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Deconstructive Impact on Postmodern Hermeneutics: An Epistemological Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Hermeneutics is considered as the art and science that attempts to interpret texts or any act of communication. The emergence of postmodernism has reinterpreted all things under the sun, including the interpretation of texts. As a result, this historical foundation of decoding the textual meaning from the author is challenged, his role of bringing a document is degraded and the historical context which caused the composition is dismantled. In the wake of postmodernism, Deconstruction, one of the outcomes of poststructuralism, was brought into the limelight by the great philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose intellectual skills directed him to deconstruct the texts. Deconstruction as a literary theory has plenty of potential benefits in the process of interpretation. As deconstruction enthroned the reader as the sole authority to dictate the meaning, the entire postmodern fragmentary ideology is encapsulated in the deconstructive system of interpretation. This framework has adverse effects on the textual interpretation, especially biblical interpretation. Postmodernism to Deconstruction and vice versa are inseparably intertwined in their intrinsic worth when it comes to the process of interpretation.



Introduction

Deconstruction is said to be one of the methods of criticism which tries to look into the text to understand binary distinctions. As a system of interpretation, it bypasses all traditionally established systems and critiques them in an unprecedented fashion. Among all the poststructuralist theories, deconstruction stands apart to consider the text specifically and also to examine the phonocentric and logocentric biases. In the time when postmodernism dawned and flourished in the twentieth century, deconstruction had an inseparably interlinked relation with it. Ideologically, deconstruction agrees with the postmodern fragmentary meaning. One of the important concepts of Deconstruction is “free play” which has an infinite number of sign-potentials or meaning possibilities that must come under the same scrutiny. The very conflict of communities regarding the meaning of a text can and should drive scholars to a re-examination of that text and thereby closer to its ‘meaning.’ Derrida came out with the displacement of original meaning by the reader’s encounter with the text in the postmodern milieu. This has culminated in reader-response criticism, in which the reader recreates his text, and in deconstruction, in which reader and text are deconstructed in the openness resulting from difference. In this article, an epistemological examination is done to perceive the idea of what extent the Derridean Deconstruction has influenced postmodern hermeneutics.

Deconstruction – A System of Reading

The term deconstruction is derived from the French verb "*deconstuire*," which means, ‘to undo the improvement of’ ‘the development of’, or ‘to take to pieces’. Deconstruction is one of the methods of criticism which tries to read the text from an analytical mode of inquiry. It is primarily applied to the study of literature because it is a literary critical theory that comes under poststructuralism. Deconstructive hermeneutics has played a crucial role in literary studies, wherein texts are examined for their intrinsic contradictions and aporias.¹

As a theory, it bypasses all classical assumptions of the ability of language to represent reality thereby reiterating the idea that a text has no potential identification because words and phrases refer eventually to other words. Based on the nature of the text, a reader is

¹ Kevin J Vanhoozer. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Zondervan, 1998. 131.



expected to eliminate any metaphysical and ethnocentric priorities that cause a text to be documented. This way of reading a text etymologically means “to undo”, which is a virtual synonym for “de-construct”. It does not mean the destruction or demolition of the text but removing the ontological dominations of the text from a critical methodology. This strategy of critical analysis is associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language. As a matter of fact, R. Gnanasekaran notes that “Deconstruction is a system that incorporates all other related necessities of building radially and tenaciously, and or contains both obliteration and improvement in itself giving space for the illumination that there is no destruction without advancement and the other way around.”²

Deconstruction is one of the significant literary criticisms which comes under poststructuralism and diverse disciplines use the term interchangeably to fit into their context. In reality, deconstruction challenged all established norms and guidelines from Plato and redefined the basic beliefs about truth and meaning since René Descartes, the greatest French Philosopher of the seventeenth century. The Cartesian approach placed reason over everything that one sees in this world and subsequently, scholars believed that thinking and acting rationally will ultimately bring solutions to human problems. All constant, universal meaning and understanding changed into dynamic ones when the dawn of poststructuralism emerged in human history. Jacques Derrida played a vital role in bringing the plurality of senses which are equally valid in the interpretation.³ “The poststructuralists argued instead that texts are fluid, dynamic entities that are given new life with repeated readings and through interactions with other texts, thereby providing an ongoing plurality of meanings”.⁴ It would be difficult to exactly find out the meaning of a text by decoding the rules of grammar to get the exact meaning due to diverse reasons. Poststructuralists argued and concluded that “meaning is essentially undecidable, thereby denying the structuralists’ belief in the

² Gnanasekaran. “An Introduction to Derrida, Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism” in *International Journal of English*. Vol. 3(7), pp. 211-214, July 2015.

³ Lorin L Cranford. *Modern New Testament Interpretation in Biblical Hermeneutics Comprehensive Introduction* edited by Bruce Corley, Steve W. Lemke Grant L. Lovejoy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 123.

⁴ Ann B Dobie. *Theory into Practice An Introduction to Literary Criticism* 3rd Ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2002. 158.



possibility of establishing objective knowledge through systematic observation and logical deduction.”⁵ By asserting the multiple meanings to a single text, Derrida moved on to think that meaning is said to be an outgrowth of various signifying systems within the text which may include contradictory meanings.

Deconstruction is a text-based technique that seeks to demonstrate the seemingly neutro-binary equation in certain arguments or statements. There is an agenda applied to these binary terms in traditional opposition, about which there is no peaceful co-existence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other and occupies a commanding position over the other. Ex. Good/bad, male/female, madness/reason, and right/wrong.⁶

In Deconstruction, one looks to the text and specifically to the texts, and carefully reads the arguments to clearly identify the moments when the hierarchy reverses, betrays, or inverts itself. In other words, this thorough identification is done to locate the place where the binary distinction breaks down. The first move of doing Deconstruction is done by isolating that place where the distinction breaks down, trying to dominate the other. It is to expose the arbitrary/constructed nature of that hierarchy and dismantle it, which is said to be the goal of Deconstruction.

Another move in Deconstruction is to locate a moment where the seemingly dependent term turns out to be foundational for the dominant term. Deconstruction destabilizes the oppositional categories, and this brings undecidability into play, then the undecidability exposes the internal chaos of logical reason for telling us to rethink why we privilege one or the others; how we privilege one or the other, or the ways we don't. Derrida plays a lot with these undecidables in various texts. Derrida claims that he is not interested in turning true meaning. But he is interested in the way that these constructs are built and unbuilt. Deconstruction can be one of the powerful methods and ways that incorporate social, cultural, and critical theory in all their variants and also a powerful intellectual agent of complex critical engagement.⁷ If someone considers deconstruction without any reservation, they will end up with an eventually tragic collapse of the textual meaning.

⁵ Dobie. *Theory into Practice An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, 158.

⁶ Grant Osborne. *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press. 1991. 78.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge University Press. 1981. 77.

**Linguistic background of Deconstruction**

Jacques Derrida has developed an approach that takes the most radical task thus far, for he questions the very possibility of philosophical criticism as one can currently define it. Derrida is the product of a direct line of continuity from structuralism to post-structuralism which gradually leads to deconstruction. Each school built upon its strengths and sought to correct the weaknesses of its predecessor. Post-structuralism (Barthes) reacted against the structuralist assumption that the linguistic codes provide a direct line to the meaning of a language or a text, arguing that every language, even the second-order discourse of structuralism, is open to another meta-language behind it. Deconstruction then goes further to challenge the communicative power of language itself. The fragility of textual meaning is shown by Derrida's claim that "there is nothing outside the text."⁸

Deconstruction is neither a method nor a negative critique. In short, "Deconstruction is a method for perusing which uncovers the inconsistencies and mysteries in the consistent structures of philosophical and artistic writings. This method is utilized as a part of the exploration as an apparatus to critically break down the deconstructive procedures that a writer has utilized in some of his works".⁹ It is better understood as a strategy for reading texts under the influence of Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Emmanuel Levinas, and Saussure. In the early years of deconstruction, many of the most important readings were devoted to these thinkers, all of whom, except for Husserl, were treated in Derrida's 1968 lecture "Différance." Derrida justified this cross-fertilization of disparate authors by saying that their names served to define contemporary thought. This practice came to be generalized as intertextuality and came to be further enhanced as Derrida, in each new text, drew heavily on his previous readings. Because Derrida's language is both cumulative and parasitic in the texts that he is reading, attempts to formulate Derridean doctrines are often misleading. Hence it is more appropriate to focus on his strategies.¹⁰

Derrida specifically attacks the concept (from Saussure) of "presence" in spoken language, arguing that "writing" has priority over speech, and that "absence" and "difference"

⁸ G Bennington. *Jacques Derrida*. University of Chicago Press, 1993. 90.

⁹ Gnanasekaran, *An Introduction to Derrida, Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism*. 211.

¹⁰ Andrew Cutrofello "Derrida, Jacques", in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 203.



characterize language. He is especially opposed to “closure,” the search for a central meaning, because, according to him, the text becomes locked up in the single meaning and ceases to exist as text. Moreover, for Derrida, closure is impossible because when we unlock the door to the signs, we find the room empty: there is no central or original meaning. Rather, a text is “open” or free to be reproduced in the reader’s experience.

The Interrelation of Deconstruction and Postmodern Hermeneutics

There is a significant relationship between the influence of deconstruction and postmodern hermeneutics. Deconstruction, primarily developed by Jacques Derrida, challenges traditional assumptions about language, meaning, and interpretation. This has had a profound impact on the development of postmodern hermeneutics, which similarly questions universal truths, objective interpretations, and fixed meanings in favour of multiplicity, contextuality, and ambiguity. The notion of a consistent, cohesive meaning within texts is rejected by both postmodern hermeneutics and deconstruction¹¹. In line with the postmodern hermeneutical perspective, that interpretation is subjective and impacted by cultural, historical, and individual contexts, deconstruction reveals the brittleness of language and meaning.

Deconstruction's emphasis on the text as a site of infinite play of meanings informs postmodern hermeneutics, which sees texts as dynamic fields for interpretation rather than as repositories of immutable truth. This relationship emphasizes a shift from asking “what does the text mean?” to asking “how does the text mean?” A key philosophical influence on postmodern hermeneutics, construction offers the concepts and instruments necessary to question conventional interpretation methods and accept the complexity of textual meaning within a postmodern context.

Deconstruction is inseparably interlinked with postmodern hermeneutics in diverse ways. Postmodernism is a twentieth-century development that was a reaction to the traditional systems of the modern period. During the pre-modern period, human beings were directed and controlled by the traditional systems and the authority of the church. However, during the modern period, the traditional systems were challenged and the authority was shifted to reason and natural science. This individual glorification of man led him to make his

¹¹ A.J Godzieba. “Hermeneutics” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia Second Edition*. London: The Catholic University of America, 2003. 167.



conclusions, including the source of meaning and truth. The above-mentioned thesis and antithesis naturally led to postmodernism, a term generally applied to the changes taking place in the fields of literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and other fields of studies. The postmodern truth of the matter is that reality is not reflected in the understanding of man, but it is fabricated as the human mind attempts to perceive its own specific and personal reality. As a matter of fact, postmodernism emphasizes the universally accepted mandates but only accepts the relative truths and subjective mandates. Following this foundation, subjective interpretations became the hallmarks of postmodernism.¹²

At the very outset, Postmodernism is heavily dependent on the use of language and its meaning. Each language has its unique usage and structure, postmodernism questions the concept of accurate translation from one language to another. It reiterates the idea that the language that appears from a particular moment in history can only be perceived in that context precisely. Secondary interpretations may be taken into account with adequate reservations because the context in which it was originally applied no longer exists. The legitimate postmodern question is there anything objective? For postmodernists, what one generation considered as true has no longer become true today. As a result, they come to a conclusive dictum which says that what is true for me is not necessarily true for you. Emphasizing the question of how one individual unequivocally dictates to another what is true. Based on this conception, the postmodernists reiterate positively or negatively human finitude, sociocultural embeddedness, contextualized reason, metaphysics, and ontologies of all kinds.¹³

In this context, Derridean Deconstruction comes to play a serious role in the practical concept of truth. For postmodernists, truth is reached by the community through free appreciative inquiry and not through any other means. Truth can be discovered from the cultural and historical experience of diverse people groups existing side by side as heterogeneous populations with various customs. Most ordinary people agree on most ordinary things apart from any metaphysics or transcendental principles. Therefore, to make

¹² B.H McLean. *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 52.

¹³ Magnus, Bernd. "Hermeneutics", in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* Ed. II edited by Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 127.



things into their levels of understanding, one needs to deconstruct. Deconstructing various ontological and epistemological priorities into multi-layers so that the reader would perceive the meaning clearly.

Postmodern hermeneutics was heavily influenced by the critical theory called Deconstruction. Even though Deconstruction is an explicit outcome of postmodernism, its tools and technicalities influenced and impacted the way one should look at the text. The very outlook with which an interpreter grasps the textual meaning is regulated, redirected, and challenged. Postmodern hermeneutics was seemingly influenced by its apparatus, which has redirected the readers from understanding the intentionality of the author.¹⁴

One of the linguists, Bertens, encapsulates the entire Derridean argument in the following way. For Jacques Derrida is concerned, the language is intrinsically and undoubtedly unreliable. Language functions are based on differentiation; however, the differences in words are enabled when they refer to other words. The words are confined to the particular linguistic system and subsequently never relate to the real world. He further explores the idea of Derrida that there is no single word that exists with a fixed meaning. All words over the passage of time are building more and more words around them. Ultimately, they will become a cluster of words for a particular sense. The shape of the language produces the reality. If anyone wants to get the real meaning, he/she has to work with differences. One of the most important concepts of Deconstruction is that words are never stable and have fixed meanings over time. In the passage of time, the meanings of words are to some extent polluted by colliding with other words and therefore they are subject to change.¹⁵

Derrida seriously considers the texts and their internal tensions, inconsistencies, and multi-faceted complexities. “Derrida is thereby able to locate and follow lines of force within the differential play of signifiers of the text to ruptures and gaps that witness to the trauma and undecidability of bringing force to textual experience. His readings resemble a transcendental interrogation of the conditions for the possibilities of discursive practices and textual

¹⁴ Grondin J. *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. j. weinsheimer. New Haven: Conn, 1994. 83.

¹⁵ J.W. Bertens. *Literary Theory: Basics*. London, GBR: Routledge. 2001. 126-127.



productions.”¹⁶ in reality, deconstruction is the exchange of ideas between the reader and the text. In short, what one sees in the text is like a tip of an iceberg. What one sees is only a little and there is a lot underneath the water which needs to be discovered by the skillful interaction of the reader.

Derrida believes that there is no single word taken out of context that can make sense perfectly. He thinks that a word may give the meaning and some extent the intention, denotation, connotation, and Semitic over determinations. However, the adequate meaning is the result of the skilful analysis of the reader.¹⁷ For him, the text without the interpreter is like ink on the paper making no sense to the reader and therefore, context is of no value. Meaning is made in the eyes of readers, processed in the minds, and expressed through their interpretation. In short, the sole maker of meaning is the reader in the deconstruction of Derrida. As far as Derrida is concerned, he categorizes the reader into four major positions, primarily he is a reader, a decipherer, an investigator, and a correct critic. Taking different positions to evaluate the text, the reader enthrones himself to dictate the meaning as the ultimate determiner of meaning. Postmodern hermeneutics has enthroned the reader as the sole authority to determine the meaning of a text. As a matter of fact, there is no fixed or static meaning inherent in a text, but rather multiple meanings, there are no single unique meanings, but fragmentary meanings. Postmodernism, to some extent, not only affects hermeneutics but also affects all the branches of knowledge, which include the tools and techniques with which one tries to retrieve the meaning of a text.

Deconstructive Impact on Biblical Interpretation

Deconstruction involves the idea that texts have no fixed meaning and are open to multiple interpretations due to language's inherent instability. Derrida acknowledges the value of deconstruction in exposing the ways texts can be misused or manipulated to serve power structures. However, Vanhoozer critiques deconstruction for its relativistic tendencies, arguing that it undermines the possibility of any authoritative or meaningful interpretation,

¹⁶ Ajda Guney and Kann Guney. “A Brief Description of Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction and Hermeneutics” in *Social Sciences Western Languages and Literature*. Vol.3, Number 2, 2008. 8.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida. *Of grammatology*. Translated by G.C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Original work published, 1967. 179.



which he sees as problematic for theology and biblical hermeneutics.¹⁸ The traditional understanding of biblical interpretation is that the context of a larger text in which the pieces are placed limits how a language uses its lexical, morphological, and syntactical resources. The unit of thought in a text is taken together to interpret the intentionality of the writer. The biblical interpretative method revolves around parts connected to the full text and the full is very much connected to the parts. It precisely focuses on the structure and function of texts, rather than individual sentences or isolated words.¹⁹

Postmodern hermeneutics contests the notion of a singular, objective reading of a text. It emphasizes the role of the reader, cultural context, and the plurality of meanings. Vanhoozer engages with postmodern hermeneutics by affirming the importance of context and the reader's role in interpretation but critiques its tendency to elevate the reader's perspective above the author's intent. He emphasizes the necessity of a balance between authorial intent, textual content, and reader response, advocating for a "theological hermeneutics" that respects the text as a medium of divine communication.²⁰

Especially in theological contexts, Vanhoozer contends that the author's purpose should be recovered as a guiding principle for interpretation. The author's intention, in his opinion, is essential to comprehending the meaning and purpose of the text. His idea of "Theo-dramatic hermeneutics," in which texts are regarded as a component of a divine play, is developed. According to this method, the interpreter must actively participate in the interpretation of scripture, which is seen as an act of communication from God. According to Vanhoozer, interpretation is more than merely deriving meaning; it also involves reacting to the text in a way that supports its intent within the greater scheme of God's redeeming work.²¹ Therefore, the deconstructive approach does not align with biblical interpretation as they are methodologically falling apart. Elevating the reader in the place of the author can in no way be considered in the biblical interpretation.

¹⁸ Vanhoozer. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 145.

¹⁹ Randall Buth. *Language and Linguistics in Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* edited by Kevin J Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2005. 433.

²⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002. 36.

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. 67.



Conclusion

In conclusion, postmodern hermeneutics has greatly benefited from deconstruction's effect in redefining modern epistemological frameworks. Deconstruction questions conventional ideas of absolute truth and permanent meaning by examining the intrinsic instability of language. This promotes a hermeneutical approach that values ambiguity, plurality, and interpretative fluidity. This investigation shows that postmodern hermeneutics, which is based on deconstructive ideas, reimagines the process of meaning-making as an open-ended, dialogical engagement with texts, while also destabilizing hierarchical binaries. This leads to a critical reassessment of knowledge production and its underlying processes, with epistemological implications that go beyond textual interpretation.

A significant change in the epistemological terrain may be seen in the impact of deconstruction on postmodern hermeneutics. A more flexible and dynamic approach to understanding has been promoted by deconstruction, which questions conventional beliefs about meaning, text, and interpretation. This paradigm is a major influence on postmodern hermeneutics, which welcomes plurality, contingency, and the undecidability of meaning while rejecting monolithic narratives.

Having studied the philosophical systems called Postmodern hermeneutics and Deconstruction, one understands that there is a precise relationship with one another. The underlying relation has reflected the area of hermeneutics heavily. The postmodern features have influenced the post-structural Deconstruction which subsequently influenced postmodern hermeneutics. Derridean deconstructive guidelines of interpretation find their roots in the fragmentary phenomenon of postmodernism. Therefore, the hermeneutician who utilizes the deconstructive principles as a methodology may understand that the postmodern ripples are the foundation on which Derridean deconstruction is built. This epistemological investigation highlights the transformational power of deconstruction in transcending foundationalist certainty and promoting an ongoing examination of how meaning and knowledge are created and comprehended within textual and cultural settings. The deconstructive influence on postmodern hermeneutics has transformed epistemological beliefs on meaning, interpretation, and truth. By challenging traditional hierarchies and embracing the fluidity of language, deconstruction has opened new avenues for



understanding texts and contexts. However, its implications continue to provoke debates, ensuring its relevance in ongoing epistemological and hermeneutical discourses.

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