
UNIT 3 JACQUES DERRIDA

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Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already been briefly introduced to the work of Jacques Derrida in the unit on “Feminism and Deconstruction” in a previous course (see MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4). Before you begin reading this unit, you may find it helpful to review what you have read earlier. In this unit, we will examine Derrida's work much more closely with a view to better appreciate its implications for questions of gender identity and politics. To this end, we will first attempt to clarify some of the basic premises that inform Derrida's works through a close scrutiny of his ground-breaking essay, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Continuing your earlier engagement with the term, we will then seek to understand the different ways in which Derrida theorised, deployed and practised deconstruction. Finally, we will explore Derrida's statements about the woman question and conclude with a synoptic account of various feminist responses to Derridean thinking.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the significance of Jacques Derrida's work within the context of contemporary Western thought;
- Explain some of the concepts and assumptions that consistently shape Derrida's works;
- Provide an informed discussion of the important debates around deconstruction as well as Derrida's understanding and use of the term;
- Clarify Derrida's position on the question of woman or gendered identity and feminism; and
- Assess the value of Derrida's work from a feminist perspective.

3.3 JACQUES DERRIDA: LIFE AND WORKS

Jacques Derrida was born in 1930 to a petit bourgeois Sephardic Jewish couple in the El Biar suburb of French-ruled Algiers. He had four other siblings, two elder and two younger, none of whom pursued academics. After an early education in Algiers intermittently marred by incidents of anti-Semitism—being expelled from one school and pressured to leave another because he was a Jew—Derrida left for France in 1949 to complete his higher studies. To begin with, he was at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Thereafter, in 1952, despite trying and failing initially, he secured acceptance at the reputed École Normale Supérieure where many illustrious French intellectuals cut their academic teeth. At ENS, Derrida not only met Louis Althusser with whom he struck up a close friendship over the years but also others like Jean Hippolyte and Michel Foucault. While Derrida's early philosophical training and work in France was largely focussed on Edmund Husserl and related phenomenological concerns, he was also influenced by and engaged with the works of Rousseau, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Freud, Levinas, Strauss, among others. He submitted his dissertation on Husserl for his *Diplome d'études supérieures*, the equivalent of a Master's degree, in 1954.

Derrida did not defend his doctoral thesis until 1980, but before that and subsequent to teaching soldiers' children in exchange for active military service during the Algerian War of Independence, he held several academic positions at prestigious institutions, initially in France and later abroad, especially, the United States. In Paris, after teaching at the Sorbonne (1960-64), Derrida was invited to join the École Normale Supérieure by Althusser and Hippolyte in 1964. He remained with ENS till 1983. Subsequently, till his death, he served as the Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. In 1983, he was also instrumental in the

setting up of the Collège Internationale de Philosophie—an institute meant to radicalize the research and dissemination of philosophy and free it from rigid establishment controls. Derrida served as inaugural President of the Collège Internationale de Philosophie. Concurrently, from the seventies on, Derrida worked at several American institutions including Yale University, Johns Hopkins, SUNY Buffalo, Cornell University, and University of California, Irvine. Starting in 1986, in fact, he had an ongoing arrangement to teach for one semester every year at the latter institution, which now also houses the valuable Derrida archives. Apart from these regular and visiting appointments, Derrida also lectured and toured extensively around the world, with India too making it on his itinerary.

Derrida succumbed to pancreatic cancer in 2004, a little while after he was first diagnosed with the disease. He was survived by his wife, Marguerite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst (whom he married in 1957 when at Harvard on a grant to study James Joyce), their two sons, Pierre and Jean, and two grandchildren. Derrida also had another son, Daniel, with feminist philosopher Sylvia Agacinski.

While his star has been on the wane for some years now, at the peak of his career Derrida attracted celebrity and controversy, flack and following to a degree unparalleled by any of his contemporaries. Derrida began the early years of the sixties quietly enough, writing reviews and actively contributing to *Tel Quel*, the French left-avant-garde journal begun by Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier in 1960. He first came to the notice of the English speaking world at a 1966 conference hosted by the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man.” Derrida presented his now famous paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” to this forum, which even today is often cited as the moment when Poststructuralism announced its arrival on the world intellectual scene. The following year saw Derrida further firm up his international credentials with three significant publications: *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. 1973), *Writing and Difference* (trans. 1978), and his most famous *Of Grammatology* (trans. 1976). Together, these works provided an early demonstration of that most controversial of terms associated with Derrida, i.e., deconstruction. Derrida did not slow down after his ‘*annus mirabilis*’ (year of wonders, or more appropriately, here, year of wonderful achievements). Rather, he proved a prolific author till the end who had over 50 books and literally countless essays and papers to his credit. Some of Derrida’s important later works include *Glas*, *Acts of Literature*, *Aporias*, *Specters of Marx*, *The Gift of Death*, and *Of Hospitality*.

It is often said that a break is discernible from the 1990s in the body of his work, marking a much more political and ethical “turn” in his preoccupations. Writings such as *Specters of Marx*, *Politics of Friendship*,

On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, among others are adduced in support of the claim. Indeed, one of the most persistent criticisms levelled against Derrida has precisely to do with his work being seen as “apolitical” and nihilistic. His dilatory and deliberately opaque prose, the extreme experiments with style, for instance, in *Glas* and *Postcard from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, the unrelenting focus on text and textuality in the earlier works, the association with Paul de Man and the so-called Yale school of criticism, combined with often misapprehended apothegms (sayings or maxims) like “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (see glossary) that have taken on a life of their own have only fed fire to this perception.

Identitarian (those who privilege different identity groups like class or gender or race as categories around which to mobilise opinion and/or agitate) thinkers, including old-school Marxists and feminists, have been wary of Derridean deconstructive premises, suspecting it of playing into conservative hands and fronting reactionary agendas. While Derrida has consistently refused simplistic political stances and gestures, he has always asserted a continuity in the philosophical tenor of his works. And during his lifetime he has many times given both verbal and active support to political causes, whether that be protesting against the Vietnam War or capital punishment, or apartheid in South Africa or mobilising for the rights of state-persecuted Czech writers and immigrant employees in France.

Another set of people, especially, analytic philosophers have been wary of Derrida on different grounds: they questioned if he was a philosopher at all and alleged he had greater traction with literary and cultural studies departments than with scholars of his own stripe. Things came to a head in 1992 when Cambridge University’s decision to confer an Honorary Doctorate on Derrida sparked off an unprecedented transcontinental letter campaign by some faculty members to foil the move. They were defeated when matters were put to a vote and Derrida finally got the honorary doctorate from Cambridge University as indeed he did from many other institutions. But the episode captures in gist the kind of resentment and resistance Derrida generated in certain quarters.

Derrida was notoriously camera-shy in the early part of his career: he did not want his photograph/face to “authorize” his writing. Later, however, he eased up to the extent of starring in a film called *Derrida!* Despite the fact that Derrida is no longer “the rage” as he once was across American literary and humanities departments, he is by no means without influence. He continues to inspire conferences, special issues of journals, books and research aplenty at least in the Anglophone academy, including India, close to seven years after his death and forty-five years after he first emerged upon the international academic stage. This is certainly testament to his enduring value as a thinker. It also means that there are numerous sources and avenues through which to process that value for ourselves.

Check Your Progress:

What are the main criticisms leveled against Derrida?

3.4 STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY: AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY DERRIDEAN THOUGHT

This section offers an introduction to early Derridean thought through an exposition of the core ideas articulated in Derrida's ground breaking essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Since the premises of the essay remain germane to much of Derrida's oeuvre or body of work, "Structure, Sign and Play..." in many ways selects itself as an introductory text par excellence. As already mentioned, Derrida first presented his ideas in the form of a paper at a 1966 conference called "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," organised by René Girard, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. This conference was originally meant to acknowledge the influence of Levi Strauss' structural anthropology across the social sciences and humanities and hail the arrival and establishment of structuralism as an inter-disciplinary programme for the first time in the US. Not surprisingly, several leading structuralists of the time (Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Lacan, Lucien Goldmann, to name a few) were to be counted among the attendees. That the conference volume when it was published in 1970, far from celebrating structuralism was subtitled *The Structuralist Controversy* is a measure of the kind of impact that Derrida's paper had. In retrospect, the 1966 paper is often identified as a significant moment in the advent and elaboration of poststructuralism.

3.4.1 Structure, Centre, Margin

The recurring proposition of “Structure, Sign and Play...” is simply that an “event” has occurred in “the history of the concept of structure” which simultaneously bears the characteristics of a “rupture” and a “redoubling” (Derrida, 2004, p. 89). The rest of the essay, as will become clearer as you read on, fleshes out the form and implications of this “event” in a way that constitutes a thoroughgoing critique of longstanding Western philosophical assumptions.

According to Derrida (2004), traditionally, Western philosophy has avoided engaging with the constructedness of structures; that is to say, their being constructed and not natural structures. This avoidance is managed through recourse to the notion of a centre: “the structurality of structure...has always been neutralized or reduced...by a process of giving it a centre, or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). To paraphrase Derrida, the centre is whatever performs as the organizing principle of a structure. In so doing, it not only stabilizes and naturalizes the structure it is centre of, but also, necessarily, itself. In other words, the centre functions to control what Derrida calls “the play of the structure” (see glossary for “play”). On the one hand, “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). On the other hand, the centre also cuts off play beyond the margins of the structure it demarcates. Moreover, as centre, it is the point at which the limited play which characterizes a structure and constitutes its structural logic becomes impossible, or as Derrida qualifies “has always remained *interdicted*” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90).

One way to understand the concept of centre and structure is by thinking of a game, say, cricket. Fielders can be positioned in different places on the field by the captains or the bowlers; bowlers can be changed; the batting order can be moved around; the batsmen have flexibility in choice of strokes, while the bowlers in choice of delivery—bouncer, yorker, googly, etc. However, this play and flexibility disappears when it comes to the core set of rules which govern the different formats of the game. For e.g., a batsman cannot play with a baseball bat, a bowler cannot throw the ball, and so on. If the core rules changed then the very structure of the game as we know it would become impossible. Yet these core rules are not really unchangeable or natural. The different formats of cricket show that rules can and have been changed to produce new forms of cricket. The rules are thus arbitrarily made up. They are not the game, but some sort of consensus about a set of rules makes the game possible. Hence the paradox of classical thought: the centre is both inside and outside the structure. “The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong

to the totality..., the totality has its centre *elsewhere*. The center is not the center” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). Centred structures, thus, are, by definition, instances of contrived coherence or coherence in contradiction; they are premised on an absent presence—the centre. They are inherently unstable, although they project an appearance of stability and fixity through the ruse of the idea of a natural centre.

The “event” that Derrida calls attention to at the start of the essay is firstly a greater awareness of the constructedness of structures or thought systems, their “structurality” which has always existed since structures must inevitably be constructed. This leads to a more acute consciousness of play (defined as rupture or the disruption of presence), rather than centred presence, as the matrix and modality of meaning (hence rupture). The history of Western philosophy prior to this “event,” Derrida contends is “a series of substitutions of centre for center” whose task has been “the determination of Being as *presence*” where presence includes “all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre” be it “*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth*” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90-91). In other words, transcendental signifieds invested with authority by the structures of which they are a part are centred within the structure and consequently lead to the creation of power hierarchies with a dominant centre and its margins.

Check Your Progress:

i) *How is the centre both inside and outside the structure?*

ii) *Why are centred structures inherently unstable?*

iii) *Think of some examples of transcendental concepts that societies place at the centre of certain institutional structures. From where is their power derived? What is arbitrary about this power?*

Where lies the source of the change in thinking, of the decentering of dominant philosophical assumptions about structures and centres? Since ‘origins’ refer to a central or initial point, Derrida is loath to fix a point of origin to this alternative stream of thought and so re-enact a lapse into centred thinking. Nonetheless, he cites Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger as some examples who undertook in various ways to destabilize different axiomatic anchors of Western philosophy, i.e., Truth, a fully conscious and rational Self, Being.

Derrida insists furthermore that, in the “absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse,” i.e., “a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (2004, p. 91). In other words, once the idea of centred stable structures came to be discredited, language (especially Saussure’s understanding of language as made up of signs whose relations to each other is arbitrary and conventional) became the model for understanding how meaning was generated through difference and in relation. (We have looked at Saussure’s contributions already in Block 1, Unit 1, Section 1.3.1. You may also like to refer back to MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4, Section 4.3.1.2/3 for a basic understanding of these ideas.)

Underscoring the onset of the era of discourse and textuality, however, is not simply an unacknowledged nod to Saussurean linguistics and the structuralist wave it generated: Derrida is quick to point out how taking the sign to be a stable concept merely makes of it a new nucleus of centred

thinking. In fact, this insistence on difference from Saussurean structuralism becomes the launch pad for Derrida's engagement with the Saussure-influenced structural anthropology of Levi Strauss.

The critique which follows is not any wholesale rejection of Levi Strauss as has been sometimes alleged. Rather, it is a deconstructive reading attentive to the unresolved tensions and paradoxes underlying the Straussian project to come up with a science of human cognition, to determine the deep structures of thought which generate the vast variety of past and present cultural formations and expressions. The tone is set early with Derrida's nuanced representation of the salience of ethnology and Levi Strauss at the time.

3.4.2 Derrida's Critique of Levi Strauss and Ethnology

Comparative ethnology studies human groups or cultures in a comparative frame without a priori privileging any one culture over the other. European ethnocentrism refers to the practice among scholars to take Europe and the white European as the point of reference and standard against which to measure all other civilizations, races and ethnicities. According to Derrida, comparative ethnology is born precisely at the moment when European ethnocentrism bites the dust. Nonetheless, ethnology remains a European science. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, deserves attention not simply because of the prestige attached to ethnology in the contemporary moment or because his ethnology has been influential. Rather, Strauss deserves attention because a "certain choice" and "doctrine has been elaborated" (p. 93) in his work as concerns the discourse and purport of ethnology vis-à-vis the social sciences. In other words, Levi Strauss is important for the ways in which he is both inside and outside the practices of traditional European social sciences: on the one hand, using such concepts and methods as he finds practical, and on the other, showing them up to be contingent and convenient ideas and tools.

In example after example thereafter, Derrida demonstrates both what Levi Strauss' ethnology achieves but also and more importantly, what it shies away from and/or excludes. Take, for instance, the nature/culture binary that has structured Western epistemology since even before the time of Plato. In *Elementary Structures*, Levi Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal, something which cannot be explained by the nature/culture opposition (see glossary) in that it has the predicates or characteristics of both categories. Derrida asserts that "[b]y commencing his work with the *factum* of the incest prohibition" Levi Strauss "places himself at the point at which this difference [between nature and culture], which has always been assumed to be self-evident, finds itself erased or questioned" (Derrida, 2004, p. 94). According to Derrida, Strauss on the one hand, exposes the

dichotomous understanding of nature and culture to be problematic because of the widespread prevalence of the incest prohibition. On the other hand, Derrida says, Strauss by calling the incest prohibition a scandal paradoxically gives legitimacy to the nature/culture binary, for only when the nature/culture binary is taken to be a norm, can the incest prohibition be seen as a scandal.

Derrida explains that the *bricoleur*, as opposed to the engineer, according to Strauss in the *Savage Mind* is someone who uses the means at hand to perform his task/s (2004, p. 95). In other words, where the *bricoleur* innovates, the engineer invents could be one way of understanding the distinction. While Derrida acknowledges the legitimacy of *bricolage* (play; see Glossary), that is, the discourse of the *bricoleur*, he also shows how the binary within which the *bricoleur* exists is unsustainable on deeper scrutiny. “If bricolage” Derrida points out is “the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage” (i.e., a pre-existent system or structure of thought) then “every discourse is bricoleur” and the engineer who must “construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon” inevitably “a myth produced by the bricoleur” for self-confirmation (Derrida. 2004, p. 96).

While the concept of play as *bricolage*, as supplementarity, has been significant in Strauss’ work, Derrida faults the ethnologist, ultimately, for the unexamined tensions between play and history, and play and presence that inform Strauss’ writings. Derrida perceives “in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins [i.e., centres]...” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). This structuralist position, according to Derrida, celebrates the fictiveness of the centre as freedom.

“Structure, Sign and Play” thus offers a comprehensive critique of Western philosophy. Through a deconstructive reading of the binary oppositions that undergird its metaphysics of presence, its centred structures, Derrida highlights the play of signs which is limited, excluded and falsely rendered derivative. His engagement of Strauss likewise reveals the blindspots of structuralism. The poststructuralism he heralds in many ways is only the extension, rather than the overturning of structuralist insights. It is a carrying forward of structuralist thought through to its logical conclusion, which, of course, in unraveling and superceding structuralist verities participates in “the seminal adventure of the trace” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102; see glossary for “trace”) and announces the arrival of the poststructuralist moment of play “without security” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). In retrospect, it should be clear how the title of Derrida’s essay represents a rather exact if condensed articulation of the major shifts in Western epistemology round the human sciences up to the conjuncture of the 1966 conference: from structure to sign, and almost simultaneously, to play.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What is the change in thinking that the “event” inaugurated, according to Derrida.*

iii) *According to Derrida, how does Strauss differentiate the ‘bricoleur’ from the ‘engineer’.*

3.5 DECONSTRUCTION

You have already been introduced to Derrida and deconstruction in MWG 003 (Block 1, Unit 4), where we looked at some intersections between feminism and deconstruction. In the popular imaginary, Derrida and deconstruction go together, with deconstruction often serving as shorthand and stand-in for Derrida’s entire body of work. Such has been the purchase of this identification that no introduction to Derrida can avoid engaging with the term without calling into question the credibility of its own enterprise. Because deconstruction is an important and multiply meaningful word in the Derridean lexicon, this section offers a brief clarification of the term and its checkered life in the Western academia.

The word deconstruction first appears in Derrida's writings in the 1960s. Contrary to common belief, it is no invention on the part of Derrida. As Derrida himself states, deconstruction is "a very old word in the French language" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 21). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word is also no newcomer to the English language, having first found written expression in English way back in 1882. Derrida's use of deconstruction, moreover, draws substantially on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's employment of the German concepts *Destruktion* and *abbau*.

This idea of deconstruction was never far from Derrida's early writings and his entire oeuvre may justly be seen as performing it, with two important caveats. As Peggy Kamuf notes, "Derrida had initially proposed [deconstruction] in a chain with other words—for example, *différance*, spacing, trace—none of which can command the series or function as a master-word" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 23). That is to say, first of all, deconstruction has no priority in Derrida's body of writings as *the* core signifier of a practice, a programme, a thesis or anything else. Second, Derrida has been neither unequivocal in his enthusiasm for the term nor consistent when elaborating on it. At least some of Derrida's reluctance to have his work reduced to this one word may be attributed to deconstruction's "American chapter."

For a time when Derrida was at Yale University in the late 70s and early 80s, he was part of a group of prominent literary critics, among them, Paul de Man, J Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom, who were tagged as constituting the Yale School of deconstruction. There was, in fact, no such "school," it being chiefly a media creation, based, as Julian Wolfreys says, on a fundamental "misunderstanding of the nature of the critical work that Derrida, de Man and Miller were each, in their own fashion, pursuing. Such work was mistakenly given the name of 'deconstruction...'" (Wolfreys, 2008, p. 7). The label stuck, no doubt helped in part by the 1979 anthology *Deconstruction and Criticism* to which Derrida et al contributed.

The chief drawbacks of the American literature departments' embrace of Derrida and deconstruction were two-fold. On the one hand, the philosophical context of Derrida's writings—which back in France included the twin ruling ideologies of phenomenology and structuralism with which Derrida was grappling—got elided in the American valorization of deconstruction as Derrida, and the further representation of *that* deconstruction as principally a method of reading literary texts. So transformed into an instrument and pedagogy, deconstruction proved fertile ground for a welter of distortions which while outraging and intimidating people with its "extremism," its

“irreverence,” its “nihilism,” its “textualism” (Richard Rorty, Robert Scholes among others) its “obscurantism” (Foucault is alleged to have commented on Derrida’s intellectual terrorism), also won for Derrida messianic cult status for a period of time. The currency of misreadings round Derrida’s *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, for instance, certainly can be attributed to this warped dynamic of translation and reception at play in America.

On the other hand, because of its close association with the Yale literary critics, deconstruction could not escape being embroiled in the whole Paul de Man saga. When, after his death, a couple of previously unknown articles by de Man expressing anti-Semitic thoughts during the World War were discovered, the backlash was swift and brutal. Paul de Man was pilloried as a Nazi apologist. Along with de Man, deconstruction too was reviled for its political evasiveness, its relativism, even fascism. In fact, neither deconstruction nor Derrida has been able to completely shake off the infamy and slur (intellectual and ethical) that attached to involvement in the de Man affair. Not surprisingly, Derrida himself has expressed reservations about the American avatar of deconstruction.

So, what is deconstruction? Over the years, Derrida’s responses to this question have been erratic—ranging from a refusal to oblige calls for definition to a disavowal of the term. Some of these include the following assertions: “I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name [deconstruction]. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15); “...in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique.... I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one.... It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an *act* or even an *operation*” (Derrida, 1988a, p. 3). His clarifications ranged from sometimes cryptic to sometimes loquacious statements on deconstruction. On one occasion, Derrida claims that “deconstruction not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language... it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text...” (Derrida, 1984, p. 125). In another instance he speaks of deconstruction as “destabilization on the move”: “but it is not negative. Destabilization is required for ‘progress’ as well. And the ‘de-’ of *deconstruction* signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme...” (Derrida, 1988b, p. 147). Elsewhere he asserts that “Deconstruction is justice” (Derrida, 1992, p. 15) while distinguishing both from law. In still other statements, Derrida claims that

“Deconstruction is merciless,” (Derrida, 1995, p. 16) a “kind of ethics of ingratitude” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15) at one and the same time as it is “devoted to grace and gratitude, thus to a gratitude without thanks, without exchange...” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15). Moreover, that “deconstruction would consist, if at least it did consist, in...deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting ‘out of joint’ the authority of the ‘is’” (Derrida, 1995, p. 25).

As you can see from the above, deconstruction is not a static theory or stable set of formulas for Derrida available before-the-fact for ready application, or for replication/reproduction. In fact, as Martin McQuillan declares “Deconstruction is not a school or an ‘ism’. There is no such thing as ‘deconstructionism’ [incidentally, Edward Said is one of the people known to have used the word!]: this is a word used by idiots” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 41). Nonetheless, certain recurrent patterns and strategies may be isolated as more pertinent to the work of deconstruction through close attention to Derrida’s writings, especially as it concerns reading texts. If, according to Derrida, deconstruction destabilizes the structures of logo- and phonocentric (see glossary for both terms) thinking and by extension the metaphysics of presence from within, then *sous rature* (see glossary) or the practice of placing terms under erasure, is significant. It works on the principle that received notions, that language itself, in the case of Derrida, is “inadequate yet necessary” (Sarup, 1993, p. 33).

Box No. 3.1

A simpler, more pared down, representation of Derrida’s “reverse and displace” deconstruction could read as follows—identify binary oppositions in text ? since binary oppositions exist in a “violent hierarchy” identify which term in the binary is central and which marginal ? reverse the relation by showing how the central term is dependant on the marginal, so the repressed term is actually central, etc. ? finally, put this newly recovered term under erasure to defeat the very logic of logocentrism, i.e., ordering of the world/thought through binary oppositions that privilege one pole by decentering the other.

Ultimately, however, Nicholas Royle’s (2007) collage of terms working on the logic of “and” and “also” may be the best way, strategically as well as empirically, to tackle the question, what is deconstruction. **In other words, deconstruction cannot be pinned down to any one or even a set of meanings. It remains an open-ended term.**

Check Your Progress:

i) *Did Derrida invent the term “deconstruction”?*

ii) *What were the chief drawbacks of the American literature departments’ embrace of Derrida? Did Derrida distance himself from this? Explain.*

iii) *Has Derrida been consistent in his definition of the term? What are some of the ways in which he has talked about the term?*

3.6 DERRIDA AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER

How might the positions and formulations sketched above impact or intersect with questions of gender, subjectivity and agency? Has Derrida ever directly addressed the problematic of gender identity/politics in his texts? How have feminists responded to the provocations of Derrida's work? Do they see potential in deconstruction to forge a useful feminist praxis, or do they see Derrida and his writings to be fundamentally hostile to any practical feminist politics? In this section, let us briefly illuminate some of the conflicts and concerns around gender based on our understanding of Derrida's writings.

3.6.1 The Problematics of Gender

Derrida has not dealt directly with the topic of women, sexual difference, femininity and/or gender politics in his work except sporadically—*Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*; "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference"; *Glas*; "Otobiographies"; "Women in the Beehive"; *The Post Card*; "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am"; "Choreographies"; "Deconstruction in America" being some examples of this engagement. Scant and scattered as it may be, Derrida's thoughts have occasioned much debate and interest among feminists. Especially controversial has been Derrida's articulation of woman as concept as well as his deprecation of feminism.

In *Spurs* (1979), for instance, Derrida offers a representation of woman as concept that has exercised and influenced feminist thinking over the years (for instance, the works of Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Gayatri Spivak, Jacqueline Rose, to name a few). According to Derrida, Nietzsche's dispersed statements about the essential metaphoricity of woman, the "relation between art and woman" (Derrida, 1979, p. 47) constitute a rethinking of truth, indeed, of philosophy itself. Nietzsche's woman "is not a determinable thing.... Perhaps, woman—a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum—is distance's very chasm" (Derrida, 1979, p. 49). Furthermore, "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, ... Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth" (1979, p. 51). "That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth—*feminine* (1979, p. 55). If this is so, however, the "credulous and dogmatic philosopher who *believes* in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman, this philosopher has understood nothing. He has understood nothing of truth, nor anything of woman. Because, indeed, if woman *is* truth, *she* at least knows that there is no truth, that truth has no place here and that no one has a place for truth. And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, what she is believed to be, in what she thus is not" (Derrida, 1979, p. 53).

While deconstruction has been equated with “woman,” among many other terms, Derrida is keen to clarify that “For me deconstruction is certainly not feminist.” Deconstruction “naturally supposes a radical deconstruction of phallogocentrism [see glossary], and certainly an absolutely other and new interest in women’s questions. But if there is one thing it must not come to, it’s feminism.” Rather, “deconstruction is deconstruction of feminism, from the start, insofar as feminism is a form—no doubt necessary at a certain moment—but a form of phallogocentrism among others” (Derrida, 1985, pp. 30-31).

As mentioned, Derrida’s formulations on “woman” and deconstruction itself have been furiously contested as well as welcomed by feminist thinkers. If Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (postcolonial feminism), Drucilla Cornell (ethical feminism), Joan W Scott (politics of gender in history), Hélène Cixous (*écriture féminine*) are some of the names that might be adduced in favour of Derridean insights, then Seyla Benhabib, Margaret Whitford, Somer Brodrib, Rosi Braidotti, among others, may be cited as feminists more critical of Derrida. Cornell (1995), for instance, is emphatic that Derrida’s “exposure of the limit of phallogocentrism—the way in which central philosophical concepts are profoundly tied in with the unconscious significance given to the phallus—is an important intervention for making that process of resymbolization possible” (Cornell, 1995, p. 151) which it is the task of contemporary feminism to work towards.

It is not possible to rehearse here in any detail the sheer variety of feminist responses to Derrida. Instead, this section concludes with a summing up of some of the salient points of overlap and divergence between feminism and Derridean thinking provided by Elizabeth Grosz.

3.6.2 Elizabeth Grosz: Overview of Feminism and Deconstruction

According to Grosz (1989), the value of Derrida to feminism may be encapsulated under four heads:

- his critique of logocentrism;
- the stress on “materiality of reading processes;
- the concept of *différance*; and
- his “focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Let us look at each one of these, as discussed by Grosz. Of the first, Grosz asserts that Derrida’s “challenge to logocentricism parallels and refines feminist challenges to phallogocentric discourse. Logocentrism is implicitly patriarchal. Given the close cooperation between these ‘centrisms,’

deconstruction and the play of difference it engenders, are allied with feminist struggles within the production of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Likewise, Derrida’s insistence “on the materiality of reading processes confirms the productivity attributed to it by Althusser and Lacan. ... Derrida makes the powers at work in discourses (whether in knowledges, truths or fictions), powers that are clearly instrumental in the oppression of women, and others, explicit where they must normally function implicitly” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

According to Grosz, Derrida’s “development of the concept of *différance*” furthermore, “has become emblematic of a powerful trajectory within feminist theory, distinguished from liberal struggles for equality. In recognising the limits of equivalences within the masculine (if masculinity is oppressive, why aspire to it as an ideal?), many feminists have instead directed their attentions towards developing autonomous definitions of woman and femininity. This autonomy, at least for some feminists, finds a source in the Derridean notion of *différance*” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

And finally, Derrida’s “focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses”... confirms feminism’s interest “not simply in women as the object of speculation and knowledges, but in the metaphors of femininity, excess, materiality and play in the production of knowledges” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

In other words, Derrida’s work on the one hand shows how reading is an inevitably political act and therefore an exercise in power relations, or, at least a negotiation of power relations. On the other hand, Derrida’s work has allowed feminists a new way of exploring their identity as well undertaking a much more thoroughgoing critique of the very practices of knowledge production. That is to say, Derrida’s work facilitates the emergence of a radical politics that names the tyranny of the One to be also the tyranny, among others, of patriarchy and phallocracy.

Grosz (1997) provides a similarly brief but handy overview of some of the key objections to Derrida’s work voiced by feminist scholarship over the years. One of the oft-repeated criticisms against Derrida is that he “speaks in the name of, for, or as a feminine subject in a mode of male appropriation of women’s right to speak” and that “along with Deleuze and others, wants to occupy just the very speaking position that women have finally produced for themselves...” (Grosz, 1997, p. 82-83).

Another point of concern is how Derrida places “deconstruction in a position oppositional to feminism, a position of structural domination over feminist concerns”. Grosz cites Margaret Whitford especially as advancing this line of reasoning: “In the opposition which he sets up between deconstruction and feminism, there is no question for Derrida of privileging the subordinate

term, since it would leave him without a place to speak”... (Grosz, 1997, p. 83-84).

A third bone of contention remains Derrida’s alleged disregard of the practicalities around women’s mundane and ordinary experiences of disempowerment. In other words, Deconstruction, “remains both elitist and unrelated to power struggles that function in more mundane and everyday terms” (Grosz, 1997, p. 84).

For his feminist critics, then, Derrida does a disservice to the cause of feminism when he pits it in a binary relation with deconstruction—where deconstruction is always the positive term and feminism, another form of logocentrism. They allege that Derrida’s theories camouflage and distract from the myriad ways in which women daily experience systemic oppression. And in doing so, they assert that Derrida unfortunately becomes one more variant of patriarchal power that actually muzzles flesh-and-blood women while philosophising about the “idea of woman” or, speaking for and *as* women.

Ultimately, then, it is for each one of us to determine for ourselves, depending on the specificity of our needs and location, whether or not we see value in the potential solidarity between feminism and deconstruction. What remains indisputable is the many ways in which Derrida has challenged and stimulated feminist thinking for the last many decades.

Check Your Progress:

What does Derrida mean when he says, “deconstruction is deconstruction of feminism”?

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have focussed in some depth on Derridean thought. Through a synoptic overview of his life and works we have first outlined the importance of Derrida as an intellectual whose work has significantly influenced contemporary Western poststructuralist and postmodern thinking. We have then tried to grasp some of the central tenets of Derridean thinking through an exposition of the ideas found in one of his earlier essays, i.e. “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science.” This was followed by a closer scrutiny of the term deconstruction. On the one hand, we have sought to illuminate the debates and controversies around this term, its origins and different significance in Europe and North America. On the other, we have tried to highlight Derrida’s own complex, at times ambivalent as well as contradictory, representation and deployment of it. Given how “woman” has been one of the words proposed as a substitute for deconstruction in Derridean thought, we have then taken a closer look at Derrida’s thinking on gender identity and politics. Finally, and in the light of Derrida’s statements on the question of woman and feminism, we have read of some of the salient ways in which Derrida may be useful for feminist purposes as well the chief ways in which he has been debunked and/or criticised by feminist thinkers. It is hoped that this unit has equipped you to critically engage and or adapt Derridean thinking when tackling not only theoretical questions of gender identity, but also practical problems of feminist politics.

3.8 GLOSSARY

Bricolage : “describes an asystematic or creative approach to meaning, such that the meaning of a cultural practice or a literary text is produced unpremeditatedly, by making use of whatever happens to be at hand in order to see what ‘works’” (Lucy, 2004, p.133). *Bricolage* is the opposite of what Strauss, according to Derrida understands by “engineering (or scientific) discourse,” which proceeds according to unvarying rules and inflexible methods of analysis that enable the engineer or the scientist to solve a problem not by trial and error, but through the rigorous application of rational thought. In this way the engineer or the scientist appears to be the author of his own discourse, sole progenitor of an idea, a theory or a solution” (Lucy, 2004, p.133) However, as Derrida points out, insofar as *bricolage* is the “form of creative thought in general..., the absolutely uncreative rationality of

the engineer is a ‘myth’ created by *bricolage*” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134). In other words, “bricolage is typical of every discourse” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134).

Différance : a neologism combining difference and deferral. “Along with deconstruction, this is one of the names Derrida uses to describe his own techniques of reading philosophic and logocentric texts. In his work, the term refers to three related concepts: first, to the movement or energy preconditioning the creation of binary oppositions. It is the unacknowledged ground of the opposition between identity (or sameness) and difference. In this sense, *différance* precedes oppositions. Second, it refers to an excess or an unincorporated remainder which resists the imperative of binary organisation. *Différance* is *both* as well as *neither* identity and difference. In this sense, *différance* exceeds binary oppositions. And third, it is the name of Derrida’s own procedures for reading and locating this *différance*. The term thus refers to a difference within difference itself, a difference which distinguishes difference from distinction, a different difference from that which opposes identity” (Grosz, 1989, p. xvii)

Il n’y a pas de hors-texte : Occurring in “...That Dangerous Supplement...” (Derrida, 1994, p. 158), the phrase is often translated into English as “there is nothing outside the text.” In this form it has achieved a kind of notoriety among people who have taken it to represent Derrida’s textualism and used it to mistakenly support him, but equally to mistakenly attack deconstruction. In an attempt to clarify matters Derrida himself suggested a different translation: “there is nothing outside context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). Alternatively, he states “there is nothing but context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). To quote Royle (2007), “context” here means “speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not” (p. 65). Deconstruction through such a lens would be “the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualisation” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65).

Logo- and phonocentricism : Logocentrism “designate[s] the dominant form of meta physics in western thought. The *logos*, logic, reason, knowledge, represents a singular and unified conceptual order, one which seems to grasp the presence or immediacy of things. Logocentrism is a system of thought centred around the dominance of this singular logic of presence. It is a system, which seeks beyond signs and representation, the real and the true, the presence of being, of knowing and reality, to the mind—an access to concepts and things in their pure, unmediated form. Logocentric systems rely heavily on logic of identity which is founded on the exclusion and binary polarisation of difference” (Grosz, 1989, p. xix). Linked with logocentrism is phonocentrism, i.e., the philosophical bias that valorises speech over writing as an authentic marker of self-presence—“because speech implies immediacy. In speech meaning is apparently immanent, above all when, using the inner voice of consciousness, we speak to ourselves.... [U]nlike writing, which is hopelessly mediated, speech is linked to the apparent moment and place of presence and for this reason has had priority over writing” (Sarup, 1993, p. 36).

Nature/culture binary : a binary that has been a feature of western philosophical thought systems from at least the Sophists onward. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, both uses the nature/culture binary and problematizes it through a focus on incest taboo. According to Strauss, Derrida explains, that which is “universal” and “spontaneous” belongs to the category of nature, while that which is contingent on a set of norms, and therefore, culturally variable, belongs to the category of culture. Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal because it is both natural—being universal, and cultural—being rule-governed and different from place to place in what/who exactly it proscribes (Derrida, 2004, p. 93-94).

Phallogocentrism : or phallogocentrism is a form of logocentrism where the phallus stands in for *logos*. “The term refers to the ways in which patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men.... There are three forms phallogocentrism

generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they are represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men's complements.... When [any of these] occurs, two sexual symmetries... are reduced to one (the male), which takes it upon itself to adequately represent the other" (Grosz, 1989, p. xx).

Play : a rough English translation of the French word "jeu" which could mean "play" as well as "give." Many critics state that it is mistake to confuse Derrida's use of the word "play" with total untrammelled linguistic free play. Rather, "'play'" for Derrida, they say, "means something like 'give' or 'tolerance' (the tolerance within a finely tuned engine, for example, or the give in a taut length of rope), which works against ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion" (Lucy, 2004, p. 95) Play is a "disruption of presence" because the "identity of a thing is [achieved]... within 'a system of differences and the movement of ...a chain or series of 'signifying and substitutive' marks... This system is the play of presences and absences (Lucy, 2004, p. 95).

Sous Rature : translates as under erasure. Derrida borrows this concept from Martin Heidegger, "who often crossed out the word Being...and let both deletion and word stand because the word was *inadequate yet necessary*" (Sarup, 1993, p. 33). "To put a term 'sous rature' is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. The idea is this: since the word is inaccurate, or, rather, inadequate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary it remains legible" (Sarup, 1993, p. 33).

Trace : Derrida gives this term a specialised meaning which is suggested by Freud's insights in the "Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad.'" Derrida uses trace "to signify...that there is no simple sense in which linguistic signs are either present or absent. According to Derrida, every sign...contains a 'trace' of other signs which differ from itself. But, paradoxically, the 'trace' is *not* there; it is *potentially inherent*, or *present by virtue of its absence*, just as absence denotes the

possibility of presence. No sign is complete in itself. One sign leads to another via the ‘trace’—indefinitely” (Cuddon, 1998, p. 924). Trace is one of those multi-coded Derridean words that double up for deconstruction.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the key Derridean concepts and arguments advanced in “Structure, Sign and Play.” How is the essay a critique of Western epistemological traditions?
- 2) Explain why you think Derrida was keen to separate his understanding of deconstruction from how the term came to be employed in the US. Analyse the implications of Derrida’s many statements on deconstruction.
- 3) Clarify Derrida’s position on the question of woman and feminism.
- 4) To what extent do you agree with the feminist unease regarding Derridean thinking? Give reasons for your answer.
- 5) Elaborate on some of the ways in which Derrida might be considered useful for feminist purposes.

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