



Deconstruction versus Structuralism: From Ferdinand de Saussure to Derrida

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Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical relationship between structuralism and deconstruction with special reference to Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. A significant critical theory of the twentieth century, Structuralism was a study of language, literature and culture as a series of signs, codes and structures. This method was based on Saussure's structural linguistics that described language as a system which generates meaning in terms of differences and relations between signs. His ideas of signifier, signified, langue, parole, arbitrariness and synchronic study turned the course of modern linguistic and literary criticism. These concepts are used with literary texts, in the context of structuralism, to examine patterns, binary oppositions, narrative forms and cultural codes. But Jacques Derrida's deconstruction called into question the concept of "fixed structure" and "stable meaning" that was held by Structuralist. According to Derrida, language is unstable because there isn't a final meaning; rather, meaning is continually delayed by difference. His idea of *différance*, trace, supplement, logocentrism and free play uncovers the paradoxes and ambiguities of texts. The paper lets one know that structuralism is an attempt to discover order, unity and systematic meaning and that deconstruction is an attempt to question that order and discover multiple interpretations within the text. Accordingly, the transition from Saussure to Derrida is a significant development in modern literary criticism from a fixed structure to the instability of meaning.

Keywords: Structuralism, Deconstruction, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Structural Linguistics, Signifier, Signified, *Différance*, Literary Criticism, Free Play of Meaning

Introduction

Deconstruction versus Structuralism: From Ferdinand de Saussure to Derrida" suggests a shift from the structural study of language to an investigation of structure. In modern literary theory, philosophy and language studies there are two dominant intellectual themes: structuralism and deconstruction. There was a shift to structuralism as a method, which analyses meaning in terms of systems, relations and structures and deconstruction as a critical approach that challenged the stability of meaning, hierarchy and fixed interpretation. The transition from Ferdinand de Saussure to Jacques Derrida is not just a change in thinkers, however, but also a change in the concept of language, text, meaning and interpretation (Derrida 278).

Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory is the key structuralist theory. Saussure claimed that the study of language should be as a system of signs, not as a collection of words or historical changes. He says that every linguistic sign consists of two elements—the signifier (the sound-image or written down form) and the signified (the concept or meaning associated with it). This concept shifted the focus of modern Linguistics from the assumption of inherent meaning in words to the



concept of meaning emerging from differences within the structure of language. The meaning of a word is not related to anything natural but because it is not the same word in the same linguistic system (Saussure 65-67). In this manner, structuralism emphasizes order, relation, structure and systematic meaning.

Structuralism was a very popular literary criticism approach as it gave a scientific procedure for text reading. Structuralist thinking sees a literary work not as the product of the author's intention or historical context but as the internal system of signs, symbols, codes, patterns and binary oppositions that exist within it. The main concern of the structuralist critics is to analyze the meaning making process that occurs with the opposition between male/female, culture/nature, speech/writing, presence/absence and centre/margin. This is based on the premise that there are structures under the surface of language and literature that can be studied in an objective way. In this sense, the structuralism tries to reveal the order in the language's and literature's apparent complexity. But Jacques Derrida's deconstruction disputed the foundational tenets of structuralism. Derrida accepted the importance of Saussure's theory but also questioned its limits. He claimed that meaning is always provisional and provisional, as language is always pointing to other signs. The meaning of a word is never set in stone but is continually postponed and modified by its connection to other words. Derrida explained this process of difference and deferral in terms of the term *différance*. Deconstruction, a theory, states that a text does not have one final or complete meaning. It is full of contradictions, gaps and inner conflicts that disrupt its apparent unity (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 23).

Thus deconstruction is not just a "destruction" of meaning; it is a discovery of its instability, its layering and its reliance on language. This is significant because both the structuralist and deconstruction theories start with language and end with different results. Deconstruction maintains that a structure is never completely secure, while structuralism claims that meaning is found in structure. Saussure's theory reveals that meaning is relational; Derrida extends this idea to say that meaning relies on relations and therefore cannot be definitively settled. Structuralism looks for systems, rules and patterns; deconstruction confronts the authority of systems and reveals the instability that is the root of them. In this respect, deconstruction can be seen as an extension and as a critique of structuralism. According to the ideas of Saussure and Derrida:

The sign does not speak alone,
It lives through difference and relation;
Structure searches for order and centre,
But deconstruction opens meaning to
endless interpretation. (Ferdinand de Saussure, 67)

Another major transformation in modern literary criticism is also evident in the way of traveling from Saussure to Derrida. Saussure found the basis for his theory of language by deconstructing the concept of signs but Derrida took it to a new level by challenging the notion of fixed centres and stable meanings. The essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'



is particularly significant for challenging the notion of a centrality in control of structure. He claims that the centres traditionally relied on by western thought, like truth, origin, presence, reason and meaning, are not as secure as they seem (Writing and Difference 278). The argument affected how critics read literary and philosophical works by inspiring them to consider how the texts obscure, contain or contradict themselves.

The study of ‘deconstruction versus structuralism – from Ferdinand de Saussure to Derrida’ is thus important because it elucidates one of the most important theoretical shifts in twentieth-century thinking. It represents the shift in modern criticism from a quest for secure or stable forms to a skepticism of the very notion of stability (Culler 95). Structuralism offers a way to comprehend the ways in which language creates meaning in terms of systems; deconstruction shows that these systems are incomplete, unstable and open to multiple interpretations. In the face of a language that is not transparent, the medium of truth, but complex, made up of signs, differences, interpretations, Saussure and Derrida together help us to grasp the language. This paper accordingly investigates the linkage, separation and theoretical evolution of structuralism and deconstruction, particularly in regard to Saussure's model of language and Derrida's deconstructive critique (Saussure 67). According to the ideas of Derrida, Culler and Saussure:

The centre once promised truth and order,
But structure could not remain secure;
Signs move through difference and play,
And meaning stays open, shifting and unsure. (Jonathan Culler, 95)

Structuralism: Concept and Development

Structuralism is one of the most significant 20th-century critical theories, which is the examination of language, literature and culture seen as systems or structures rather than elements. The leitmotif of its idea is that meaning is not created one by one from various words, images, or events, but by their relationship to other elements of a whole system. In literary studies, structuralism brought a new focus away from the author's life and historical context and their emotions, toward the inner structure of the text. Attempts to discover the unspoken rules, patterns, codes and conventions by which the literary work generates meaning. In structuralism, it is believed that all texts have an underlying system, which can be scientifically and objectively studied. A poem, novel, drama or myth is not considered to be a random product, but a form that consists of signs, symbols, oppositions and relationships (Hawkes 7).

The theory of language is a close companion of the development of structuralism. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs and that each sign is comprised of two elements: the signifier and the signified (Saussure 67). The sound-image or written form of a word is its signifier, the concept or meaning is its signified. Saussure states that the signifier and signified do not have a natural or permanent link and that the relation between them is arbitrary. A word's meaning is determined by its difference from other words in the language system. The word “day” has meaning because it contrasts with the word “night,” for instance. Thus, according to structuralism,

meaning is constructed by relation and difference, rather than by nature. According to the ideas of Terence Hawkes and Ferdinand de Saussure:

Meaning is not born alone,
It grows within a system whole;
Signs live through difference and relation,
And structure gives the text its soul.
(Ferdinand de Saussure, 67)

Structuralism applied to literary analysis is the investigation of the structure of a text. It is not asking what a text is, but how a text makes meaning. A structuralist critic looks for repetitions, story lines, binary oppositions, symbols and cultural codes that are found in a literary work. For instance, many texts are based on good / evil, male / female, nature / culture, presence / absence, centre / margin. The opposition are used in the creation of meaning in the text. Myths, folktales and narratives are also a focus of structuralist criticism, which examines the structures common to diverse stories. This method demonstrates that while the surface of literary pieces may be different, they can have a similar structure on one level. Thus, structuralism offers a systematic approach to the study of literature (Lévi-Strauss 206).

One main principle of structuralism is the concept of language as a system of signs. Language is not just a list of words, said Saussure, it is a total system where, because of its position in the system, every word acquires meaning. Since no sign is ever alone, it is important to know how the letters and other symbols are used. It has a meaning only in relation to other signs. This concept transformed the study of language and literature, proving that meaning was not inherent to each word. That, however, is not the case, for meaning becomes the product of the structure of language itself (Barthes 9). Also, in literary texts, characters, images, symbols and events act as signs. They make meaning by engaging in relationship with each other. From this point of view, structuralism considers literature as a set of signs which can be deciphered by careful analysis. According to the ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes:

A text is not a silent form,
It speaks through codes and signs;
Oppositions shape its hidden order,
And meaning grows through patterned lines.
(Roland Barthes, 9)

In structuralist thinking there is a great link between structure, order and meaning. Structuralism is the theory that there is an invisible structure within the visible surface of any literary work that is responsible for creating meaning. This helps the reader to appreciate the deeper meaning and order the text. If there is no structure, meaning is diffused and ambiguous. In the structuralist view, meaning isn't just personal, but also rule-governed and convention-governed by the rules and conventions of language, culture and genre. The meaning of a literary work is given by the order of the parts. Characters, themes, symbols and conflicts combine to give the overall meaning of the

text. Hence, there is the importance of order, relation and system in studying literature in the context of structuralism (Derrida 278). Thus, a new method of literature criticism, structuralism, was initiated, due to its new approach to reading literature. It shifted the blame from subjective and impressionistic interpretation to analytical, systematic and language-oriented interpretations. Structuralism emphasized signs, structures and patterns and relations and it enabled critics to gain insight into the process of meaning making in language and literature. It also paved the way for other theories like post-structuralism and deconstruction (Eagleton 83). Later deconstruction challenges the stability of that structure and claims that meaning is not entirely secure although it can be inferred through structure, as does structuralism. So, one of the reasons why structuralism is not just an independent theory but as the basis of future critical theories is that it was applicable to various fields. Therefore, it was applicable to various fields, so that is one reason why structuralism is important not just as an independent theory, but as the basis for future critical theories. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Terry Eagleton:

Beneath the text, a structure lies,
Where signs and patterns make meaning clear;
Order gives the work its form,
Yet deconstruction makes stability disappear.

(Terry Eagleton, 83)

Ferdinand de Saussure and Structural Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure is considered one of the most important founders of the modern science of language and structuralist philosophy. Modelling the study of language before Saussure was predominantly historical and comparative. They were primarily interested in the dynamics and transformation of language, the development of words from the older forms and the relationship of one language to another. Saussure introduced a significantly new perspective in the study of language, suggesting that language ought to be analyzed as a whole system in a certain moment. This strategy was called "structural linguistics". Saussure said that language is not just words, sounds or grammatical rules — it is a system of signs that are organized and the meaning of each of the signs is determined by its relationship to other signs. This concept was the basis of structuralism, as it has demonstrated that meaning is not 'natural' or 'independent', but created by structure and difference (Saussure 1).

Saussure's greatest contribution to the theory is the theory of the linguistic sign. For every sign, there are two parts, he explained, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound-image or written form of a word and the signified is the concept or idea associated with the word. The "tree" in the word "tree" is the signifier, the concept of a tree is the signified. Saussure stated that the correspondence between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning that there is no natural or necessary link between the meaning or idea of a thing and the word or words used to denote it. Since English speakers say "cup" and French speakers say "gobelet", meaning is not a natural occurrence, but rather a convention of society (Saussure 67). This theory gained



considerable significance in literary criticism, because it opened the possibility of creating meaning with the help of signs, which were not just reflections of reality. According to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure:

Language is not words alone,
But signs arranged in relation;
Meaning grows through difference,

Not by nature, but convention. (Ferdinand de Saussure, 67)

The other key concept in Saussure's structural linguistics is that of *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the entire language system that is shared by a community with grammar, rules, vocabulary and conventions. *Parole* means the particular way a language is used in one's speech or writing. Saussure considers *langue* to be more significant in the study of language, since it provides the structure that allows language to function. Common language system in individual speech may differ from person to another. This separation is significant for structuralism as it focuses on the underlying system rather than individual expression. In literary theory, this is when a text is not analysed as the individual voice of an author, but is analysed as a part of a system of language, genre, symbols and cultural codes (Saussure 67).

Saussure also made a distinction between synchronic and diachronic study of language. Diachronic analysis is a study of language that looks at it in history, with emphasis on the changes that have occurred in word and meaning over time. The synchronic study focuses on the language system at a specific point. Saussure put more emphasis on the synchronic study as he felt that language is a system in the present. The value of a chess piece is determined by its position during the game and the value of a word by its position in the language system. This comparison is useful to illustrate Saussure's structural approach to language. A word does not have a meaning just from its history, it is a meaning because of its relationship with other words in the system. So, meaning is not independent; it's relational (Saussure 14).

Saussure's theory is all about the concept of difference. He said that in language only differences exist. The meaning of a word is attributed to it by its difference from other words. For instance, "light" can be interpreted as special light as opposed to dark, heavy, or night, depending on the context. This principle had a profound impact on the structuralist criticism, particularly on the analysis of binary oppositions. Saussure's concept was later adopted by structuralist thinkers who examined the oppositions of male and female, nature and culture, good and evil, speech and writing and presence and absence, in their analysis of literature, myths and culture. The oppositions are not coincidental, but instead they embody the deep structure toward meaning making (Saussure 114). Therefore Saussure's linguistic theory was used as a model for the study of literature and culture as well as language. According to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure:

Language lives within a system,
Where words gain value through relation;
Langue gives structure to expression,

And difference creates interpretation.

(Ferdinand de Saussure, 114)

Saussure's structural linguistics also affected the understanding of literary texts. If language is a system of signs, then literature is also a system comprised of signs, symbols, images, characters and narrative structures. The meaning of a poem, novel or drama is created not by the subject matter; meaning is created by the way the parts are arranged and related. The structuralist critics applied Saussure's theories to the analysis of literary meaning as it is created by patterns, repetitions, contrasts and codes. This paved the way for more systematic and analytical literary criticism. Rather than reading the text for the author's life or the reader's feelings, structuralism read the text's internal structure and the rules that make meaning. But Saussure's theory would be the foundation for later thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. Saussure demonstrated that meaning is based on difference while Derrida later asserted that meaning is founded on difference and therefore cannot ever be definitively established. This is how Derrida's deconstruction emerged both from Saussure's structural linguistics and as a criticism of it. Saussure introduced the notion of language as a system of signs and Derrida challenged whether so-called 'stable' meaning could be produced within that system. So, Saussure's significance is not limited to his founding of structural linguistics but also his influence on the further evolution of post-structuralism and deconstruction (Saussure 89).

Finally, the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure was the intellectual background for structuralism. His ideas of sign, signifier, signified, arbitrariness, langue, parole, synchronic study and difference revolutionized the study of language and literature. He showed that meaning is not a natural attribute of the words themselves, but arises out of relations within a system. His theory enabled the critics to comprehend the language as a field of signs which is structured and it made the literary analysis systematic. His ideas also paved the way for Derrida's deconstructive critique at the same time (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* 10). As a result, Saussure is at the starting point of a significant theoretical trajectory that travels from structuralism to deconstruction. According to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jonathan Culler:

Literature speaks through signs and structure,
Where patterns give meaning its direction;
Saussure builds meaning through difference,
And opens the path to deconstruction.

(Ferdinand de Saussure, 89)

Jacques Derrida and Deconstructive Thought

Jacques Derrida is one of the most influential thinkers of twentieth-century literary theory, philosophy and post-structuralist criticism. His deconstructionist approach revolutionized the reading of language, meaning, text and interpretation for critics. As Derrida's thinking about philosophy evolved, it was in reaction to the weaknesses of structuralism. Structuralism held that meaning was accessible through systems, structures and relations but Derrida asked what about a

structural product of a fixed and final meaning? He asserted that language is not a constant medium in which truth can be communicated with ease. Language, on the contrary, is rife with variations, lacunae, inconsistencies and ambiguities. Thus, there isn't just one single interpretation for a text. There is no destruction of meaning in Derrida's deconstructive thought, but rather a demonstration of the instability of meaning, its delay and dependence on other signs. The deconstruction, then, is a means of reading that reveals the tensions and contradictions in the text (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 8).

Derrida's deconstructive philosophy is related closely to his critique of Western philosophy. Traditional Western thought is ultimately based on these centres of stability: truth, reason, origin, presence, God, consciousness, meaning, etc., Derrida said. These centres are regarded as permanent structures providing a structure to knowledge and language. This tendency, called by Derrida "logocentrism." Logocentrism is the idea of there being a core or fixed meaning behind language. Western philosophy has privileged speech over writing, Derrida contended, since the latter was thought to be less connected to presence, truth and speaker's meaning. Writing, meanwhile, is often looked upon as a second language or a second skill (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 8). Derrida upset the dominance of the hierarchy and revealed that writing is subject to signs and differences as is speech. So that neither speech nor writing gives absolute meaning, or pure presence. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida:

Language does not hold one truth,
Its meanings shift through signs and play;
Deconstruction reads the hidden gaps,
Where fixed centres slowly fade away.

(Jacques Derrida, 8)

Derrida's most significant term is that of *différance*. The term is used in two ways; difference and deferral. Derrida employs *différance* to describe the process of meaning being born from differences between signs and also the deferral, postponement or delay of meaning itself. The meaning of a word cannot be provided by itself. For instance, if we wish to know the meaning of one word we must have another word to explain it. This process has no definitive conclusion. Then meaning is not complete at one moment, it's in a series of signs. Derrida's notion of *différance* brings together Saussure's notion of difference and challenges the structuralism's optimism about stable meaning. Saussure had affirmed that the meaning of signs is determined by difference; perhaps more importantly, Derrida had contended that the meaning of signs is founded in difference and therefore is never completely determinate (*Margins of Philosophy* 5).

The "trace" is another key concept of Derrida's thinking. Each sign has the mark of other signs of which it is different: the trace. A word is never final, because there are other meanings in it which do not exist, yet are alive. For instance, the concept of 'presence' actually consists of the concept of 'absence' and the concept of 'speech' of the difference of 'writing'. Therefore, in each meaning there is something else that is present that is excluded or opposes it. Deconstruction examines these



traces and demonstrates that a text is never "one. The central theme in a text is frequently defined by what is outside of the frame, marginal, suppressed or missing. This is, in turn, to claim that meaning is not pure, it is never an absence or a lack or a difference, but it is always difference and absence and a relation. Derrida demonstrates through the concept of trace that meaning cannot be presented in a complete or direct form:

Derrida's addition of "supplement" was also important. It seems that supplement is an addition in normal usage. But Derrida demonstrates that a supplement is not simply an addition but a defect in addition. The so-called original is not complete in itself if something requires a supplement. This concept was the source of Derrida's critique on the traditional distinction between speech and writing. Writing is regarded by Western thinking as an adjunct to speech, but Derrida insists that speech is incomplete when considered as a supplement to writing. Signs, repetition and difference are also involved in speech (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 5). Hence writing is not just a secondary activity to speech but the instability of all the system of meaning. The concept has significance in literary criticism because it demonstrates that the secondary, marginal, or inferior aspects of a text may play a crucial role in the meaning of the text. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida:

Meaning is never complete in words,
It moves through difference and delay;
Every sign carries hidden traces,
And supplements open another way.

(Jacques Derrida, 5)

Deconstruction also questions binary oppositions. In western thought oppositions like speech/writing, presence/absence, male/female, reason/emotion, centre/margin, nature/culture and truth/error are important. In these oppositions, one term is usually given superiority over the other. Derrida's deconstruction does not simply "invert the oppositions," but it also challenges the structure that constitutes the oppositions. He demonstrates how the meaning of the dominant term is dependent on the subordinate term. For instance, without "absence" there is no "presence" and without "margin" there is no "centre." Deconstruction is thus a process that shows that binary oppositions are not natural or stable, but rather are constructed through language and power. This approach is useful to literary critics in exploring the creation of meaning in literary texts, when ideas are omitted, suppressed, or marginalised (Norris 20).

"Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" is an essay written by Derrida which is particularly significant with regard to his deconstructive thinking. So Derrida suggests in this essay that the concept of structure has always relied on the concept of a centre. The centre is in control of the structure but at the same time not totally part of the structure. This contradiction Derrida challenges and claims the centre is questioned, meaning gets into "play." Play is the free (uncentred) movement of meaning. This idea directly contradicts the structuralism, which is a search of a stable system and a principle of the structure (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 278).



This idea is a direct contradiction with the structuralism which is a search of a stable system and a principle of the structure. Hence, deconstruction is a deconstruction from fixed structure to free play of meaning. According to the ideas of Christopher Norris and Jacques Derrida:

No centre stands alone in truth,
No margin lives outside the frame;
Oppositions lose their fixed control,
And meaning moves through play and change.

(Christopher Norris, 20)

Derrida's deconstruction offers a strong way of reading literature. A deconstructive reading isn't looking for a last message or authorial intention. Rather it explores the self-contradictory nature of a text, the change of meaning within it and the way language in a text induces uncertainty. Deconstruction focuses on the ambiguity, gaps, repetitions, contradiction within the text. It demonstrates the presence of multiple layers of meaning in a literary work, which can present a seemingly separate and opposing or marginalising meaning on the surface but at a deeper level can also affirm or undermine that meaning. In this way, several interpretations are given importance and it is rejected to believe that there is one fixed centre for a text. Hence, literary criticism becomes deconstructive, in the sense that it is open, complex and philosophical (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 144).

The importance of Derrida's thought is that it alters the way language and truth relate to one another. Language always produces difference, delay and uncertainty, as Derrida argues and traditional criticism frequently presupposes that language conveys a fixed meaning. This is not to say that meaning is not possible but rather that meaning is never certain. Each interpretation can be subject to additional interpretation. It is, therefore, a teaching of deconstruction that texts should be read carefully, critically and patiently. It questions the reader on the content of a text and on the content that is not in the text, not presented or not controlled. Derrida's deconstructive thinking is useful in this way for the understanding of literature, philosophy, culture and power. To conclude, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive thinking is a huge challenge to the structuralism and the conventional understanding of meaning. Saussure and structuralism said that language is a system of signs, but Derrida demonstrated that this system is not stable and is open-ended. It is in his ideas on *différance*, trace, supplement, logocentrism and binary opposition that he demonstrates that meaning is always moving and relies on the absence as much as presence (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 280). Language and meaning are not completely negated by Derrida, but rather he demonstrates that meaning is complex, layered and never fully complete. Hence, deconstruction does not involve destruction, but is a profound and critical technique which allows the text to be read in a variety of ways and enables the instability of the text to be brought to the fore as the instability of language. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida:

A text has no final centre,
Its meanings shift, divide and grow;



Through gaps, traces and contradictions,
Deconstruction lets hidden meanings show.
(Jacques Derrida, 280)

Structuralism versus Deconstruction

Structuralism and deconstruction are two aspects of language, literature and meaning. Structuralism advocates that meaning is created through an organized structure. The notion of structuralist thinking is that there is an underlying order in a literary text, language system or cultural practice that facilitates the understanding of the meaning of the text. Structuralism presupposes that such codes, patterns, symbols and signs exist within any text and that they operate in a systematic way. Meaning is not arbitrary then, but is determined by the internal organization of the text. The meaning of a novel, for instance, can be found in plot, characters, themes, symbols and binary oppositions like good/evil, male/female, nature/culture or centre/margin. Structuralist critics attempt to discover these fixed patterns and provide an analysis of the way they shape the text. It is a method that is very much inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who claimed that language is a system of signs and that each sign becomes significant through its relationship with other sign in the system (Saussure 67).

Deconstruction, however, challenges this conviction in a fixed structure. According to Jacques Derrida, language is unstable and there is no final or complete meaning that can be produced by any structure. Derrida defines the fixed centre as a centrality that has always been necessary to Western thought in his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." This centre is thought to have control over the structure and provides it with order, truth and stability. But Derrida demonstrates that the centre is not solid. Now that the centre is challenged, freedom of meaning begins (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 278). This movement is called the "free play of meaning." Free play is where words, signs and interpretations are not confined to a single interpretation. They keep on looking at other signs and creating their meaning. Deconstruction refuses the notion of a final, single centre or final reading of a text. It reveals, on the contrary, that a text has places that are missing, inconsistencies and that it has several possible interpretations. According to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida:

Structure seeks order in signs,
Where meaning grows through relation;
But Derrida breaks the fixed centre,
And opens the text to interpretation.
(Ferdinand de Saussure, 67)

There is thus a huge difference between a fixed structure and a free play of meaning: a difference between structuralism and deconstruction. Structuralism looks for order, system and unity in a text. It holds that there is a structure in a text through which the meaning can be understood. Deconstruction is in agreement with the presence of structures but it contends that there are no complete or fully stable structures. On the surface, a text seems to be well organized, but on a



deeper level there are contradictions and tensions in the text. For instance, the words used in a text can evoke multiple meanings and the content can be connected to one idea, but the words can also present meanings that are opposite. Deconstruction examines these internal contradictions and reveals that meaning is not regulated by a single structure. Essentially structuralism attempts to fix meaning with structure, whereas deconstruction allows meaning to move, be unstable and plural (Saussure 67).

The second important difference is between the stability of the sign and the instability of the sign. The sign is a construct in the structuralism theory that describes how signs are understood with regard to Saussure's signifier and signified. The signifier is the sound or writing of the word and the signified is the concept related to the word. According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, but in a language system it would be meaningful because of the social convention. The structuralists would view signs as stable enough to produce meaning in a specific system. Each word is not meaningful by itself, it is meaningful in relation to other words. The meaning of the word, for instance, day, is only meaningful in relation to night. In this regard, structuralism is the theory that claims that the meaning of signs is organized by the structure of language (Saussure 70).

Derrida calls this belief in the stability of the sign into question, a belief that is considered structuralist. The relation between signifier and signified is never determinate, he says. A sign isn't strictly connected to one end result; it is connected to another sign, another sign connected to another sign and so on. Meaning is unstable when it is in this perpetual state of motion. Derrida refers to this process as *différance*. The term *différance* refers to both difference and deferral. But difference is also a way to generate meaning and meaning is always deferred or postponed. The meaning of a word is dependent on other words, contexts and interpretations when a reader endeavors to interpret a word (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 5). Thus, there is no place where meaning exists without it there also. It is continually in motion and incomplete. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida:

A sign never ends in one fixed sense,
It moves through difference and delay;
Meaning depends on other signs,
And remains incomplete in endless play.

(Jacques Derrida, 5)

The liminality of the sign lies at the heart of deconstruction. What Derrida is saying is not that signs don't have meaning, but rather that signs do not have one final meaning, one final meaning that is permanent or absolute. Each sign is imbued with the signatures of other signs. For instance, meaning of "presence" is determined by "absence," and meaning of "speech" is determined by its difference from "writing." That is, each sign carries in itself the imprint of what it is not. Thus, deconstruction demonstrates the non-purity of meaning, as well as the lack of self-containment of meaning. Absence, difference and context always have an effect on it. This concept is a direct



challenge to structuralism which attempts to discern meaning by taking a look at a stable system of signs, but deconstruction shows how open the system is to change and uncertainty (Culler, On Deconstruction 88).

This difference is crucial in literary analysis. A structuralist approach might seek to identify a consistent form in a poem, novel or drama. It might detect symbols, oppositions and narrative structures that make sense. Now, however, with a deconstructive reading, it is the instability of these same symbols and oppositions that is investigated. It examines the places where the text speaks not only inconsistently with itself, but also with conflict between meanings. If reason is presented as superior to emotion in a text, for instance, a deconstructive reading might reveal how reason depends on the presence of emotion in the text. Deconstruction reveals the fragility of predetermined conclusions and demonstrates that each text has multiple readings. According to Jonathan Culler's explanation of Derrida's deconstruction:

No sign holds meaning by itself,
It lives through absence and relation;
Deconstruction reads hidden conflicts,
And opens the text to many interpretations.

(Jonathan Culler, 88)

So, basically, the difference between structuralism and deconstruction is where they focus on structure and sign. Deconstruction is a belief in the free play of meaning, the instability and openness to interpretation, while structuralism holds the belief in the fixed structure, order and systematic meaning. While structuralism attempts to discover the rules that allow for the possibility of meaning, deconstruction asks whether these rules can ever be the means by which meaning is completely controlled. While structuralism understands language in terms of a system of signs that can be analysed scientifically, deconstruction views language as a space of movable signs in which meaning is always deferred and never definitive. Thus, the transition from structuralism towards deconstruction is a paradigm change from stability to instability, from order to play, from fixed meaning to multiple meanings (Norris 20).

Importance in Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is an analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary works in a systematic way. It enables readers to interpret the meaning of a poem, a novel, a drama or a prose writing, created by the language, structure, symbols, themes and cultural codes. Both the structuralist and deconstruction approaches to literary criticism are important because both approaches moved away from the focus on the biography and historical context of the author to the language and inner workings of the text. The traditional criticism schools would ask the question, "what did the author mean?" while the modern critical approaches would ask, "how does the text mean?" In this context, there are two significant theories for the reading of a literary work, namely structuralism and deconstruction. Structuralism looks for the "order" or "pattern" or "system" within a text and deconstruction asks what is stable and asks how and why meaning is not finalized. What matters



with structuralism and deconstruction is the fact that they place emphasis on language. Both theories agree that literature consists of language and that meaning is created through signs, relations and differences. But there are some differences in the way they do it. In the view of structuralism, a literary piece has an underlying structure that formulates its significance. It examines patterns, binary oppositions, symbols, narrative techniques and cultural codes. Deconstruction, however, says that such structures are not entirely stable. It demonstrates that contradiction, gaps and multiple meanings can be found in a text. Hence, these approaches are crucial since they make literary criticism more substantive, analytical and theoretical. They assist readers not only to grasp the meaning of a text, but to comprehend how meaning is produced, disrupted and re-negotiated (Barry 42). According to the ideas of Peter Barry:

Literature is read through signs and form,
Where language shapes each hidden theme;
Structure seeks order within the text,
While deconstruction questions the dream.

(Peter Barry, 42)

- **Structuralist Reading of Literary Texts**

Structuralist approach to a literary text assumes that a literary work is not a free-flowing outpouring of emotion, but a system of signs and structures. A structuralist critic examines the internal organization of a text and attempts to uncover the rules underlying the production of meaning. Here, the literary text is read as a system in which all components are used to serve a purpose. Characters, events, symbols, images and themes or narrative patterns are not studied in isolation, but in relation to each other. For example, the meaning of a character is not created only by his or her actions, but also by the character's relation with other characters, conflicts and themes in the text. In this way, structuralist criticism gives importance to structure, order and relation (Hawkes 19).

The theory of language of Ferdinand de Saussure has a significant impact on structuralist reading. Language is a system of signs and each sign has a signifier and a signified, Saussure said. The signifier is the sound or the written word; the signified is the concept related to the word. But the meaning that is created in a word is something that is not natural, not fixed, but is created by difference in the language system, Saussure said. A word becomes meaningful due to its difference from other words. This concept is used by structuralist critics when they are discussing literature and make the argument that meaning is also constructed in relation, difference and structure in literature. For instance, the concept of "hero" is defined in opposition to "villain" and "good" to "evil" (Saussure 67).

One of the important aspects of structuralist reading is the analysis of binary oppositions. Binary oppositions are pairs of opposite ideas such as good/evil, male/female, nature/culture, light/dark, speech/silence, centre/margin and life/death. According to the structuralists, these oppositions are means of structuring meaning in literary texts. Oppositions are the foundation of many poems,



novels and dramas. For instance, a novel could develop tension between tradition and modernity, or a drama could involve tension between fate and free will. A structuralist critic analyzes how these contrasts are employed in the text and how they influence the character, theme and events of the text. It is a way in which the reader can better understand the underlying structure of the literary piece (Eagleton 86).

Narrative structure is also a part of structuralist reading. It explores the structure of the story, the linking of events, how conflict is developed and how the text is resolved. The structuralists hold that, although the surface features of stories may vary, their underlying meaning or structure may be the same. For instance, there are all kinds of myths, folktales and novels that have a pattern like journey, struggle, loss, transformation and return. This method is the most systematic way of literary criticism, finding similar forms and patterns in literary works. It also shows that literature is connected with larger cultural systems. Structuralist reading, therefore, enables readers to comprehend the literature as a system of signs, codes and meanings. Importance of literary criticism: structuralist reading in literary criticism is important as it eliminates the personal opinion and makes literary criticism more analytical. It is not just a matter of feeling or moralizing. Rather, it focuses on the internal organization of the text and on elucidating the process of meaning construction (Abrams and Harpham 97). It helps readers consider language, symbols, oppositions, narrative patterns and codes with careful attention. But structuralism is not without its flaws, as it can sometimes be assumed that meaning can be grasped in terms of stable structures. Later, this assumption is challenged by deconstruction, which suggests that meaning is not fully “final” or “stable.” According to the ideas of Terence Hawkes:

A text is shaped by signs and codes,
Where parts create meaning through relation;
Oppositions guide its hidden form,
And structure leads interpretation.
(Terence Hawkes, 19)

- **Deconstructive Reading of Literary Texts**

Deconstructive reading of literary texts is an important method of Jacques Derrida. It challenges the notion of a final or fixed meaning of a text. Deconstruction is not destruction of a text, but rather a careful and deep reading of a text that will reveal contradictions, gaps and uncertainties within the text. A deconstructive critic does more than ask, what does this text mean? Rather the critic will focus on the ways in which the text generates meaning and on the ways in which the text also disrupts or undermines meaning. The practice of this will give students the idea that a literary text may have more to say than it seems to on the surface. It can express one thing openly, but it can also do the opposite or conflicting thing with its language.

Derrida's deconstruction is founded on the concept of language instability. Derrida claims that words do not have all the meanings themselves. Each word points to other words, each of which points to more words. So, meaning is always deferred and never completed. The process of



difference and deferral, Derrida explains, is referred to as *différance*. The principle of meaning through difference, but at the same time, always deferred, as there is no final meaning to a sign. This concept is opposed to structuralism, which sees signs as part of a system that can be understood within it and deconstruction is a view that structuralism does not share, as it suggests that a particular system is open to instability and multiple interpretations (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 5).

Deconstructive reading focuses on the contradiction and tension in a piece of literature. A close reading can reveal that a text questions the argument it develops, even though it seems to present a clear argument. For instance, a text which says that reason should be preferred to emotion may be deconstructed to reveal that emotion is the basis for reason. Wherever speech is important in a text, deconstruction can reveal the need for silence for meaning. Deconstruction finds the meaning of a text not to be determined by one central idea. There is ambiguity and contradiction in the language, allowing the text to be interpreted in multiple ways. Another important element of deconstructive reading is questioning of the binary oppositions. Old ideas generally tend to privilege one form over another, for example speech over writing, absence over presence, male over female, reason over emotion, centre over margin. According to Derrida, these oppositions are not natural and constant. The meaning of the superior term is dependent on that of the inferior term. Thus, ideas of "presence" need "absence" and "centre" needs "margin". A deconstructive critic examines the ways in which these "oppositions" work in a text and how they can become unstable (Saussure 70). It is useful in literary criticism to find what is not being said here and there and to uncover the hidden power structures and suppressed meanings and marginalised voices. According to the ideas of Jacques Derrida:

A text speaks beyond its surface,
Through gaps, tensions and delay;
No meaning rests in final form,
It breaks, returns and moves away.

(Jacques Derrida, 5)

Deconstructive reading is essential in that it allows for multiple meanings of the text. It doesn't take the skin deep meaning as final. Rather, it looks at gaps, silences, irony, ambiguity, repetition and contradiction. It demonstrates that literature consists not of a single definite meaning but an open field of interpretation. Language is not static and a poem, novel or drama can have several meanings for its several readers. This is not to say that any interpretation is okay, it is not. Deconstruction is an analysis that works with the words and tensions of the text. A systematic approach to reading that demonstrates the complexity, instability and layers of meaning. Finally, it is clear that both structuralist and deconstructive readings have their own roles in literary criticism, albeit in different ways. Structuralist reading is based on the order, pattern and structure that creates meaning in literature. Questions for deconstruction that order and demonstrate instability of meaning, multiplicity and open-endedness. The structuralism allows the reader to



understand the system of signs within a text and the deconstruction assists the reader in comprehending the contradictions and uncertainties within that system. These methods can combine to form a more forceful literary criticism, as they demonstrate that literature is not a monolithic entity of language and structure, but is complex and in need of interpretation (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* 113).

Conclusion

To sum up, the “Deconstruction versus Structuralism: From Ferdinand de Saussure to Derrida” study illustrates a significant shift in theory in modern literary criticism. In structuralism, structure, order, signs and relations are important. It is an explanation of the non-natural and non-isolated nature of meaning, created within the internal system of language and literature. Saussure's theory of language as a system of signs was developed for the purpose of helping critics to grasp how meaning is created in literary texts through patterns, binary oppositions, symbols and narrative structures, which became the basis of structuralist criticism. On the other hand, Derrida's deconstruction questions the stability of these structures. As Derrida says, meaning is never "finished" because each sign alludes to another sign and this is a constant deferral and difference. Deconstruction does not deny the existence of meaning but it suggests that meaning is multiple, complex, unstable and open to a number of interpretations. Structuralism and deconstruction are not mutually exclusive, however, but rather should be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Structuralism offers a methodical means of reading texts and deconstruction brings them to a close. They make literary criticism deeper and more analytical and demonstrate that literature is not something that is static and always knowable, but an active realm of language, structure, contradiction and interpretation.

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