Derrida's theory of deconstruction and its application on students: A case study on Indian universities

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the application of Derrida's "Theory of Deconstruction" on university students. "A deconstructive reading is reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself." Derrida, in his writings, discusses the concept of language in written texts, where written words function as 'signs' and 'symbols' carrying meaning. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the educational applicability of Derrida's theory of deconstruction for students studying in various universities and educational institutions. This study attempts to apply Jacques Derrida's theory to the general educational landscape in the modern era. The research methodology adopted is a descriptive qualitative approach utilizing secondary data for analysis. Data collection techniques include observation and documentation. The study focuses on students from Indian universities to analyse the practical application of deconstruction in an educational context. Our hypothesis posits that Derrida's theory of deconstruction has been implemented in various universities and educational institutes in India. This has been validated through extensive literature reviews and documented evidence. The findings confirm that Derrida's theory of deconstruction is not only theoretical but also has practical implications for educational institutions and universities.

Key words: Derrida, Deconstruction theory, Sarojini's My Fairy Fancies

1. INTRODUCTION

"Jacques Derrida coined the term 'Deconstruction' in his famous book 'Of Grammatology '. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means "to undo" -- a virtual synonym for "to de-construct. [1]

Derrida introduced words such as, deconstruction, presence, difference, trace, logos, and play to the lexicon of contemporary discourse in structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism. Deconstruction has also been applied as a strategy of analysis to education, literature, linguistics, philosophy, law and architecture. Jacques Derrida is, arguably, one of the foremost philosophers of the humanities and their place in the university. Over his long career he was concerned with the humanities' fate, status, place, and contribution. Through

his deconstructive readings and writings, Derrida reinvented the Western tradition by attending closely to those texts which constitute it. He redefined its procedures and protocols, questioning and commenting upon the relationship between commentary and interpretation, the practice of quotation, the delimitation of a work and its singularity, its signature, and its context: the whole form of life of literary culture, together with the textual practices and conventions that shape it. From early in his career, Derrida occupied a marginal in-between space – simultaneously textual, literary, philosophical, and political -- a space that permitted him a freedom to question, to speculate, and to draw new limits to humanities, (Peters and Biesta, 2009). With an up-to-date synopsis, review, and critique of his writings, this book demonstrates Derrida's almost singular power to reconceptualise and reimagine the humanities, and examines his humanism in relation to politics and pedagogy". [2]

As Higgs (2002), states educators, educational theorists, philosophers of education, and curriculum theorists around the world have shown a mounting interest in Derrida's work and in his concept of deconstruction in recent years [see, for example, Biesta and Egea-Kuehne (2001), Lather (1991), Stronach and Maclure (1997), Usher and Edwards (1994)]. The major influence of Derrida and deconstruction on the practice of education originally came from the adoption of deconstruction in English departments. (Higgs, 2002) With respect to the Derrida's philosophy fundamentals, the following can be stated. Derrida claims that philosophy in the west was formed under the impact of the metaphysics of presence. The latter caused us neglect the depth of existence concept and be trapped in a range of current circumstances, resulting in the camouflaging of the pure existence in ambiguity and absence. This absence in contrast to presence has become a pivotal concern in Derrida's metaphysical arguments. Derrida, in the book of Grammatology, provides a list of such contrastive or binary oppositions and claims that Plato has given superiority to one in each two through proposing these binary oppositions. On the whole, it can be stated that Derrida critically deals with the metaphysics of presence prior to any discussion of modern perspectives in metaphysics. He challenges the 5 fundamental approaches in metaphysics which are self-centred, ethnocentrism logo centrism ethnoculturally, and phallocentric. Logo centrism is regarding the major aspect (Derrida, 1981). With respect to epistemology, Derrida doubts, if there were general or holistic rules and challenges the opposition between mind and object in reaching an expression of object. He states that there is nothing beyond text that can be regarded the exclusive reference. With respect to axiology, Derrida questions the traditional approach in ethics in which ethics draws on ontology. Similar to Levin's, Derrida gives priority to ethics. [2]

Objective of the study:

II Exploring Derrida's Influence on the Humanities and Education – Understanding how Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy has influenced various disciplines, particularly in the humanities, education, and curriculum development.

Normally, Western philosophy is centred around the metaphysics of presence, prioritizing speech over writing and binary oppositions. Derrida challenges this through deconstruction, questioning these hierarchies and exposing hidden assumptions. Actual figures on the extent

of deconstruction's influence in humanities, education, and philosophy are **not** systematically recorded by institutions or governments. However, its impact on literary theory, curriculum studies, and epistemology is significant, as indicated by various scholars.

By applying Derrida's deconstruction to traditional frameworks, this study aims to reveal new perspectives in humanities and education, thereby reshaping conventional thought and critical analysis.

Scope of the study

Philosophical Foundations of Deconstruction – Analysing Derrida's critique of metaphysics, logocentrism, and binary oppositions in Western thought.

Impact on Humanities and Education – Examining how deconstruction has influenced literary theory, educational pedagogy, and curriculum development.

Ethical and Political Implications – Investigating Derrida's views on ethics, justice, and democracy, and their relevance in contemporary philosophical and political debates.

Material and Methods:

The research methodology which has been used is Descriptive qualitative approach in our paper. Descriptive research describes the Jacques's Derrida theory of Deconstruction and its applicability on students of Indian Universities. Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. It can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative research work. Here we have applied descriptive approach to qualitative study. The research has used secondary data for result analysis. Data collection techniques used in this paper was Observation technique and documentation of various literatures.

Results and Discussions:

Meaning of Ambiguity:

"The word 'ambiguous', at least according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is ambiguous between two main types of meaning: uncertainty or dubiousness on the one hand and a sign bearing multiple meanings on the other. When a word, phrase, or sentence has more than one meaning, it is ambiguous. Ambiguous means that there are two or more distinct meanings available. Ambiguity in language is the uncertainty within the very core of the organized system of language". [3]

For example. Heike recognized it by its unusual <u>bark</u>.

It's not clear whether Heike recognizes a tree by the look of the bark on its trunk, or if she recognizes a dog by the sound of its barking.

Many authors and poets have also used ambiguous words in their writings. Such as Thomas Pynchon's sentence "we have forests full of game and hundreds of beaters who drive the animals toward the hunters such as myself who are waiting to shoot them," (Against the Day, p. 46) utilizes the referential ambiguity of 'them' to great effect when said by his fictionalized Archduke Ferdinand. Shakespeare's "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man" (Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 1 line 97–98) plays cleverly on the double meaning of 'grave'. Comedians have often found ambiguity useful in the misdirection essential to some forms of comedy. Groucho Marx's "I shot an elephant in my pyjamas" is a classic of this genre.

Pre-suppositional Ambiguity:

Kent Bach (1982) explores the intriguing case of:

- I love you too.

This can mean (at least) one of four distinct things:

- I love you (just like you love me)
- I love you (just like someone else does)
- I love you (and I love someone else)
- I love you (as well as bearing some other relationship (for example liking).

If none of these are true, 'I love you too' is clearly infelicitous. This suggests that ambiguities can arise at the pre-suppositional level just as they can at the syntactic or semantic level [4, 5]

Metaphor, Allegory and Homograph:

"These are only a few of the language figures or "tropes," providing concepts useful to understanding ambiguity in language".[6]

Metaphor:

"This refers to the non-literal meaning of a word, a clause or sentence. Metaphors are very common; in fact, all abstract vocabulary is metaphorical. A metaphor compares things. (Examples: "blanket of stars"; "out of the blue")". [6]

"A metaphor established by usage and convention becomes a symbol. Thus, *crown* suggests the power of the state, *press* = the print news media and *chair* = the control (or controller) of a meeting." [6]

Homograph:

"When different words are spelled identically, and possibly pronounced the same (examples: *lead* the metal and *lead*, what leaders do)" [7]

Allegory:

"Allegory refers to the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence; an instance (as in a story or painting) of such expression." [8]

Sarojini Naidu's Poem My Fairy Fancies:

NAY, no longer I may hold you,
In my spirit's soft caresses,
Nor like lotus-leaves enfold you
In the tangles of my tresses.
Fairy fancies, fly away
To the white cloud-wildernesses,
Fly away. [9]

Nay, no longer ye may linger

With your laughter-lighted faces,

Now I am a thought-worn singer

In life's high and lonely places.

Fairy fancies fly away,

To bright wind-in woven spaces,

Fly away! [9]

Analysis of Naidu's Poem My Fairy Fancies with respect to Application of Derrida's theory and ambiguities:

Ambiguity in sentences is the complex phenomenon which is used by the authors. Authors from poetry, fiction, drama, or any other literature often makes the use of ambiguous words. Ambiguity in a sentence creates different way of thinking in reader's mind. It may give reader different sense of analysing the text for the students who are reading it. Sometimes students are not able to make out the idea of the writer what he wants us to understand. We have found lot of ambiguities in Sarojini Naidu's poem My Fairy Fancies, which may create different sense in student's mind. That's what Derrida has clearly mentioned in his theory of Deconstruction.

Derrida's theory of Deconstruction:

"According to Derrida's philosophy, **"**Language is Subjective". Readers only understand few meanings hidden in the text what he is capable or according to his need and interest. "Real meaning in the text is unknown", that means reader is not able to derive all truths hidden

inside a literature written by an author, which he read. Reader may predict false meaning from the text he reads and may not understand the complete meaning what author wants us to understand. Language may not always take us to understand the truth. There may be different meanings present with the single sign in a text or sentence like that of ambiguous words used by the authors. Concept of deconstruction state that one sentence may have several meanings. Author meaning may be different then what reader understands. This is what Derrida has discussed about his "Theory of Deconstruction" in his book "Of Grammatology, 1967". He said that we can't find real truth of the text from the Speech and language in the text which readers read. Derrida had deconstructed the theory of Ferdinand De Saussure, in a way that signs may not always have a definite meaning". [10-18]

For example: If it is written in a text that there was a cat. Now, students may predict it a black cat or brown cat or a white cat. So, the meaning in a word "cat" is not clear. It may not give the truth to the student of any university to understand the real meaning what author wants us to understand.

Derrida said, only meaning and speech is not enough to make reader understands the truth in the text. Meaning of Sign is detachable. Sign may have different meanings. Derrida in his theory said "we must deconstruct those ideas which we have given more emphasised". Means there should be no discrimination; one should give equal chance to all for getting selected. Ambiguous words or sentences which are used by the authors in their text and sentences, very well fits in Derrida's theory of Deconstructions. Because of these ambiguities, students are not able to understand the true meaning of the text what author wants us to understand. Let us analyse these ambiguities in Sarojini Naidu's poem "My Fairy Fancies" in her book The Golden Threshold creating an example in case of universities and institutes.

Metaphors Used in the poem My Fairy Fancies:

Spirit's Soft Caresses:

Naidu in the first stanza of her poem uses metaphors as spirit's soft caresses. This is again an ambiguity as she says that my spirit or my soul cannot hold you in soft caresses. Here caresses mean a loving touch or touching gently. But as the title is all about fairy, which is again a supernatural entity which is not to be touched, off. Student may get little confused about thought of the poetess, that to whom she is referring to. The whole phrase may refer to hold.

Tangles of tresses:

Tangle refers to a confused mass of something twisted together, whereas tresses mean a long lock of a woman's hair. Again, this might create a little confusion in the minds of students who are reading it that Naidu is referring to a person or a fairy.

Fly Away:

In some sense, student can realize the sad mood of the poetess. The phrase Fly away may refer to go away. Poetess doesn't want to hold her fairy fancies tightly and don't want it to leave herself. But at the same time in next stanza, she uses the metaphor fly away, which is again ambiguous in meaning and may create different meanings in mind of students.

White cloud-wilderness:

Poetess has used the phrase white cloud wilderness which may refer to the sky; the heaven where she wants that fairy may fly away. And if she is referring to fairy, they have inbuilt supernatural powers to fly, as creation of poet's imagination. Then the idea is still not clear to the students whether she refers to fairy, soul or human beings.

Laughter-lighted:

Sometime Naidu refers to her sad mood while writing this poetry at the same time she uses the phrases like Laughter-lighted in second stanza. Phrase laughter lighted may refer to filled with happiness, had ambiguity in it. Naidu is feeling unhappy about fairy fancies that had left her and gone apart. And at the same time, she is happy also. What this implies may create little confusion in minds of students who are reading it.

Thought worn singer:

The phrase in her second stanza may refer to Naidu's explanation about her tiredness of stopping the fairy from not going far away from her. She says that now she is in habit of being alone as she knows that fairy will not come back. And she has been left alone. Now she alone has to face all ups and downs of life which will come across her way.

Life's high and lonely places:

In her second stanzas, Naidu in her sad mood state that you may leave me my fairy fancies, no matter, I will be alone in my life facing all ups and downs of my life, all tough situations which falls in my way of life. Poetess describes her future situation, that when her fairy fancies will leave her, how she will feel. She might be lonely sometimes, and may face life's ups and downs alone. But this is what we had understood but still the literary meaning is not clear.

Wind-in woven Spaces:

In her last stanza, this phrase might refer to the sky, the heaven, where the fairy had flown away. In may also refer to the spaces between the clouds in the sky where fairy fancies flied away. It again creates ambiguity in the minds of students. Meanings of such phrases are still not understandable by the students and create confusion.

Homograph:

"NAY, no longer I may hold you, nor like lotus-leaves enfold you Nay, no longer ye may linger". Sarojini Naidu has very well used these homographs in her poem in both the stanzas, which again creates ambiguity in the minds of students. Though these create a session of rhythm but still it creates little confusion while understanding the real meaning of the sentences.

Allegory:

Fairy fancies:

Fairy is a literary device which had been used by different writers of 19th century to make their text more attractive and entertaining. They refer to author's thoughts or day dreams. For example, a famous writer William Shakespeare has used concept of fairy in his famous novel "Rape of the Lock". Fairy is the symbol of beauty and delicacies which have super natural powers. They imply the moral and perfection of virtue in literatures. They had been created as a result of author's creativity and imagination of human mind. Fairy refers to angels and small imaginary beings which had been invoked in lot of literatures so far. Fairy is the symbol of famine aesthetic.

Thus, fairies refer to poet imagination which had also been used by Sarojini Naidu's poem "My Fairy Fancies".

Fancies:

Naidu had used the word fancies instead of fancy. Fancies refer to the third form of word fancy, which is used here in her poem. Fancies imply the faculty of imagination and a creativity of human mind and soul. Naidu had personified her faculty of imagination by using these two words ferry fancies together. Her faculty of imagination has grown so grown so strong that she can't resist it.

Now here, there are lot of ambiguities in Sarojini Nadu's poem. They can be seen in context to Metaphors, Allegory and Homographs. The idea which the poetess wants to make reader understand with respect to the two words Fairy Fancies is still not clear in student's mind. Is Naidu talking about the imaginary supernatural fairy as a creation of poet's mind or she is referring to this fairy as her personal relationships with some beloved one. The meaning of her poem is ambiguous pertaining to the title of the poem itself. The poem has mood like quality and is devoted to the feeling of sadness. It seems to express the sad mood of the poetess. But still the idea behind the poem is not clear and lacks the real truth in the poem. Mood of the poetess seems that she is talking about lost love one. But the truth of the Naidu's idea is not understandable. She had not mentioned in her poem that for whom these lines are referred to. Is she talks about some lost personal relationships or she is driven in her way of fancies imagination and creation. There is lot of ambiguities behind these poetic lines that creates false understanding in the minds of readers. Poem is created with the themes of nature, love and romantic views. She had talked about natural imaginaries. It seems she is talking about natural phenomenon or an event. The poem has sad accent, like a mood when we lose some beloved once. It is like sonnets where Sarojini Naidu is praising a natural

phenomenon and ideas. It's seeming it's about the loss of someone whom she loved a lot. Thus overall, the idea behind writing her poem is still not clear in student's mind. Whether it's a remembrance of someone or creative imagination of her about human values, nature and beauty is a kind of ambiguity existing in her poem. There is overlapping between human mind of imagination and the nature.

The Lotus Flower:

Sarojini had used the allegory of lotus flower in her poem in the second stanza. There is lot of ambiguity in the word lotus which she had used in her poem. Again, the idea behind using this word is not clear to the student mind. Although, we know that lotus refers to spirituality in Indian Mythology. Goddess Lakshmi sits on lotus flower. She has used lotus as imaginary to pass some message. But still that message which she really wants us to understand is not clear. Lotus is a symbolic representation of purity, sacredness of human soul; even it has carved on various monuments like Taj Mahal. It has also carved on flag of ruling party BJP in India as their symbol. Lotus has also considered holy in Buddhism culture. They also believe it as the symbol of purity and spirituality. But Naidu had used it in which context, is still ambiguous in the mind of students

Acknowledgement:

Conclusion:

Language is very complex phenomenon. Students while reading or writing commits mistakes. While reading the text, it is not clear always that students had understood the entire hidden meaning of the text or not. That's what Derrida had spoken about language in his theory. Derrida said that language is subjective. The students while reading a text may create their own opinion about the text as per their need and interest. The true meaning what the author wants the reader to understand is not always clear. As we have seen the ambiguity in Sarojini Naidu's poem as an example about the Derrida's theory of deconstruction and its applications on students of various universities and educational institutes. Concluding all, we can say that Derrida's theory had been applicable not only to the previous centuries but also in the current modern world. The limitations of this work is that it may not be applied to other poetry which had not currently been analysed here.

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