

**A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE DECONSTRUCTION THEORY**

**BY**

**AYEBANOAH, TIMIBOFA**

**07062918048**

**Ayisat24@gmail.com**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**UNIVERSITY OF UYO**

**Abstract**

This study investigates Deconstruction as a theory. It attempts to examine its significance in literary analysis and criticism. The paper argues and concludes that most classical and ancient works of literature like, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare and *Things Fall Apart*, *No longer At Ease*, *A man of the People* by Chinua Achebe to mention but a few, would have gone into extinction, but for the development of Deconstruction life has returned to them, as it gives scholar an opportunity to explore new interpretations.

## **Introduction**

Deconstruction as a theory emerged in the early 1960s. However, it became a literary sight in the late 1970s. Its major proponent is Jacques Derrida. It is built against the backdrop that, a text has single and stable meaning. The theory attacks the general notion that, the author has an autonomous interpretation, and therefore calls for the death of the writer or his absolute silence, as no text has fixed a meaning. Hence, Deconstructionist believes that meaning is produced by the reader as he/she communicate with the text. In fact, they argue that the writer himself does not understand his artistic frame work as it believed he/she writes under the influence of some super natural beings that, inspires him/her. Thus, cannot offer an interpretation to his work, but the reader and the critic. It implies that every reader or critic arrives at his/her own distinct meaning after relating with a text. This further reveals that; a text has multiples of meaning embedded inside it at its period of composition; which can only be discovered or unveiled by close reading.

According to Paul de Man, an influential deconstructionists, he “insist on the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs coincide with what is signified.” In order words language cannot express reality so

emphases is places on *how* language is used rather than *what* is been said in the text. Deconstructionist insists on how the writer has twisted his diction. They do not consider what he writer has said; this is because to them, what he has said can be changed at any time. It can be decentred because it not transcendental signified.

### **Operational Terms**

Every critical theory has operational terms; that announce itself to readers. Operational terms are words that identify a particular theory and it introduces that approach to readers. They help to amplify the readers' comprehension of the theory. Deconstruction criticism has key terms that; enhance readers understanding which include:

1. Centre –literary text do have fixed position that is; meaning can change with time
2. Transcendental signified – language is arbitrary, therefore a word, concept or idea in literary text does not have an independent or superior meaning that is; it can be altered
3. Flexible – different reader(s) or critics can arrive at different meanings at same time and at different occasion
4. Fixed – interpretation of a literary text is open ended
5. Multiple - literary work has layers of meanings
6. Closure – there is no end to further interpretation of text
7. Decentre – existing meaning or order can shift ground
8. Deconstruct- an idea can be broken down into parts to form a newer version
9. Layers – literary work has divergent meanings
10. Produced – meaning is not found in the text but produced by the reader
11. Undecided ability – no single reader or critic can decide the meaning of a text
12. Fragments - every interpretation is an aspect of the original
13. Composition – literary work is an arbitrary organization of ideas

14. Arbitrary – literary text can be interpreted differently as it words assume new meanings
15. Embed – text are pregnant with varieties of meanings
16. Autonomous – no author has autonomy of meaning even his own text
17. Supplement –Every literary composition is an addition or compliment to previous knowledge
18. Dynamic – language is flexible so literature
19. Transitory – literary meanings do not last forever but subject to changes
20. Illusive – Earlier meanings can be deceptive as literature is sometimes not realistic itself
21. Imposition – no single meaning stands out as it may have been interpreted subjectively
22. Presupposition – there is no assume or already existing meaning in literary text but it is produced in the communication process

### **Relevance of the Theory**

Deconstruction as a theory is relevant to criticism because; it enables us to think critically. According to Lois Tyson, Deconstruction has a good deal to offer us: it can improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies, of which we are unaware because; they are “built into” our language ( cited in NOUN, 210).

Secondly, the theory enables the critic to extract different meaning from texts. It builds in the reader a mindset that what the writer has composed is open to divergent interpretation and it gives the reader an access to empty his heart to bring out something unique.

Accordingly, the theory adds value to literature as it makes every reader an author of his own. This is so because, whatever interpretation given by the reader or critic is a new version of that text; which implies that, the reader or critic has written.

More so, it gives more life to texts that have been over researched on. For instance, the works of Williams Shakespeare and Chinua Achebe would have been considered dead or archaic if not for theories like these that have resurrected them by bringing new interpretation to them daily by scholars.

In the same vein, the theory also kills the subjectivity of the author and sees the work of literature as purely objective which gives room for creativity.

Finally, it encourages scholarship as it places emphases on close reading. It argues that, meanings are hidden beneath but can only be accessed through line by line or in depth study.

However, in order to understand how deconstruction reveals the hidden work of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world, we must first understand deconstruction's view of language because, according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies programme us without our being aware of them (NOUN, 210).

### **Major Postulations of Deconstruction**

Primarily, deconstructive criticism is concerned with:

1. The relation of words to things
2. Whether or not there is certainty of truth
3. Whether or not texts have meanings beyond what the reader makes of what he reads

4. Whether interpretation is an individual thing, or it is the particular thing that the author has in mind when writing (211).

Lois Tyson argues further that, deconstruction claims that, language is non-referential because it refers neither to things in the world, nor to our concepts of things, but only to the play of signifiers, of which language itself consists. Deconstruction thus offers us a radical vision of the activity of thinking. Our mental life consists not of concepts—not of solid, stable meanings—but of a fleeting, continually changing play of signifiers. Derrida, on his part, argues that language has two important characteristics

1. Its play of signifiers continually defers, or postpones, meaning
2. The meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another (212).

In other words, deconstructionist theory of language has implications for *subjectivity*, for what it means to be a human being as the theory asserts that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by the language we speak, and because all language is an unstable, ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies, we are, ourselves, unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies. Basically, for deconstruction:

- Language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings
- Existence has no centre, no stable meaning, and no fixed ground
- Human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only “identities” are the ones we invent and choose to believe (NOUN, 213).

It stressed further that, literature is as dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable as the language of which it is composed. Meaning is not a stable element residing in the text for us to uncover or passively consume. Meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. Or, more precisely,

meaning is produced by the play of language through the vehicle of the reader, though we generally refer to this process as “the reader”. Furthermore, the meaning that is created is not a stable element capable of producing closure; that is, no interpretation has the final word. Rather, literary texts, like all texts, consist of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us. What have been considered the “obvious” or “commonsense” interpretations of a given text are really ideological readings—interpretations produced by a culture’s values and beliefs—with which we are so familiar that we consider them “natural”. In short, we create the meaning and value we “find” in the text. Just as authors cannot help but draw on the assumptions of their cultural milieu when they construct their texts, readers as well cannot help but draw on the assumptions of theirs when they construct their readings (215). Therefore, both literary and critical texts can be deconstructed.

### **Conclusion**

Deconstruction theory believes in the dynamics of literature and language. The theory is anchored on its tenets that; meaning is not fixed and closed but flexible and open, hence new interpretation can emanate from a text by different readers and critics. This is true because, meaning is produced and not found in the text.

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