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RETHINKING DERRIDEAN LEGACY: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO “THE END OF THE  
BOOK AND THE BEGINNING OF WRITING”

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida, a postmodern French philosopher developed a poststructuralist critical theory, popularly known as “deconstruction”. He has enormously influenced the academe in all countries and his philosophy is crucial in debates in Ontology, Epistemology, especially concerning Social Sciences, Ethics, Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and Philosophy of Language. Many artists and critics have largely referred his works as explicit influence on their works. His widespread influence made him not only a very well-known cultural figure, but his philosophical approach and complexity of his works also made him a debatable and a controversial figure. He has been often criticised by academicians, analysts and philosophers because his works questioned and modified the rules of the dominant discourses. Jacques Derrida’s theory of “deconstruction” has immensely influenced literary studies in the late 1970’s. The terms deconstruction commonly used as a pretentious alternative to analysis has expanded the range of meaning with its considerable complexity. It is a radical deconstruction of the earlier ideologies, philosophies and moments. Presently, it has become a prominent part of contemporary critical thought, it adds to our understanding of literature with a greater sense of critical perception. In the present paper, an effort has been made to analyse Derrida’s “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”, a chapter from his classic work *Of Grammatology*, in particular, while taking into consideration various key terms coined by him in the process of development of his critical theories.

**Key words:** Deconstruction, language, writing, signified, phonocentrism, logocentrism.

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“Following Derrida not simply an act of memory and remembrance”, Michael Naas writes, “but an invitation to think, from out of this memory, about the future and about this memory as the future” (McCance v).

Jacques Derrida (July 15, 1930 – Oct. 9, 2004), a postmodern French philosopher was born in Algeria in a Jewish family. His petit bourgeois background and belongingness to a marginal, dispossessed culture and rabbinic tradition had formative influences on the development of his critical theory, popularly known as “deconstruction”. He is associated with postmodernist philosophy and his work has been labelled as poststructuralist. He published more than forty books including many essays and interviews. His writings had a significant impact on the humanities; particularly on Anthropology, Sociology, Semiotics, Jurisprudence and Literary Theory and on Cultural Studies, in general. He has enormously influenced the academe in all countries where continental philosophy is predominant, including continental Europe and South America. His philosophy is crucial in debates in Ontology, Epistemology, especially concerning Social Sciences, Ethics, Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and Philosophy of Language. Many artists and critics have largely referred his works as explicit influence on their works. Even the fields of architecture, music and plastic art too are not away from Derridean influences. His later writings with Ethical and political themes have determined various activities and other political movements of that period. His widespread influence made him not only a very well-known cultural figure, but his philosophical approach and complexity of his works also made him a debatable and highly controversial figure.

Derrida read the works of many philosophers particularly Rousseau, Nietzsche and Gide in his young age; and found in their works some sort of rebelliousness against the established conventions of the society. He met Louis Althusser and worked on Edmund Husserl and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. During the Algerian War of Independence Derrida had been a teacher of English and French from 1957 to 1959, later he taught philosophy at Sorbonne. In 1965, he got associated with the Tel Quel group of literary and philosophical theories.

Derrida acclaimed international prominence and recognition with his contribution to “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science”, a colloquium on structuralism held at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. There he got the chance to meet the great philosophers like Jacques Lacan and Paul de Man. The year 1966 holds a special significance as far as his critical writings are concerned as his first three books – *Writings and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena* and *of Grammatology* published in the same year. Derrida travelled widely and became the co-founder of CIPH, an international institute, and then he was elected as its first president. CIPH was thought to be the place where philosophical research was carried out intensively. Derrida was awarded honorary doctorates by Cambridge University in 1992, but only after much controversy and protests, and later other institutes like Columbia University, The New School for Social Research, the University of Essex, and University of Silesia followed the suit. He has been often criticised by academicians, analysts and philosophers because his works questioned and modified the rules of the dominant discourses.

Post-structuralism emerged in France in the late 1960’s. Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes are two key figures associated with the development of post-structuralism. Derrida’s lecture on “structure”, “sign” and “play” may be taken as a starting point of Post-structuralism. He questions Saussure’s claim that “in language there are only differences without positive terms”. For Derrida, Language is not merely a simple union of signifiers and signified. Instead it is a chain of signifiers, and we can never get signified or a stable meaning. In the essay, Derrida questions the basic assumption of the Western metaphysics. It is apt here to quote Raman Selden: “Derrida’s paper ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science’ given at a symposium at John Hopkins University in 1966, virtually inaugurated a new critical movement in the United States. Its arguments put in question the basic metaphysics and assumption of Western philosophy since Plato” (174).

While discussing the notion of “structure”, Derrida argues that structuralist theory believes in a presupposed “center” of meaning and the structure in governed by this center. There is always a desire for center and this desire for center, to Derrida is *logocentrism*, as he defined it in his classic work *Of Grammatology*.

While examining Rousseau’s *Confessions* Derrida observes that Rousseau calls writing a “necessary evil” and a “dangerous supplement”. To Rousseau, speech is a primary natural resource. Derrida observes that from Plato and Aristotle to Heidegger, Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Structuralism *speech* is privileged over *writing*. He argues that the spoken word is assumed to be closer to the thought than a written word, because of presence

which is lacking in writing. The privilege of speech over writing is called *phonocentrism*. Derrida elucidates that this phonocentrism is, in fact, a classic feature of logocentrism. Phonocentrism treats writing as contaminated form of speech and to them, it seems relatively impure. But writing can be repeated and repetition invites interpretation and re-interpretation. Philosophers have condemned writing as it may destroy the authority of philosophical truth. They are of the view that speech has full presence while writing is secondary and threatens to contaminate speech with its materiality. Derrida terms this pairing of “writing” and “speech” as a “violent hierarchy”. He reverses this hierarchy and calls speech as species of writing. In other words, he subverts the phonocentric/logocentric tradition. This subversion is the first stage of Derridean deconstruction. For Rousseau, writing is merely a “supplement” to speech but Derrida shows that writing is not only a supplement but it also take place of speech. He uses the term *supplement* to convey the unstable relationship between speech and writing.

Jacques Derrida propounded the theory of “deconstruction” and it has immensely influenced literary studies in the late 1970’s. The popularisation of the term deconstruction had been matched by the growing celebrity of Derrida himself. The term “deconstruction” commonly used as a pretentious alternative to analysis has expanded the range of meaning with its considerable complexity. In the present postmodernist scenario, it has become a byword for fashionable obscurity. Deconstruction is a philosophical term; it is a radical deconstruction of the earlier ideologies, philosophies and moments. Presently, it has become a prominent part of contemporary critical thought, it adds to our understanding of literature with a greater sense of critical perception.

The existence of life is governed by certain ideologies which are built in language. For Derrida, language is not stable; it is dynamic, fluid and slippery. Structuralists believe that language refers to concepts of things in the world; on the contrary, deconstructionists do not believe in the concepts referred by language. Derrida’s writings mark a critique as well as continuation of structuralism. According to Derrida, language is a signifying system and each sign or signifier produces another signifier to get the meaning or signified. A sign is a sign of another sign with no fixed meaning or signified, there is no final transcendental signified. This is a process of never ending deferral or postponement of meaning. Derrida coins a term called *differance* to explain it that means ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’. In this way, language is a play of signifiers and we can never get a stable meaning. He claims that what we take to be the meaning is only the mental *trace* left behind by signifier. Derrida’s trace is the mark of the absence of a presence, ‘an always already absent present’.

Derrida’s notion of language is the key concept to understand his theory of deconstruction. It is assumed that language possesses the stability or solidity, but according to Derrida language is fluid. To define language Derrida uses another term *bricolage* that means the process of assembling together. It refers to the act of borrowing concepts from different sources and redesigning them to suit a particular purpose. He explains the meaning conveyed by language by putting it *under erasure*. Hence we use and erase language at the same time. The practitioners of structuralism believe in *binary opposition*. They build hierarchies of polar opposites to conceptualise our experiences of the world in which one term is privileged over the other. In Derridean view such pairing of opposites is not possible as it is observed that the two opposites overlap and share some common elements.

Derrida is a poststructuralist philosopher. Poststructuralists like deconstruction reject the notion of ordered vision of language and the existence of world. They believe in the unstable dynamic, fluid and fragmented notion of language. This notion of language can be applied to literature too because literature is also created by and composed in language. Hence literature is also unstable, dynamic and equivocal.

In deconstructive reading of a text, there is multiplicity of endless possibilities of meaning. In the process of reading a text, meaning is not stable or fixed as intended by the author to consume, rather it is created by the reader. Deconstruction helps us to know the undecidability of the text and the complex ideologies the text is composed of. All texts, literary or non-literary, are made of language, and meanings always proliferate in endless ways. If a sign is a sign of another sign, a text is also a text of other texts. A text is not a finished corpus of writing. No text is complete in itself; a text depends on the other texts to get the

meaning. In other words, 'inter-textuality' is advocated by deconstruction. Derrida says that the text is a gas. Deconstruction sees the text against itself. The text is shown as multiple, disunited with shifts and breaks, contradictions, silences, "aporias" and fault lines and it reveals the meaning unintended by the author. Derrida proposes *dissemination* that means proliferation of signs and meaning to infinity. Deconstruction is one of a potential infinite series of the uses of the same word in different contexts to communicate different meaning. Derrida claims that the fate of the deconstruction is instructive.

In the present paper, an effort has been made to analyse Derrida's "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", in particular, while taking into consideration various key terms coined by him in the process of development of his critical theories. It is taken from Derrida's classic work *Of Grammatology* translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and published in 1976. *Of Grammatology* is Derrida's one of the most influential writings. The book is divided into two parts: "Writing Before the Letter" and "Nature, Culture, Writing". "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing" is taken from first part of *Of Grammatology* that is "Writing Before the Letter".

"The End of the Book and Beginning of Writing" has been further divided into three parts: "The Program", "The Signifier and the Truth" and "The Written Being/The Being Written" consecutively. The present paper examines Derrida's emphasis on the writing and language. He is looking at the end of the book in reference to the writing. It is apparent that a book is limited by number of words and the number of pages in a book is also restricted. On the contrary, the language or writing has no such limitation. The notion of writing is infinite. Writing is dynamic and ever growing. It always has a beginning not the end. The book is a discrete physical object. It is evident that the book is finite and confined by certain limits but the experience of reading a book is invaluable. It enriches the mind of the reader in infinite ways.

Derrida has made serious attempts to discuss the problem of language as it has invaded "The global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses..." (OG 6). The horizon of language is wide and the language is a loose term. Like the inflation of the sign "language" is absolute inflation. While discussing the problem of language Derrida says, "This crisis is also a symptom. It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historic-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizons" (6).

In the first section "The Program", Derrida seems to be establishing a relationship between language and writing. Spoken language (*langue*) signifies the thought and writing signifies the spoken language. Therefore, writing is thought to be a signifier of signifier, but he privileges writing over language. To Derrida, this signifier of signifier is no longer a "derivative" or "auxiliary" form of language. He further argues that it is not "the exterior surface" of language, thus according to Derrida, writing "comprehends" language (7). Western metaphysics including Rousseau has limited the scope of language:

It is as if the western concept of language . . . were revealed today as the guise or disguise of a primary writing: more fundamental than that which, before this conversation, passed for the simple "supplement to the spoken word" (Rousseau). Either writing as never a simple "supplement", or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the "supplement" (7).

Earlier speech was privileged over writing. Rousseau, Aristotle, Plato and Saussure including other western philosophers conceived writing secondary to speech. Rousseau calls writing merely a "Supplement" to speech. The tradition of phonocentric/logocentric hierarchy was prevailed. Derridean deconstruction has subverted this hierarchy. Derrida argues that writing is not "secondary", not a "supplement" to language but on the contrary, "writing" is a movement of language" and writing comprehends language. The concept of writing was "narrow" and historically determined (8). Its function was conceived as "instrumental" because of the absence of the writer. Derrida says, in fact, speech was not privileged over rather presence was privileged over the absence. The relationship of the language and writing has been "willfully misleading" us (8). To Derrida, language is a mode, a determined mode; language is a phenomenon, an aspect or more precisely language is a species of writing. His belief that "the book is dead" means it is limited or confined. By saying that the book is dead he actually means to say that speech is dead. In other words, speech is subordinate to writing, "To affirm

in this way that the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language, presupposes of course a certain definition of language and writing”(8-9).

It is evident that writing is overtaking speech. Writing has gone beyond the role of only a signifier, it is not only the “physical presentation of literal pictographic or ideological inscription” (9) but it represents the totality of what makes it possible. Derrida claims that language is for “action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc.” (9). Writing is more than that;

And thus we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing”. One might also speak of athletic writing . . . of military or political writing (9).

Derrida, in a way, is trying to broaden the horizon of writing a language. He seems to be trying to represent the human experience and existence of life without the limitations of previous metaphysics which is hampered by the limitations of speech.

In the second section, “The Signifier and Truth” of “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”, we observe Derrida’s most influential critical theory termed as “deconstruction”. Derridean “deconstruction” believes in relativism. It negates the notion of transcendental truth celebrated by Western metaphysics. Western metaphysics is more associated with “*logos*”. Derrida calls “*logos*” merely an illusion of Western metaphysics nothing else. Deconstruction has widened the scope of writing. Derrida views that:

The “rationality” . . . which governs writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a *logos*. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the desedimentation, the deconstruction, of all the significations that have their sources in that of the *logos*. Particularly the signification of *truth* (10).

Heidegger believes that all the metaphysical determinations of truth are related to the “*logos*”. Philosophically, in pre-Socratic and in Hegelian sense and in the sense of God’s infinite understanding of the world, the *logos* or it can be called the reason is essentially linked to the *phone*. It has been determined implicitly or explicitly that the essence of the *phone* is immediately proximate to “thought” as *logos* relate to “meaning”. Meaning is produced or composed by the concept of *logos*. Derrida believes that for Aristotle, “spoken words are symbol of mental experience and written words are the symbol of spoken words” (11). By virtue of being present the spoken words are essentially proximate with the mind. To Saussure, “relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (67). He argues that both are the two faces of one thing. Hegel believes in the domination of sound. According to him, the meaning is produced because of the self presence of the subject. Derrida believes that notion of phonocentrism is actually logocentrism. Phonocentrism is inseparable from the historical determination of the meaning of being as presence. In other words, logocentrism supports this determination of the being of the entity as presence. The epoch of *logos* debases writing and calls it as exteriority of meaning. The idea of *logos* is based on the assumption of presupposed already existing truth that becomes reference to all words. Derrida views it as the “exteriority of signifier” (OG 14).

In literal sense, writing is finite. “The idea of the book is the idea of totality, finite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified pre-exists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality” (18). Derrida considered that there is no final transcendental signified or meanings. Meanings are created. Meanings can be altered according to the context. There is no truth for a signifier to refer to begin with.

In the third part, that is “The Written Being/The Being Written”, Derrida is trying to answer certain questions regarding signifier and signified. Derrida has attempted successfully to answer the questions like, “what is the sign?” In Derridean descriptions the signified is “sense or thing, noeme or reality” (18). Derrida advocates the belief that there is no difference between the signifier and the signified. The signified is present and the privilege of its proximity to the *logos* as *phone* is the privilege of presence. To Derrida, the “formal essence” of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence (18). In order to get the meaning of sign he has put it *under erasure*.

Derrida seems to try to describe the concept of being. In order to describe the meaning of being he has discussed the ideologies of various philosophers including Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Husserl and many others. Derrida says that "Heidegger reminds us constantly that the sense of being is neither the word 'being' nor the concept of being" (21). Heidegger seems to believe that the idea of being cannot be captured by language that the signifier being does not correspond to the meaning of being. Derrida refers to Nietzsche in this regard, "Nietzsche, far from remaining *simply within* metaphysics, contributed a great deal to the liberation of the signifier from its dependents or derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified .... Reading, and therefore writing, the text were for the Nietzsche "originary" operation" (19).

Like Derrida, Nietzsche has demolished the traditional convention and reversed the order. He argues that writing is not subordinate to logos and to truth. Derrida appreciates him "Nietzsche has *written what* he has written. He has written that writing – and first of all his own – is not originarily subordinate to the logos and to truth" (19).

Heidegger reinstates the instance of the "logos", of the "truth" and of "being" as *primum signatum*, "the transcendental signified". He believes that there has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between the signifier and the signified to be absolute and irreducible. He further says that the thought of "being", else the thought of this transcendental signified is manifested in the voice. The voice is called conscience. It is believed to be closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier. The signified is produced itself spontaneously from within the self. Derrida calls this effacement of the signifier in the voice merely an illusion.

In Derrida's view Heidegger has evoked the "voice of being" (22). It is indeed the question of being that Heidegger asked metaphysics. This question is the question of truth, of sense, of the logos. He calls this voice of being as "it is silent, mute, in sonorous, wordless, originarily *a-phonic*" (22). Heideggerian situation is ambiguous with respect to the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. On one hand, it is contained within it and transgresses it simultaneously. The sense of being is never simply a signified; it escapes the movement of the sign. To Derrida, it seems a repetition of the classical tradition. Derrida says for Kant and Husserl, the sense of being is neither "primary" nor "fundamental" nor "transcendental". Derrida calls this "provisional moments" (OG 22).

Derrida's practices and his influence have been wide and profound and it was recognised at his death in Oct 2004. His writing has consistently frustrated and annoyed some readers especially since early 1990's when it has often consisted of short interventions on questions of ethics and politics including religion. His later period writings included the essay, "Force of Law" (1994), *Politics of Friendship* (1997), *Of Hospitality* (2000), *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001) and *Spectres of Marx* (1994). Derrida's work has moved across philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, literature, art, architecture and ethics and thus evaded traditional disciplines and subject boundaries. Not only does Derrida seem not to belong definitively to any one of these areas, his work persistently questions the assumptions and protocols on which they, or their canonic representatives, depend.

Derrida's writings, in some sense, elude the thetic, the postulates that can be cited as pithy sententious statements for all time. Of course, there are many repeatable sentences in Derrida's writings: "difference in neither a word nor a concept" (*Margins*), "there is nothing outside the text" (OG 158), "there are no phantoms in Van Gogh's paintings" (*Truth* 257) , " O my democratic friends" (*Politics* 306), "Justice cannot be deconstructed" (*Force* 243) and on and on. One can indeed find in Derrida sentential claims for all time – and there are many of them but Derrida needs to be read, to be followed through the intricacies of his reading to enter into the web of his thought; to activate the spaces that he is able so adroitly to identify, to marginalize, to situate between binary pairs.

Derrida's writings haunt us and will continue to do so with each and every new reading. Here, however, we must ask that there is of Jacques Derrida's voice, his intense articulation of complex webs of thinking and writing, textualising and marginalizing that persists even today in our polyvalent readings of his work as much

as he would not want to speak of an “*oeuvre*” there is nevertheless and *oeuvre* at work here – now that he is no longer with us. There will have been endless readings of his writings, his pressing issues of the day in literature, in philosophy, in politics, in psychoanalysis, in art in architecture, in every imaginable domain of textual production. Jacques Derrida’s writing addressed great writers and thinkers of all times – Husserl, Heidegger Nietzsche, Plato, Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, Celan, Blanchot, Valery, Artaud, Kafka, Joyce and on and on. These readings, however, are occasions for Derrida to demonstrate how to read a text in its marginalities, its textualities, its indecidabilites.

But as one reads these texts, it is not the text that he reads that signifies, but rather the strategies in reading that bring out radically different ways to think some of the most persistent philosophical, political, literary, even theological issues. So what would it mean to speak of Derrida’s legacies?

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