Chapter 40  
Deconstruction, Feminism and Discourse Theory

Key Words:

Deconstruction, structutstructuralism, différance, conflictual nature of language, layers of meaning, extra textuality, surface meaning, interminable analysis, feminism, sexism, sexist oppression, gender justice, gender equality, discourse, social constructivism, discursive formation, power, knowledge, subject,

Introduction

Deconstruction has originated in France in the late 1960s, when structuralism and existentialism were still intellectually active. In a fundamental sense, deconstruction is associated with certain techniques for reading texts developed by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and some other thinkers. Another important thinker who was associated with deconstruction is Foucault, though many will not consider him as a deconstructionist in the strict sense of the term, as he was more than that. There is a wide consensus on the fact that Jacques Derrida is the chief proponent of deconstruction.

From its very outset, deconstruction challenges some fundamental assumptions of the Western metaphysical tradition. It can also be seen as a response and reaction against some important 20th century philosophical movements like the phenomenology of Husserl, structuralism of Saussure and psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. Derrida himself affirms that deconstruction is not a method, but an activity of reading as it refers to certain new strategies for interpreting literary texts. It is also conceived as a way of criticizing political institutions.

While we discussed Heidegger’s philosophy earlier, we have discussed the notion of the “destruction” of the metaphysical tradition. The idea of deconstruction owes immensely to this Heideggerian notion, though it is also substantially different from the former. While Heidegger’s destruction has a definite objective—to arrive at the primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—deconstruction is envisaged as an ongoing process, which has no such definite end point, where things are neither analyzed completely nor the final meanings are reached. Again, as Barbara Johnson observes:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with "destruction", however. 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." ...
If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself. [The Critical Difference]

The approach of deconstruction towards the notion of meaning is also relevant in this context. Deconstruction asserts that, texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices do not have unambiguously definite meanings, as they do not have very strict and rigid boundaries. To deconstruct, as Nancy Holland observes, “....is to take a text apart along the structural “fault lines” created by the ambiguities inherent in one or more of its key concepts or themes in order to reveal the equivocations or contradictions that make the text possible. [Holland] Before we examine these more vital features of deconstruction, let us examine the historical context that witnessed its emergence.

As mentioned above, the intellectual environment of post World War II Europe was dominated by various philosophical approaches like structuralism, phenomenology, existentialism and psychoanalysis. Structuralism was the leading cultural theory, which exerted significant influence on other social sciences. Unlike existentialism, which focuses the individual, structuralism emphasizes on the structured system and considers the latter as the locus of the real and the meaningful. As Cantor observes, this transference of meaning and authenticity from the individual to the system makes structuralism a theory that rebels against the anthropomorphism of existentialism. By giving priority to universal structures that subsume both the individual and the society, it envisages to transcend the conflict between them [Cantor, p.346] Deconstruction agrees with structuralism on this aspect. It also shares some of the political concerns of structuralism. For these reasons, deconstruction owes a lot to structuralism.

Nevertheless, there are important differences. Deconstruction is critical about the idealistic overtone of structuralism, which subscribes to the notion of common universal structures. In their search for deep universal structures, the structuralists fail to see the possibilities of critiquing and transforming the society and tend to consider the world as it is given as legitimate. Deconstruction is therefore, more radical in its approach than structuralism. Cantor adds that
deconstruction is a radical variant of structuralism: a culturally and, to some extent, politically left-wing offshoot of structuralism. [p.357]

**Key Themes in Derrida’s Theory**
Derrida advances certain very important concepts while elucidating his theoretical position. Some of them are listed below.

- There is nothing outside or beyond the text.
- The notion of *différance*
- Every text deconstructs itself.
- The essential oppositional and conflictual nature of language.
- There is not one canonical signification to a text: there are several simultaneous layers of meaning.
- The nature of language is such that it conceals meaning.
- There are infinite meanings in the text.
- The necessity of an interminable analysis

One primary feature of deconstruction is to reject the idea of extra textuality; the notion that meaning or significance lies in some definite platform outside the text. It also asserts that one always access the text from a context. But this context nevertheless does not suggest any fixed boundary for the text. The text, asserts Derrida, is not a finished corpus of writing. He conceives the text as a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. (Derrida, Living on: Border Lines, pp.83-84).

The notion of *différance* does not mean just “difference”, but it indicates a combination of differences. It also indicates how the structure of the text is constituted. It suggests that the text possesses intrinsic oppositions within itself. There are different elements in any text, which prevent it from forming a unitary significance or meaning. These elements are not just different from each other but are in perpetual conflict. Such oppositions or internal conflicts are at work in each signifying text, as such conflicts or oppositions constitute the very nature of language. With these conflicts constantly at work, each text undergoes a constant deconstruction.

Deconstruction thus overthrows many traditional conceptions about textual meaning. The internal conflicts embedded in language and the text
ultimately creates ruptures in the surface meaning of the text, which leads to its immanent disintegration. Derrida argues that, due to this, the text breaks down into several layers of meaning, where none can claim prominence. Hence, the text has no single meaning. Instead, it has infinite meanings or layers of meaning. One has to be sensitive to this fact about the not apparent and unconscious multiplicity of meanings that lie behind the immediate and apparent surface.

Hence, along with the immediate message a text gives out on its surface, it also projects conflicts, which bring out the immanent gaps in the text. Such conflicts eventually unsettle any attempt to fix textual meaning to any single point. Derrida affirms that, one should focus these gaps, which according to him can be found in the margins of the text. He says that in reading he deconcentrates on those points that appear to be the most important, central or crucial and instead focus the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases. (Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p.44-45) there is a constant focus on what is marginal and peripheral.

He also stresses on the idea of interminable analysis. The deconstructionist criticism is an endless process, which never reaches any final goal. He conceives the perpetual overturning of meaning as the very nature of language. Since it is the nature of language, the text deconstructs itself to the reader. One important aspect of deconstruction is the fact that it is not a method that aims at finding the meaning of the text in the sense in which phenomenological analysis engages itself with things. It stresses on the infinite possibilities of reading the text and opposes any fixation of meaning. Deconstruction is one of the prominent postmodern approaches, which opposes the sanctity of metanarratives.

**Feminism**

Feminism can be understood as a form of resistance against all forms of patriarchal domination in all aspects of life. In other words, it aims at ending different forms of sexist oppression. It has very strong social and political implications, as it raises very important questions concerning equality and justice in human societies, most of which traditionally follow the patriarchal social order.

Historically, most human societies considered women as subordinate to men. And many religious traditions have provided theological justifications to this subordination and discrimination. Philosophical traditions were also directly or
indirectly promoting male domination. Many thinkers like Aristotle considered women as inferior to men. Feminism as an intellectual, ideological and political movement was aware of this historical context and tries to posit counterarguments by proposing theoretical frameworks that support gender justice and equality.

Historically, feminism is associated with several movements of political activism originated in different parts of the world that ultimately tried to gain equality and justice for women. The woman suffrage movements in Europe and the US during the late 19th and early 20th centuries are examples. The Women's movement of the 1960s explicitly demanded equal legal rights and political participation. In this sense, feminism defines itself positively as a movement that aims at establishing more justice and equality in human societies, which are constitutive of several forms of hierarchies. Hence, different forms of feminisms are not anti-male or mere political initiatives that seek gender equality. But feminists consider the question of gender equality as primary and envisage to create gender justice and ensure equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Bell Hook states that feminists are made, not born.

This insight is important to understand feminism. In other words, it tells us how our societies are patriarchal and how both men and women contribute to the sustenance of the status co. Hence feminism cannot be anti-male, as it is not men alone who are responsible for the male-dominant and patriarchal social system. It is the way our societies are economically, politically and culturally formed and organized. As Bell Hooks observes, females were as socialized to believe sexist thinking and values as males: hence before women could change patriarchy they have to change themselves. Hence, as Bill Hook observes, to end patriarchy we need to realize that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism. Feminism therefore, has to begin with women changing themselves and not just expecting men to change their attitudes.

Though women are oppressed in human societies since time immemorial, feminism as an active ideology has originated only in recent times. Many historical and political factors are responsible for this. With the enlightenment, Europe had witnessed the emergence of liberalism, which emphasized concepts like equality, personal autonomy, rights of individuals etc. 20th century had witnessed the spread and popularity of democratic institutions and governments all over the world. All such developments prompted the development of various rights groups that argues for
justice in terms of the idea of race and gender equality. During their early phase, many feminist groups were visibly anti-men. But they soon overcame this phase and developed their respective ideologies and many of them do not consider gender equality as a matter of concern for women alone. They treat it as problem facing humanity in general.

But there are several complex challenges feminist movements face in today’s world. For instance, class differences and race discriminations add new dimensions to the fundamental issue of gender discrimination and gender justice. There are differences among women in terms of economic status, education, and race etc., where all these factors determine the power relationships that permeate in the society. Again there are feminists who advocate reforms and argue for gender equality, while some others aggressively propagate social transformation through revolutionary measures. Often many of these initiatives remain within the elite classes. As Bell Hooks observes, evolutionary feminist theory was not made available to the public, as it remained as a privileged discourse available to those among us who are highly literate, well-educated, and usually materially privileged. [Hooks, p.5]

Again, there are different types of feminisms; liberal, radical, diversity, socialist, Marxist, postmodern, lesbian, eco-feminists and existentialists are a few. The liberal tradition plays a vital role in the creation of the feminist sensibilities, as they advocate values like equality and autonomy, which ultimately argue for universal human rights. The socialist feminists believe that gender and sexuality are social constructs and they argue for their transformation. While the Marxist feminists consider capitalism as the major factor in women’s oppression, the lesbian feminists challenge the conception of normalcy centering around the idea of heterosexuality. The diversity feminists believe that the problems women face are different in different cultures and times and the existentialists argue that the construction of women as man’s other leads to inauthentic existence. The radical feminists maintain that women's oppression can be considered as the conceptual model for understanding all other forms of oppression and the eco-feminists adopt more a spiritual approach.

In spite of these different approaches and theoretical frameworks, almost all groups of feminists oppose oppression, exploitation and discrimination on the basis of gender. They are all concerned about the injustice fostered by a patriarchal/hierarchical society and suggest gender equality and gender justice as
means to overcome the various problems facing, not only women but also the society in general.

**Discourse Theory**

Jørgensen & Phillips state that a discourse can be understood as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world or an aspect of the world. [Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method, p. 1] they treat discourse analysis, as just one among several social constructionist approaches—a range of new theories about culture and society—but it is one of the most widely used approaches within social constructionism. (p.4) From the outset, the notion of discourse is based on the assumption that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life. Accordingly we have “medical discourse” or “political discourse”, representing different domains. Discourse analysis is the analysis of these patterns. [Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method, p. 1]

While discussing the fundamental aspects of various social constructivists, Vivien Burr formulates four premises shared by all social constructionist approaches. [pp. 2-5, referred by Jørgensen & Phillips, p. 5 ] Burr states that all of them adopt a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge. Secondly, that all emphasize on historical and cultural specificity. Their approach establishes a link between knowledge and social processes and finally they all stress on the link between knowledge and social action. The social constructionists therefore, deny the idea of a reality out there and consider that the world is accessed by us only through our categories. They further acknowledge that, since we are historically and culturally situated, our knowledge about the world is also determined by this situatedness. They affirm that discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world and our ways of understanding the world are created and maintained by social processes. [Burr, p.5]

In a basic sense, discourse theorists understand discourse as something, which is produced by social actors through their practices and are shaped by social structures. Discourses are thus consumed and monitored in this manner. The meaning of objects and actions is determined by historically specific systems of rules. As indicated above, discourse theorists do not conceive any object existing independent of discourses. The condition of the meaning of any object depends on the socially
constructed system of rules. In this sense a discourse represent a system of social relations and practices, which are nevertheless, embedded in various power relations.

As mentioned above, the discourse theorists subscribe to the view that our access to reality is always through language. Here they are in agreement with structuralism and poststructuralism. Things in the world gain meaning only in the context of a discourse. Language thus constitutes the social world, along with social identities and social relations. Therefore, the changes in the discourse are reflected in the social world.

The French philosopher Michele Foucault’s contributions in the development of discourse theory and analysis are seminal. Foucault’s critical approach challenges the conception of truth advocated by traditional philosophy. He views truth as a discursive construction and therefore, conceives that different regimes of knowledge determine what is true and false. According to him a discourse is a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation. He maintains that a discourse is made up of a limited number of statements and is essentially a fragment of history. [The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.117]

Foucault also advocates a theory that links power with knowledge, which explains how power is spread across different social practices, as it does not belong to particular agents such as individuals or the state or groups with particular interests. [p.13] He holds that power constitutes discourse, knowledge, bodies and subjectivities. It is responsible both for creating our social world and for the particular ways in which the world is formed and can be talked about. Therefore, power is both a productive and a constraining force. [p.14]

Another very important aspect of Foucault’s discourse analysis is his theory of subject, as he argues that subjects are created in discourses. He thus questions some fundamental assumptions of the subject the Western tradition advocates. By demonstrating how the subject evolves through discursively formed social practices, Foucault shows how decentered the subject is.

Discourse theory and analysis exert significant influence in the course of the development of many philosophical theories in 20th century. Particularly, Foucault’s influence was phenomenal. This method has remarkable contributions to research in the field of many social science disciplines and it has significantly influenced social and political theory.
Quiz

1. Which of the following statements are true of deconstruction?
   (i) There is a definite goal for analysis  (ii) It has no definite end point  (iii) It aims at arriving at the primordial experiences  (iv) It is an ongoing process  (v) Things are analyzed completely.
     (a) all the above  (b) (ii), (iii) and (iv)  (c) (i), (ii) and (iv)  (d) (ii) and (iv)

2. Which of the following is not a concern of deconstruction?
   (a) An activity of reading  (b) A method of reaching the real meaning of the text  (c) Strategies for interpreting literary texts  (d) A way of criticizing political institutions.

3. Which of the following is done by deconstruction?
   (a) Focus the central meaning of the text  (b) Interminable analysis  (c) Stresses the final reading of the text  (d) To reach a final analysis of the text.

4. Which of the following do the socialist feminists advocate?
   (a) Capitalism is the major factor in women’s oppression  (b) The problems women face are different in different cultures and times  (c) Gender and sexuality are social constructs  (d) The construction of women as man’s other leads to inauthentic existence.

5. Which feminist group believe that women's oppression can be considered as the conceptual model for understanding all other forms of oppression?
   (a) Radical  (b) Eco-feminism  (c) Marxist  (d) Socialist.

6. Which of the following is not a view held by discourse theory?
   (a) Emphasizes historical and cultural specificity  (b) Link between knowledge and social processes  (c) Link between knowledge and social action  (d) Emphasizes universal structures that constitute knowledge.

Answer Key
1. [d]
2. [b]
3. [b]
Assignments

1. Discuss the idea of difference advocated by deconstruction.
2. “Feminists and made and not born”. Explain.
3. Explain the concepts of discourse and discourse analysis.

References

Books


Web Resources

1. Derrida-defining Deconstruction: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgwOjjoYtco
9. The Basics of Socialist Feminism:
14. Kinds of Feminism, available at:
    http://www.uah.edu/woolf/feminism_kinds.htm