

STRUCTURALISM AND JACQUES DERRIDA

Dr. Devarinti Sudhakar, Asst Professor of English, SGRCM Govt Commerce and Management College, Ballari, Karnataka-583102

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Criticism is as old as Aristotle and Plato. Ancient Sanskrit literature has also produced enough criticism. We have the tendency to divide the history of criticism into three periods – the ancient (classical), the late medieval (Romantic) and the modern (modernist, formal, structuralist etc.). The ancient criticism is text-based and it is objective; the Romantic criticism is author-based and it is subjective; and the modern criticism is reader-based and it is varied, subsuming such schools like modernist (formalistic), structuralist and subaltern trends.

Structuralism is in opposition to mimetic, and expressive criticism, and it does bother about literature as a mode of communication. It is different from the traditional humanist criticism. M. H. Abrams provides the following observations: “Almost all literary theorists beginning with Aristotle have emphasized the importance of structure, conceived in diverse ways, in analyzing a work of literature.” (Abrams 381) "Structuralist criticism," "however, now designates the practice of critics who analyze literature on the explicit model of structuralist linguistics. The class includes a number of Russian formalists, especially Roman Jakobson, but consists most prominently of a group of writers, with their headquarters in Paris, who applied to literature the concepts and analytic distinctions developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1915). This mode of criticism is part of a larger movement, French structuralism, inaugurated in the 1950s by the cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who analyzed, on the model of Saussure's linguistics, such cultural phenomena as mythology, kinship relations, and modes of preparing food.

We need not think that structuralism covers only culture and literature. It cuts across the humanities (including arts) and social sciences, providing an objective account of all social and cultural practices. It analyses mythical narratives, literary texts, advertisements, fashions in clothes and patterns of social decorum. Structuralism views these practices as combinations of signs that have a set significance for the members of a particular culture. The elementary cultural phenomena are relational (not absolute) – the identity is given them by their relationships of differences from the binary oppositions to, other elements with that system. “This system,” as Jonathan Culler in his *Structuralist Poetics* tells, “of internal relationships and of codes that determine significant combinations, has been mastered by each person competent within a given culture though the person is unaware of it.” (Culler 121) Here our interest is in the language (but not in the matter).

Structuralism is in opposition to mimetic, and expressive criticism, and it does bother about literature as a mode of communication. It is different from the traditional humanist criticism. In the 1960s, structuralist criticism ceded its central position to deconstruction. This was a shift. Both Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes appropriated structuralism thus.

Structuralist premises and procedures, however, continue to be deployed in a number of current enterprises, and especially in the semiotic analysis of cultural phenomena, in stylistics, and in the investigation of the formal structures that, in their combinations and variations, constitute the plots in novels.

By the late 1960s, many of structuralism's basic tenets came under attack from a new wave of

predominantly French intellectuals/philosophers such as historian Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and literary critic Roland Barthes. Though elements of their work necessarily relate to structuralism and are informed by it, these theorists eventually came to be referred to as post-structuralists. Many proponents of structuralism, such as Lacan, continue to influence continental philosophy and many of the fundamental assumptions of some of structuralism's post-structuralist critics are a continuation of structuralist thinking.

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Jacques Derrida (1930 -) pioneered the concept of deconstruction. Born in Algeria to French-speaking Jewish parents, Derrida began life in an environment that was both multilingual and culturally complex. He explores the relationship between life and writings. He studied at Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1956. He studied at Harvard, USA and married. After the Algerian war, his family moved to Nice in France. He taught at Ecole. In 1966, along with a number of other French intellectuals—notably Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Georges Poulet, and Lucien Goldmann—he spoke at a landmark conference, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," at Johns Hopkins University. That conference helped shape how structuralism and poststructuralism began to influence literary studies in America. Derrida's own talk, an extension but also a critique of structuralism titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," was fundamental in articulating what was later seen as the break between the two schools. Derrida published *Speech and Phenomena* (a critique of Husserl's concept of the sign), *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Differences*, *Dissemination* and *Margins of Philosophy*. In 1975 Derrida was invited to teach a few weeks a year at Yale University, where he was soon considered a member of the so-called Yale School (along with Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom). It is said: "Derrida is famous for producing such critical readings, which have come to be called "deconstructions." (Norton 1817)

In order to see a relationship in a particular language between patterns one commands and patterns one does not command, Derrida has to work within the space between the signified (what is meant) and the signifier (the vehicle for conveying that meaning). The noncoincidence of the two sides of the sign can never be overcome: indeed, we detect a signified when a signifier does not quite coincide with it. The signifier, for Derrida, thus functions as a 'trace' that gives the impression that a signified was prior to it, even though the only evidence for that signified is the trace itself.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure, who split the sign into signifier and signified, revolutionized the understanding of language by seeing it as a system and not as a nomenclature. According to Saussure, language does not arise cumulatively from either things or ideas but instead produces things or ideas out of a structure of differences. "Language is a system of differences," he says in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Derrida takes this concept of difference from Saussure and adds to it the dimension of temporality that Saussure's static structure does not allow. In doing so, Derrida uncovers a significant contradiction in Saussure: although Saussure thinks he can eliminate writing as secondary and keep speech as essential, he treats language as fixed in time and thus as if it were a dead language—a language that we can only know in writing. Derrida makes the counterintuitive claim that writing is more fundamental than speech.

Derrida shows how the effort to fit everything into binary oppositions (speech and writing, good and bad, true and false, philosophy and literature, etc.) depends on a distinguishability that does not exist within the word *pharmakon*. In focusing on words—supplement in Rousseau, *pharmakon* in Plato (even the word deconstruction was originally chosen to translate Heidegger's *Destruktion*, bringing out the sense of "taking apart" rather than "blowing up")—Derrida does not fashion a theoretical metalanguage of concepts designed to support discriminations and generalizations.

Derrida starts his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” with a reference to the rupture (a great event) in our times. The concept of structure (form) is as old as Plato's episteme (or subject). This structure will have a center, which may (or may not) limit the freeplay of functioning. This is to say the center is within (or outside) the structure. “This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center. From the basis of what we therefore call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, is as readily called the origin as the end.” (Derrida 296)

Derrida observes, “If this is so, the whole history of the concept of structure, before the rupture I spoke of, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names.” (Derrida 297) It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center always designated the constant of a presence—*eidōs*, *arche*, *tolas*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. This is how everything becomes discourse when everything becomes a system. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*. Where and how does this decentering, this notion of the structurality of structure, occur? It would be somewhat naive to refer to an event, a doctrine or an author in order to designate this occurrence. Derrida quotes three names, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. He adds “I would probably cite the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of being and truth, for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without truth present); the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession; and, more radically, the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of being as presence. But all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a sort of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics.” (Derrida 297)

He adds, “There is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or the interplay of signification has, henceforth, no limit. For the signification “sign” has always been comprehended and determined, in its sense, as sign of, signifier referring to a signified, signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word signifier itself which ought to be abandoned as a metaphysical concept. When Levi-Strauss says in the preface to *The Raw and the Cooked* that he has “sought to transcend the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible by placing himself from the very beginning at the level of signs,” the necessity, the force, and the legitimacy of his act cannot make us forget that the concept of the sign cannot in itself surpass or bypass this opposition between the sensible and the intelligible.” (Derrida 298)

One, the classic way, consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in submitting the sign to thought; the other, the one we are using here against the first one, consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned: first and foremost, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. What is the relevance of this formal schema when we turn to what are called the “human sciences”? One of them perhaps occupies a privileged place—ethnology. One can in fact assume that ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a de-centering had come about: at the moment when European culture—and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts—had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference.

Lewi-Straus applied reconstruction to the human sciences. He begins his analysis with ethnology. Ethnology is a European science. It is a question of a crucial relationship to the language of the human sciences. There is opposition between nature and culture. Nature is in binary opposition to the law, to education, to art, to technology. Lewi Strauss thinks deconstruction can appropriate the binary opposition. He refers to incest-prohibition. He thinks language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique. His next book *The Savage Mind* speaks of bricolage. There is a critique of language in the form of bricolage. Bricolage is a critical language. Then Derrida speaks of myths as universal. He writes, "From the very start, Levi-Strauss recognizes that the Bororo myth which he employs in the book as the "reference-myth" does not merit this name and this treatment. The name is specious and the use of the myth improper. This myth deserves no more than any other its referential privilege." (Derrida 305). There is no unity or absolute source of the myth. Myths are shallow, without facts, and universal. Myths have no center. Lewi-Straus's book *The Raw and the Cooked* speaks of myths as second-order codes. In a way, a structure cannot have a fixed meaning. There will be a continuous de-centering. He writes, "Totalization is therefore defined at one time as useless, at another time as impossible. A structure will have much significance. A signifier will, therefore, have many signifieds. This decentering or lack of totalization will have freeplay. Besides the tension of freeplay with history, there is also the tension of freeplay with presence. Freeplay is the disruption of presence." (Derrida 312). Thus, deconstruction is a form of textual analysis. Both Paul De Man and Harold Bloom have also worked in this field. *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* adds, "Deconstruction is a set of propositions, a number of general principles. It is still an extreme form of immanent critique." (*Penguin Dictionary* 86)

References:

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