writing which is centred on man.

Now here Derrida raises a very interesting point when he says that:

> To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. Therefore, one might proceed too quickly to a *neutralization* that *in practice* would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of *intervening* in the field effectively.

What Derrida is saying here is that it might be possible to just move away from the hierarchical boundary by saying that both the terms are derivative of one another and are therefore of equal valence. This will neutralize the hierarchy without our needing to overturn the binary first. That is to say, the neutralization of the hierarchical man/woman binary may be achieved without creating a woman-centric elaboration of the binary. But according to Derrida, to omit the phase of overturning is to actually leave the hierarchical politics unrecognized. It is only by creating a reverse hierarchy that one can effectively intervene into the power equation underlining the structuring of the man/woman binary. But this reversing the hierarchy, as we will have to remember, is only a phase in the strategy of deconstruction. As Derrida declares in his book *Margins of Philosophy* "Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order". This is to say that the strategy of deconstruction is not just a shifting away from a man centric binary to a woman centric binary. The task as mentioned earlier is to proceed though a double gesture and a double writing where the man-centred understanding of the binary is juxtaposed or overlaid by the woman-centred understanding of the binary. This will result in not just an overturning of the specific binary but indeed an overturning or displacement of the entire conceptual order within which the binary operates. So for instance in case of our example of the man/woman binary this will entail an

overturning of the entire conceptual order of patriarchy. Thus when we apply the deconstructive strategy to the man/woman binary, we do not simply arrive at a meaning that is different from the one that is conventional. We arrive at an aporia which represents not exactly meaninglessness but rather the inability of the conceptual structure to operate and produce a definite version of meaning.

Macbeth and Deconstruction

But how is deconstruction relevant as a strategy for reading literature? So to explore the significance that deconstruction might have as a reading strategy, let us look at Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through the Derridean lens. Now, as most of you will know, the theme of gender identity is very strong in *Macbeth*. The twin protagonists of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth operate within a conceptual order where the understanding of the man/woman binary is heavily centred on the term man. Thus, right from the first act in the play, we see Macbeth as well as Lady Macbeth trying to align their identities with notions of manliness. Thus, Lady Macbeth for instance urges her husband to kill the old king Duncan and adds that "When you durst do it, then you were a man". Macbeth in his turn asserts his masculinity by accepting to wield the dagger that appears to him in a state of hallucination hovering in front like a phallic symbol.

This prioritizing of manliness establishes, as Derrida would say, a violent hierarchy where the notion of womanhood exists as the suppressed other. This violence of suppression is evident for instance in the speech by Lady Macbeth where she evokes the dark forces to undo her womanly identity:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

[…] Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall

A careful reading of the play however shows that one can read into it an understanding of the gender theme that radically reverses the hierarchy between the terms man and woman. So, for instance, one recurring concern in the play is the idea of bearing child versus childlessness. The power that the patriarchal order of Macbeth exercises through phallic symbols of violence like daggers, knives, and swords is countered by the power of the womb to bear children. Thus, Macbeth's masculine power is reduced to nothing in absence of children as he feels his whole life transformed into "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing". Indeed, Banquo, in spite of meeting a gruesome death finally wins over Macbeth because his legacy is carried forward by his son while Macbeth bears on his head the burden of a fruitless crown:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,

And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,

Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,

No son of mine succeeding.

In this particular reading of the play, the womb is seen to triumph over the phallus thereby reversing the hierarchy in the man/woman binary. But as Derrida has pointed out, this reversing of the hierarchy is only a phase in the entire strategy of deconstruction. This reversal does not end the deconstructive reading of Macbeth because, to quote Derrida again, "Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order".

Indeed, in the play, it is the witches who comprehensively dismantle the socio-political milieu of the patriarchal order and these are precisely the characters who presented as the incarnations of the double gesture or the double writing by which the man/woman binary are deconstructed and the man-centric narrative is overwritten by the woman-centric narrative. These incarnate forms of the deconstructive double gesture create an inability to interpret their gender identity from within the conventional conceptual order of patriarchy, and this is borne out by Banquo's confusion at meeting them: "you should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so". And so here we encounter that final phase of deconstruction – a fruitful aporia that helps us to go beyond the conventionality of the meaning-making process and see through their claims of eternality and universality.

Political Significance of Deconstruction

However, what we will have to understand here is that this aporia is not a reduction of meaning into nonsense. The deconstructive aporia is a highly potent political tool which is used to dislodge and overturn existing conceptual orders and their meaning-making process. Thus for instance it can be used to dismantle conceptual regimes, like patriarchy or racism, where the meaning making process proceeds by creating violent hierarchies of man over woman, or of white over black. It is therefore no wonder that postcolonial critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would make use of Derrida to think through colonialism and dismantle its myths of racial and gender hierarchies. So, as you can see, poststructuralism is not a journey to nihilism. Both in Barthes and in Derrida you have witnessed the potential of poststructuralism to intervene politically and to dismantle the legitimacy of violent and coercive conceptual regimes. This

political nature of poststructuralism is however most evident in the writings of Michel Foucault. It is to these writings that we will focus on in our next lecture. Thank you for listening.