



## EXPLODING THE CENTER: A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF ANDREW MARVELL'S "TO HIS COY MISTRESS"

**KHANAL, KAMAL KRISHNA**

Associate Professor

Birendra Multiple Campus (T.U.), Chitwan, Nepal.



**KHANAL, KAMAL  
KRISHNA**

### ABSTRACT

Deconstruction came as a reaction to and development of structuralism in the mid 1960s. Deconstruction as a critical tool questions the nature of language that has been hitherto assumed to have referential character. By dismantling this traditional concept of language, Derrida rejects the western philosophical tradition that believes in a centre, a concept, or 'logos' or a transcendental signified or the presence of meaning in the linguistic sign. Literature is also made of linguistic signs and assumes a meaning or truth or a structure that has a centre. However the theory of deconstruction falsifies this assumption. The claim that Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" makes is actually a logo centric claim. The poem works with binaries like present/non present, subject/object consumer/consumed and so on and the first term is privileged one. But actually the binaries with which the poem is structured have no hierarchies as such. There are only contradictions, traces of one sign scattered over the others. The words and phrases contradict and indeterminacy persists everywhere in the text. The unstable nature of language explodes the acclaimed centre and the text deconstructs itself from within.

Key words: deconstruction, decentering, logo centrism, signifier, signified, trace.

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### INTRODUCTION

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), a popular and powerful seventeenth century English poet, is well-known for his concern with the philosophy of time and space. His poetry reflects his age and the mind of man at that time. He composed exquisite lyrics of varied themes with metaphysical wit and Cavalier grace. "To His Coy Mistress," is one of his most famous poems in the English language. B. J. Sokol studies this poem from the point of view of logical argument thereby revealing "a very witty play of logic and illogic in the poem" (243). Roberts John Hawley on the other hand finds a well known theme *carpe diem* and argues that "The central intention of the poem is to persuade the speaker's beloved to

yield herself to him. His argument is that they have no time to wait. The constant consideration of the time problem gives unity to the whole" (19). Harold Tolliver studies this poem from yet another point of view and writes, "Marvell's sensibility...frequently produces a more radical juxtaposition of objects" where "Marvell combines two such distinct spheres (one animal and passionate, the other vegetative, passive, and expanding) that he gives them and the reader a start" (182). Michael Gregory takes up linguistic tools and analyses lexicon and grammar of the poem and asserts how this poem integrates linguistic and social events. R. L. Brett in his article "Andrew Marvell: the Voice of His Age" analyses Marvell's poems in with reference to his social

context. In "To His Coy Mistress" he finds one of the most recurrent themes of time but he sees this poem rather

"a chilling reminder of death which comes as something of a shock in a love-poem. Its effect on the modern mind is one of recoil and leads to an eager acceptance of the final strophe, not so much as a conclusive argument but as a means of psychological relief" (7).

All the critics cited above observe the poem from more or less conventional point of views. However, my concern in this article is to study the poem from a deconstructive point of view. The foundation stone of 'Deconstruction' was laid by Jacques Derrida in 1966 with his paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" presented to an International Colloquium at John Hopkins University and it created a great sensation in the field of literary criticism in the 1970s and it is still a major course in the study of literary theory in many universities in the world. The terms like Derrida, deconstruction, transcendental signified, logo centricism, evoke fear in the academics. However, deconstruction has gained popularity as a tool to study literary texts.

The purpose of this article is not to present a detail theoretical analysis of deconstruction but to demonstrate how a text can be seen through the eyes of a deconstructive reader. A text is a jumble of signifiers and the reading is only a process of finding the traces. A text has no single and universal meaning but there are meanings scattered over the signifiers as the linguistic signs have no referential function. Deconstruction is not something imposed from outside. The text ultimately deconstructs itself from within. To prove this hypothesis Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" has been textually analyzed from deconstructive point of view. However, major theoretical premises have been observed with reference to Derrida's formulation of deconstructive ideas before entering the text under consideration.

This article has been organized under different headings. After the introductory part basic theoretical premises have been observed. The next part presents what a text and its reading mean for a

deconstructionist. The text under consideration has been analyzed under the following heading. Finally the conclusion and recommendation presents the findings of this study along with the suggestions of some areas for further study.

#### **Deconstruction at a Glance**

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction came as a reaction to and continuation of structuralism that developed in France in the 1960s. Deconstruction is within structuralism as it also has an adventure of vision like structuralism and it is also a critique of structuralism for its major attack is on structuralist premises as Davis observes that "the attempt to read and interpret cultural structures cannot be adequately translated into exacting scientific models" (147).

Derrida rejects all western (let alone eastern) philosophical and critical tradition as 'logo centric' because every philosophy places at the center of its understanding of the world a concept (logos) that organizes the ideas, explains and creates a world view for us. He criticizes philosophical tradition since Plato because "Western thought has developed innumerable terms which operate as centring principles: being, essence, substance, truth, form, beginning, end, purpose, consciousness, man, God, and so on" (Selden et. al. 164). For him this centring principle; these ideological positions like truth, meaning, reality, concept, finality, authority; this transcendental signified is not beyond dynamic instability of language. F. de Saussure's system of signification, bonding of signifier and signified and his concept that signs function by having differential relations with other signs has been attacked by Derrida that "This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logo centricism which is also a phonocentricism" (*Of Grammatology* 11). He separates 'signifier' from 'signified' and develops his theory of 'never-present signified'. Michael Lewis has rightly observed this position, "Following Saussure, Derrida understands a 'text' as a system in which a plurality of differences precedes any presence and makes it possible; and conversely, any system of differences may be deemed a 'text'" (1).

Derrida alters Ferdinand de Saussure's equation sign = signifier + signified as sign = signifier + signifier + signifier... and therefore, for him the

search for signified is just a play of signifiers because it is never present in one sign. The signified is dispersed over all other signs which are not present. This means the transcendental signified, "concept invested with absolute authority" (Habib 652), is never present and "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely" (Derrida "Structure Sign and Play" 110). 'Red', for example, is red only because it is not white, blue, or green. The meaning of 'day' is understood only when it is differentiated from evening, night, morning and so on. This means one signifier carries the 'traces' of other signifiers. So Tyson rightly explains this notion: "In Derrida's words what we take to be meaning is really only the mental *trace* left behind by the play of signifiers. And that trace consists of the differences by which we define a word" (245).

Derridian claim is that language is unstable, dynamic and ambiguous. The meaning or truth the language claims to express is, therefore, plural, fragmented and undecidable. This nature of language makes the center collapse; makes the truth local; makes the interpretation misinterpretation; and makes every reading misreading as "Everything is divisible. Unity, coherence, univocality are effects produced out of division and divisibility. This is what gives rise to the elaboration of terms such as *différance*, iterability, the trace, the supplement" (Royle 26).

Actually Derridian mode of deconstruction germinates on the soil of Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of differential relations between signs. Derrida attacks Saussure coining the word *différance* "which can mean both "to differ" and "to defer" in time. Hence Derrida adds a temporal dimension to the notion of difference" (Habib 653). The claim of centre, therefore, is not final. No interpretation is the last one. There is always possibility of plurality of meaning.

Geocentric world view, for instance, was the only scientific truth about the centre of the universe before Copernicus decentered this truth. Meaning of 'democracy' is dispersed throughout the words like autocracy, plutocracy, capitalism, communism and so on. What democracy is has no single answer. Plato's idea of perfect form in

timeless dimension of thought was not acceptable for Descartes' 'cogito'. Even our existence has on single identity. The 'I' giving lecture on deconstruction is not the same as the 'I' watching late night movie. What we say is not exactly what we say, what we understand is not exactly what we understand. Nothing is stable. The debate between 'I think therefore I'm' and 'I am therefore I think' is merely a verbal dispute. This undecidability, this dispersal of logos, this plurality of meaning proves that there is no centre, there is no final meaning and there is no transcendental signified.

#### **The Text and the Reading**

Any discourse for a deconstructive critic is just a chain of signifiers. A literary text made up of linguistic signs is also a chain of signifiers. Being critical to Saussure, Tyson supports the deconstructive claim that "language does not consist of the union of signifiers and signifieds; it consists only of chains of signifiers" (245). The play of signifiers defers the meaning and the meaning language seems to have is the result of the difference of one signifier from another. Derrida explains this position and writes that there is "a system in which the central signified, the original or the transcendental signified, is never present outside a system of differences" ("Structure Sign and Play" 110).

The text, therefore, contains only contradictions, traces, ideological complexities, undecidability and ambiguity. So when we read a text it is just one instance of reading because "meaning, the text claims to have is scattered over the whole of signifiers; it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together" (Eagleton 128). It is, therefore said that the critic does not deconstructs a text, the text deconstructs itself. The critic only traces the process of this constant flickering and shows how the privileged ideological position in a text is put under eraser. In other words the critic attempts to explode the centre the text is supposed to have created. A text for a deconstructive reader is an open ground and the reader is free to enter and exit from any point. He tries to decipher the relationships unperceived by the author. Derrida in

"Of Grammatology" clarifies this point about reading process, "...reading always aims at certain relationship unperceived by the author, between what he commands and what he does not command of the pattern of the language he uses" (qtd. In Culler 173). The text is supposed to have some kind of intellectual authority, to have some kind of centre, to have promoted some kind of ideology but "self contradiction invalidates any intellectual enterprise" (Culler 173) and the centre is naturally exploded.

#### Deconstruction from Within a Text

As the nature of this article demands, it is thought to be relevant to present a demonstration of how a text explodes its own claims. For this purpose Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" has been chosen. A traditional reader of the poem, for example, would confirm that the poem is a metaphysical one as its tone, imagery, and theme are similar to that of the other 17<sup>th</sup> century poems. They would explain a 'carpe diem' theme in detail and conclude that "tearing our pleasure with rough strife" (43) is the best way of defeating the undefeatable power of time. A new critic, to take another example, would look for the center and how the tension has been resolved at the end, how reconciliation of the opposites leads to a textual unity. S/he would see how our senses are satisfied by the use of images, instinctive desires by the patterns and our intellect by the moral sensibility. A structuralist, to cite yet another example, would look for underlying structure by probing deeper into language of the poem. S/he would discover some kind of binary opposition(s) and privilege one over the other and work with the grammar underneath.

All the approaches to literature like those outlined very briefly as examples differ in their interpretive strategies but all of them share one thing in common that they all claim for and create a centre; they all privilege one ideology over the other. They are all 'logo centric'. Actually deconstruction begins where conventional approaches end.

The situation in the given poem is very obvious. There is a speaker who addresses a lady and tries to seduce her with eloquent speech but the lady is a silent listener. The speaker uses his

knowledge, alludes to the myths, presents his logic and reasoning, and philosophizes life and time to persuade the lady. The lady is silent but a reader easily can guess that she has said something earlier which has evoked the speaker's speech.

We clearly see that the text is structured with so many binary oppositions like male/female, subject/object, consumer/consumed, life/death and most prominently present/non-present. It is also clear that the first term of each opposition is the privileged one, presented as the center. All other concepts are at the periphery. So the overt ideological project of the poem is: present moments is the most important one, utilization of the present is the best policy to defeat undefeatable power of time.

There are plenty of evidences presented in support of this ideological position. Time has been given great importance. It has "slow chapped power" (40). It can turn us to dust. Human being is too feeble "to make the sun stand still" (45/46). Not only this, time is divided into past, present and future. "Had we" in line one refers to the fact that we don't have enough time because the present is very short. "Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (22) refers to the fear of losing present moment. After the moment passes the lady's "beauty shall no more be found" (25). "While the youthful hue sits on thy skin", (33, 34) "now let us sport us while we may" (37), "rather at once our time devour" (39) draw attention towards the preference of present. With a powerful reasoning structure as 'If ... But ... Therefore ...' the poem establishes the centrality of present moment. This ideological position has been advocated for by the speaker with all his learning and intellect so that he could persuade the lady for sexual sport. All the stretched images in the first stanza, image of the moving sun, of vast eternity and ages spent to adore the lady's body parts have been used to teach the lady: if she doesn't seize the moment she will regret.

But there is no unity like the poem seems to confirm. The words, phrases and the whole poem contradict and prove that there is no hierarchy in the oppositions and no side of binary opposition has privileged position. The speaker's attitude to the 'present' at the centre and 'non-present' on the

margin is contradictory because "The system of textuality extends infinitely and thus any belief in a moment of presence that would remain outside, precedent to, and governing this text is illusory" (Lewis 1). How does the speaker present the concept of the time? Time is divided into past, present and future. Only the present is existing, past is gone, future is yet to come. The moment he speaks of "desert of vast eternity" (24) this concept collapses. Can we separate the parts of eternity? Time is like a flight of an arrow, like running sun, like a flow of his speech. Can we pick up a present moment from the unending eternity? The sum of the flight of the arrow is the sum of presences. Every point of moment in the flow is present and non-present. The non-present is either past presence or future presence. So time is a series of presences. In the "deserts of vast eternity" too we have only presences. On the one hand he talks of eternal quality of time and on the other he contradicts with his idea of limited time in the third stanza. The meaning of 'present' is possible only with the traces of past and future, if not why does he allude to Joshua who had stopped the sun so that the Israelites could win the battle? Every point of moment is 'present' and 'non-present', 'now' and 'not-now'. There's no past, no future, only series of presences. We can't live outside present to pin point a present point. Time "persists merely as a consequence of the events taking place in it. There is no absolute time, and no absolute simultaneity either" (Heidegger 3E).

Further, the word 'now' appears three times in the last stanza. Which 'now' indicates to the 'present' the speaker has in his mind? 'Now' in line 33 is not quite the same as 'now' in line 37 and 38. No point of time can be privileged. Heidegger's concept of time is relevant in this context. He argues:

What do we learn from the clock about time? Time is something in which a now-point may be arbitrarily fixed, such that, with respect to two different time points, one is earlier and the other later. And yet no now-point of time is privileged over any other. As 'now', any now-point of time is the possible earlier of a later; as 'later', it is the later of an earlier. (4E)

Heidegger clarifies the point that nothing is absolute. The point of time should be understood in relative terms. We cannot say 'now' without referring to some other point of time either in the past or future.

'Time' is only one signifier and it can have different signifieds. Similarly the phrase "long preserved virginity" (28) shows that virginity can be preserved for a long time. This 'long' refers to the length of time enough to allow the speaker to take as many years as he likes in playing with the lady's body. In the following line he contradicts this idea referring to very limited span they have and if not used right now she will "turn to dust"(29) and his lust "into Ashes"(30). On the one hand the "youthful hue"(33) of the lady is like "morning dew" (34) subject to quick evaporation and on other hand it is associated with "long preserved virginity". One shatters the idea in the other. Even the supporting opposition between the power of time and feebleness of human being collapses when the speaker presents the image of man hungrily eating up the time in "rather at once our time devour"(39). This phrase also indicates that man also has slow chapped power. The contradiction is obvious: who devours whom? The major binary opposition that structures the poem, thus, collapses and the totality, the meaning, the center that the poem seems to construct is dismantled.

Other oppositions like subject/object, consumer/consumed also fall apart. The male speaker presents himself to be the subject-superior, knower of everything, the consumer and the female listener to be the object-inferior, ignorant and the consumed. In other words 'you' is supplemented to the 'I'. The 'I' and 'you' collapse into 'us' when the speaker invites the lady to be united: "Let us roll all our strength and all/ Our sweetness up into one ball/ And tear our pleasure with rough strife" (41-43). Both 'I' and 'you' unite to be the subject or consumer and the pleasure becomes the object or the consumed. No sooner the speaker expresses his desire to unite with the lady, all these oppositions are erased.

#### Conclusion and Recommendation

Actually a critic does not deconstruct a text, a text deconstructs itself. The nature of language

proves the meaning to be unstable and undecidable. Andrew Marvell's poem also deconstructs itself from within. The author's philosophy of time in the text is not universal but relative and contextual. What he claims to be the truth is only play of signifiers. Actually a text is nothing but a jumble of signifiers. The meaning a text claims is only an approximation. Communication is possible with approximation but the truth, the intended meaning; the signified can never be achieved. The indeterminacy of meaning persists in every effort to conformation in the poem. The truth is that there is no truth, no meaning and no ultimate signified. After all a text has no authority to speak only one truth because deconstruction has provided us an open ground for observing plurality everywhere.

The discussion presented above is only one small effort among many other possibilities of studying this poem from modern theoretical perspectives. To name only a few, a feminist eye can see masculine/ feminine opposition and proceed to dismantle it. One can see moral/immoral hierarchy. Psychological state of the author can be another area. It also can be studied from the point of view of *Eros* and *Thanatos*.

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Appendix

Had we but world enough, and time,  
 This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
 We would sit down and think which way  
 To walk and pass our long love's day.  
 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side 5  
 Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
 Of Humber would complain. I would  
 Love you ten years before the flood  
 And you should, if you please, refuse  
 Till the conversion of the Jews. 10

My vegetable love should grow  
 Vaster than empires, and more slow;  
 An hundreds years should go to praise  
 Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;  
 Two hundreds to adore each breast, 15

But thirty thousand to the rest;  
An age at least to every part,  
And the last age should show your heart.  
For, lady, you deserve this state,  
Nor would I love at lower rate 20

But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.  
Thy beauty shall no more be found, 25  
Nor in thy marble vault, shall sound  
My echoing song; then worms shall try  
That long preserved virginity,  
And your quaint honour turn to dust,  
And into ashes all my lost: 30  
The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing soul transpires  
At every pore with instant fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may,  
And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our time devour  
Than languish in his slow chapped power. 40  
Let us roll all our strength and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball,  
And tear our pleasure with rough strife  
Through the iron gates of life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our sun 45  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.