

J. KRISHNAMURTI'S DECONSTRUCTION OF SPIRITUAL HIERARCHIES IN THE GURU-DISCIPLE NARRATIVE

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Abstract:

This article explores the convergence of J. Krishnamurti's teachings with deconstructionist practices in dismantling hierarchical binaries, particularly within the context of the guru-disciple relationship. By drawing parallels between Krishnamurti's critique of spiritual hierarchies and the deconstructionist method of questioning established norms and power structures, the essay argues that Krishnamurti's deconstructive approach challenges the uncritical acceptance of authority figures, binary thinking, and the psychological dependence inherent in the guru-disciple dynamic.

Key Words: J. Krishnamurti, Derrida, Deconstruction, Spiritual Deconstruction, Guru-Disciple hierarchy

Introduction:

Deconstruction as a literary and philosophical theory, associated with thinkers like Jacques Derrida, seeks to uncover and challenge the hidden assumptions and hierarchies in language and thought. As a strategic methodology of reading texts, it has gained popularity among philosophers and literary critics in both America and Europe. It challenges the long-established Western metaphysical thinking, dating back to Plato, by demonstrating how concepts traditionally perceived as final, fixed, unified, reasonable, and self-evident are, in reality, unstable, contradictory, and undecidable. Deconstruction as a method of close reading has been extended beyond the confines of textual analysis, reaching into social, psychological, and ideological discourses. Underscoring the relevance of close reading in the contemporary world, Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher prominently associated with deconstruction, remarks: "to read events, to analyse the situation, to criticize the media, to listen to the rhetoric of the demagogues, that's close reading, and it is required more today than ever" (Hospitality 67). As deconstruction questions the inherent hierarchies and power structures embedded within language, texts, and social institutions, it is amenable to be applicable across varied disciplines. Following Derrida's lead, Paul de Man has embraced deconstruction as a critical approach to literature. Other theorists have sought to integrate deconstruction with diverse disciplines such as Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Law, Architecture, and more. The versatility of deconstruction as a method underscores its capacity to inform and enrich understanding across a spectrum of intellectual domains.

Derrida observes that the entire Western metaphysical thinking has been structured by hierarchical oppositional pairs in thought where one side of the pairs is consistently privileged



and considered central, while the other is relegated to the periphery as the shadow side. Such unjust and conflict-generating thinking pattern has psycho-social repercussions for individuals, who, as conditioned entities, become both subjects and objects of such hierarchical and divisive thought processes. The most basic operation of Deconstructive reading involves “identifying governing binary oppositions of any text arranged in the dynamics of ‘violent hierarchy’, reversal of the binaries and finally dismantling thereof preventing another hierarchy” (Bansod). This may result in the emergence of some new insight, that will inherently be incompatible with, and has never been incorporated by, the previous system of hierarchical binary oppositions (Derrida, Positions 42). This emergence of some new insight / perception outside the dichotomous thinking patterns assumes significance when it is viewed from the spiritual teachings of J. Krishnamurti who can be held as a great spiritual deconstructionist. For the purpose of this comparison, it is important to note that while Derrida and other academic deconstructionists are language and textual-oriented, Krishnamurti’s deconstructive teachings are dialectic operations that are carried out on the texts of human thoughts caught in logogenic confusion, dualistic thought conflict, and ideological human problems.

J. Krishnamurti, a distinguished philosopher and spiritual teacher, born in 1895 in India, emerged as a prominent intellectual figure in the 20th century. His teachings defy conventional classifications and have intellectual, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. His discourses centre on fundamental inquiries into existence, meditation, and the intricacies of the human mind. Rejecting organized religion and institutionalized spirituality, he advocated for a direct, experiential approach to comprehending oneself and the world by urging individuals to question deeply ingrained beliefs and conditioned thought processes. Central to Krishnamurti’s philosophy is the exploration of psychological freedom. For him, real freedom comes about when one emancipates oneself from ingrained hierarchical and dualistic cognitive patterns through self-understanding. He traversed the world engaging in dialogues with intellectuals, students, and the wider public. He probed into the nature of thought, the origins of human suffering, and the potential for profound psychological revolution. His teachings urge people to take charge of their own personal development and question the dependence on external authority of tradition, gurus, or scriptures.

There are some converging points between the teachings of Krishnamurti and the practice of deconstruction as both challenge the uncritical acceptance of tradition and established norms which operate through hierarchical binaries in the social discourses. While J. Krishnamurti was not a deconstructionist in the conventional academic sense, it is possible to understand his teachings and insights in a way that are consistent with the deconstructionist strategy for dismantling hierarchical binaries and challenging dualistic thinking.

Deconstruction of Guru-Disciple Hierarchy :

In spiritual traditions, guru-disciple relationship manifests in a highly hierarchical duality, which, instead of conferring self-knowledge on the disciples by liberating them from ignorance and worldly sorrows, apparently furthers only crippled thinking and psychological dependency.

Since a guru is considered to be embodying authority, wisdom, and miraculous ways



of guiding disciples on the right tract, disciples approach him/her with a sense of awe and surrender. Disciples often place unwavering trust and devotion in the guru, which breeds emotional and psychological dependency. This creates a power imbalance in the guru-disciple relationship with the guru having significant sway over the thinking, feelings, and life choices of the disciple. Unconditional trust demanded of the disciples leads to indiscreet acquiescence and uncritical thinking. Such a hierarchical relation dynamic may hinder emotional and intellectual autonomy of the disciples. The guru-disciple relationship that operates within a hierarchical binary framework of the higher (the guru) and the lower (the disciple) was deconstructed by J. Krishnamurti in his discourses. For him, the hierarchical structure underlying guru-disciple relationship is a breeding ground for exploitation and self-gratification both for the gurus and disciples, which is inherently unspiritual.

Even in so-called spiritual movements the social divisions are maintained. How eagerly a titled person is welcomed and given the front seat! How the followers hang around the famous! How hungry we are for distinctions and labels! This craving for distinction becomes what we call spiritual growth: those who are near and those who are far, the hierarchical division as the Master and the initiate, the pupil and the novice. This craving is obvious and somewhat understandable in the everyday world; but when the same attitude is carried over into a world where these stupid distinctions have no meaning whatever, it reveals how deeply we are conditioned by our cravings and appetites. Without understanding these cravings, it is utterly vain to seek to be free from pride. (Krishnamurti, Commentaries First **116**)

Here, Krishnamurti, quite akin to a deconstructionist, detects binary distinctions between the worldly and the spiritual, and between the master and the pupil, and dismantles them by pointing out how worldly hierarchies are adopted in spiritual domain which is supposed to be a transcendental plain without any divisions. In the context of the guru-disciple relationship, disciples are often expected to submit to the authority of the guru without questioning, and Krishnamurti advises people to question and challenge this dynamic when he repeatedly cautions people against psychological dangers of submissive mentality: “Authority of any kind is blinding, it breeds thoughtlessness; and as most of us find that to be thoughtful is to have pain, we give ourselves over to authority” (Book of Life, 25 Jan). Krishnamurti’s focus on inner transformation and self-awareness can encourage people to look within themselves for answers and guidance rather than seeking external authorities. This challenges the idea that the guru has exclusive access to spiritual truth, potentially leading to a more balanced and equal relationship. His smashing of the paradox within so-called spiritual realms, where individuals, despite seeking transcendence, maintain and even reinforce social hierarchies is highly deconstructive. Through his deconstruction of guru-disciple relation, Krishnamurti points out how deeply persons are conditioned by societal norms, even when attempting to engage in spiritual pursuits.

From another perspective, deconstruction entails a critique of supposing certain voices as predominantly authoritative while suppressing others. Likewise, J. Krishnamurti deconstructs the prevailing spiritual discourse and human tendency that place an exclusive premium on help and grace of the guru over and above all other sources of help available for an open-minded and alert person. “There is help everywhere for a man who is alert; but many of us are asleep to everything about us except to a particular teacher or book, and that is our



problem... But when someone else says the same thing, perhaps in different words, you become deaf” (**Commentaries Second 197**). Inviting a reconsideration of the assumed hierarchies in the sources of guidance, he points to a deeper issue of attachment to authority figures and the consequent disregard for alternative perspectives. In a sense, this is consistent with deconstructive critique insofar as it challenges established patterns of authority and pries open a more inclusive and critical approach to understanding.

Binary thinking involves not only hierarchies but also dualistic separation and division between entities which, in reality, are parts of unitary processes. Krishnamurti's teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all things and the idea that true understanding comes from transcending dualities. By examining and questioning the perceived separation between guru and disciple, spiritual seekers can work towards breaking down this binary division. He categorically asserts, “In the understanding of truth, there is no Master or pupil, neither the advanced nor the lowly. Truth is the understanding of what is from moment to moment without the burden or the residue of the past moment” (**Commentaries First 12**). In the psychological domain of human life, it is the desire to seek childlike comfort from all sorts of worries and problem in the lap of parentlike figure that prompts spiritually-inclined persons to seek gurus, which, instead, exacerbates confusion and lead them astray from truth. The confusion of the disciples that prompts them to seek gurus is also reflected in the choice of the gurus. Rather than seeking genuine understanding, according to J. Krishnamurti, disciples tend to pursue those gurus who would cater to their need for emotional satisfaction and sensory pleasure. He clarifies: “we choose a teacher who will give us what we crave for. We do not search out reality, but go after gratification and sensation” (116). He further dismantles the process of making choices by casting doubt on the reasonableness and rationality involved in it. For him, “choice is inevitably based on bias, prejudice. You may prefer to give a more respectable and comforting name to your prejudice, but it is out of your confusion and appetites that you choose” (116). Krishnamurti cautioned against mistaking the image of a guru for reality. He argued that the guru often represents a projection of our own desires for security, comfort, and belonging (Urgency 23). This projection, he maintained, can lead to blind faith and hamper our capacity for critical thinking and independent discovery.

When questioned about being against gurus and followers, Krishnamurti clarifies that “it is not a matter of being against something but of perceiving that conformity, which is the desire for security, with its fears, prevents the experiencing of the timeless” – ‘timeless’ in Krishnamurti’s terminology refers to a state beyond the constraints of time and conditioned thought (**Commentaries Third 05**). According to Krishnamurti, it is the desire for security that prompts individuals to seek guidance and certainty in such hierarchical structures. This conformity obstructs the direct experience of the perception that transcends the established thinking patterns predicated on dualistic binary structures.

As against the conventional view of a spiritual guru being able to dispel the darkness of ignorance and negative tendencies of disciples with his/her grace and guidance, Krishnamurti points out that to be influenced by some guru or great person is not be regarded as fundamental transformation of psyche and behaviour of the influenced person (**Commentaries First 117**). Rather, it fortifies a state of dependency and re-establishes hierarchical relationship pattern. It is authoritarian pattern of relatedness imprinted on the social



beings that instigates them to be either dominating or submissive. Krishnamurti asks of his audience to “put aside this whole authoritarian outlook on life” and approach problems with a “fresh, eager mind” (Commentaries Third 18). This invites deconstruction of conditioned thought and behavioural patterns. It implies engaging in a constant process of deconstructing and reconstructing meaning so as to be enabled to think critically and authentically, free from the limitations of established power structures. For him, real freedom and egalitarian society based genuine love and respect cannot be achieved within the hierarchical pattern in that the guru-disciple dynamic can become a tool for control and manipulation, which leads to stifling individual freedom and genuine spiritual progress. In the following excerpt, Krishnamurti’s is seen deconstructing the common social etiquettes that substantiate the hierarchical patterns:

Have you not noticed that you are not respectful, kindly, generous, to your servants, to people who are so-called ‘below’ you? You have respect for those above, for your boss, for the millionaire, for the man with a large house and a title, for the man who can give you a better position, a better job, from whom you can get something. But you kick those below you, you have a special language for them. Therefore where there is no respect, there is no love; where there is no mercy, no pity, no forgiveness, there is no love. **(First and Last Freedom 213)**

Viewed in context of deconstructive perspective, J. Krishnamurti is dissecting the very fabric of social hierarchies through the meticulously constructed façade of respect in human interactions. In the hierarchically structured society, respect is reserved for those who are “above” us – gurus, bosses, millionaires, etc. Towards those considered “below,” a different language is deployed – a dehumanizing verbiage that reinforces their exclusion from the privileged circle. Krishnamurti’s critique reveals the inherent hypocrisy in showering courtesy upon those who may benefit us, while simultaneously treating our “betters” as mere tools for our own ascent. Deconstruction, in this context, becomes a powerful tool, peeling back the layers of social conditioning to expose the machinery of power dynamics beneath. It lays bare how the internalized hierarchies weaponize even respect and social etiquette. He dismantles the very foundation of the binary. Love, he suggests, is not a reward for good behaviour or a currency to be traded; it is the bedrock upon which a society free from the suffocating grip of hierarchy can be built. In this regard, Krishnamurti differentiates between genuine respect and its superficial imitation that respect often manifests as a conditioned response based on social norms, external authority, or fear of disapproval. This form of respect lacks genuineness and did not contribute to meaningful relationships or individual growth. Similarly, Erich Fromm, a renowned social psychologist, distinguished between “authoritarian respect” based on fear and reward, and “humanistic respect” based on reason and understanding (223). **In a way, by embracing such a commitment to egalitarian respect, the groundwork can be laid for nurturing deeper, more meaningful connections between individuals. This, in turn, can pave the way for a more harmonious society, where genuine understanding and compassion may flourish.**

Conclusion :

Krishnamurti specifically deconstructs hierarchical structures of authority owing to his understanding that these structures are at the of much human confusion and suffering. While



bringing out the detrimental consequences of blind acceptance of prevalent societal belief systems and hierarchical social relations, he comes close to Derridean deconstruction which dismantles hierarchical structures and exposes the hidden agendas within seemingly objective discourses.

The deconstruction of the hierarchical guru-disciple relationship being a microcosm of the hierarchically structure social order at large, represents a critical step towards an egalitarian society grounded in universal respect and love. In its place may arise a horizontal plane of engagement, where knowledge and social communion will flow freely through dialogue and mutual learning. Such empowered interaction among society may help in cultivating genuine respect and replace psychological dependency on hierarchical, authoritarian relationship structure with the development of individual critical thinking strength and egalitarian behavioural patterns. With the walls of hierarchy dissolved, compassion and empathy may truly blossom in which the inherent worth and dignity within each individual will be recognised. This shift from blind obedience to empowered dialogue lays the groundwork for a society where love and respect are not bestowed upon a select few, but rather emanate from within each individual. In this connection, Krishnamurti's teachings stood as a formidable bulwark against unquestioning deference to authoritarian authority. He relentlessly challenged blind obedience to established power structures, be they in traditional institutions, societal norms, or even spiritual teachings. This unwavering commitment to critical inquiry also finds a powerful echo in the tenets of critical pedagogy, an educational philosophy that, in Giroux's words, "seeks to empower students to critically examine and challenge the power structures and social injustices embedded in society" (5).

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